

Good evening, Shabbat Shalom, and Shana Tova. For those of you who do not know me, my name is Meredith Bowers. I've been a member of Beth Chai since 2009, and I was honored and surprised when Alexa asked me to speak to you this year. My two oldest daughters have been bat-mitzvahed right here over the last two years. And my family has two more bat mitzvahs to go so I am right in the middle of our Beth Chai educational experience and find that this is a perfect time for me to reflect on what remains solid beneath my feet and what is changing shape under me. As you know, there are moments in life when everything changes in the blink of an eye and then there are other times when it's important to stop and listen for the tremors of change. Let me back up a little for some personal history. When I was 17, I moved from DC to Los Angeles for college. It was a short-lived experiment. Within a year I was in Madison, Wisconsin where I was at first taken aback and then taken in by the friendliness of strangers—on the street, in elevators, in the check out line. It was wholly new to me and the perfect antidote to my shyness. In fact, when in Wisconsin I read, for the first time a poem by Robert Frost called "A Time to Talk" which always seems to epitomize Wisconsin to me. It's a sweet little poem and there is something about it that is so rooted in the Midwestern pace and

openness that I try to keep close to me when I feel the east coast whirl quickening my blood pressure and the stress of deadlines looming.

For those of you who don't know it, it goes like this:

A time to talk
When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don't stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven't hoed,
And shout from where I am, 'What is it?'
No, not as there is a time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit.

It's a pretty obvious poem about priorities and perspective. Not too deep, but a nice solid reminder that I am not so important that I can't just stop for a minute to show some kindness and interest in someone or something beyond myself. Nothing earth shattering, just made me read it and think "yep. That's right." But, before I left Los Angeles for balmy Wisconsin, I experienced something that **was** literally earth shattering. I experienced an earthquake—just 3 short miles from the epicenter. For those of you who have lived and grown up near fault lines, this may be no big deal. But for me, after growing up in Washington, DC, it quite literally rocked my world. Everything I had

assumed to be still and solid and enduring and permanent became fluid and uncertain and unreliable in a matter of seconds. It was at once intimate and private, but like a snowstorm, immediately forged a community of those around me through the spiderweb of those who also felt the tremors. The experience forced me, for the first time I was aware of, to stop, to take notice, to feel the earth below me. It was very akin, to me at least, to chime of the mediation bell at the beginning of a yoga or meditation practice.

Since then I have savored the moments in my life like this when I have heard the chime, the trumpeting, or the call to notice the moment—whether mundane, sacred, sublime, or even profane. I think back to when our friend Matt Schneer spoke from this very spot and evoked the beautiful image of his daughter Sylvia laughing for the first time after a complicated surgery. He heard her laughter as a shofar call. The image was so powerful to me because earlier that year as my father was preparing for emergency heart surgery, I had a moment when, as I struggled to pull off his wedding ring as he was being prepped for surgery, the world simultaneously seemed to shrink to the size and shape of his ringed finger and expand to encompass the universe. Well, to me at least. I didn't know if this would be the last time I touched my

father or, in fact, when the last time had been. As the fluorescent light of the hospital room bounced off his ring, I heard the chime of the mediation bell and something else I couldn't describe. But when Matt shared his story, I knew what it was—it was the shofar, the ancient wisdom of stopping to notice the moment as it unfolds instead of constantly reflecting on it once it has passed. It is the call to stop and experience. It is the “still small voice” that a theist attributes to the voice of God and many of us attribute to the voice within. And its the invocation for Tikkun Olam—repairing the world, which by necessity requires us to see and hear and feel the break before we can get to the work of repairing it. So, why is this simple thing so hard to do unless we are faced with the terror of losing a loved one, the joy of recovering a loved one, or the pain of actual loss? Is it hard because it is painful? Is it hard because it requires us to stop making noise long enough to hear these small sounds? Is it hard because it requires us to be alone? Which, by the way, I don't know if any of you saw the study reported in major papers this summer that people would rather shock themselves with an electric probe than sit quietly by themselves for an indefinite period.

Seriously. Somehow, this connects, to me at least, to the horrible news that after Robin Williams' recent suicide, his daughter was bullied

online for not speaking out more on social media to broadcast her grief.

Seriously. What is wrong with us? Have we lost all ability to feel something without the advertisement of the feeling? Or worse, without someone else advertising for us how we should feel? But it can't just be our fear of quiet or solitude or pain can it? Is it that we fear that in those moments of quiet reverence we will feel the ground shift and be forced to face the fact that all that is assumed, and solid, and permanent really isn't any of those things?

Some of you know that I work for an organization that employs people who have schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and other serious mental illnesses. Quick plug: It's a great organization and I would be thrilled to tell you more about it at a different time and hope to get gain your support. But, for now, back to the point at hand which is that the people I work with, constantly have to grapple with this dichotomy. What is real? What is permanent? What can be relied upon and what is simply smoke and haze and delusion? I am amazed daily at the quiet courage that this requires. One of the people I work with told me that he wakes up thirty minutes early every morning to say his mantras and pet his cat in order to fortify himself for the day. **That is courage!** Real, earth shattering courage. Every morning he is climbing a mountain all

by himself in his living room and no one knows. Just as at this moment someone is pulling a ring off her father's finger as he is whisked into surgery or hearing his daughter laugh for the first time in weeks or getting the call that a friend didn't make it or won't make it or, thankfully, is going to make it. Every second someone next to you is hearing a shofar sound, or feeling the earthquake of personal change, and we sit next to them totally oblivious.

This month I have had the privilege of starting a year-long training on leadership called Leadership Montgomery. It's started me thinking about all the necessary characteristics of a strong and inspiring leader. One of them surely is the ability to listen. To hear what are people are saying or trying to say and recognizing how courageous it is to be kind when you want to be biting or patient when your body tingles with impatience or forgiving when you are most hurt. I have a long way to go to live up to any of these standards, as my family will certainly attest, but I am hoping I can learn from the real and metaphorical earthquakes around me and hear the shofar when it blows, however quietly, however remotely.

I'd like to close with a quotation from a book I really enjoyed called Truth and Advertising by John Kenney. Check it out if you need a good read. Apologies in advance to Henry David Thoreau, whom I actually really admire.

Henry David Thoreau wrote that the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. I can clearly remember reading that in college, and thinking, *Wow. He is so right.* Now, I think, *Wow. What a pompous ass.* This from a guy whose idea of a sojourn into the deep woods took him all of a mile from his home. Quiet desperation? Most men? Who among us can say that? Who can know what goes on in someone else's life? In their worries and fears and hopes. Their history and pain. Who knows the quiet joy that one might feel in the quotidian thing, the nothing thing: a child's evening bath, volunteering at a soup kitchen, walking the dogs when the family is asleep, the neighborhood quiet, a cigarette smoked alone. Lunch with a favorite coworker. Who can know the little worlds of beauty we try desperately to guard during the onslaught: watching your wife go through chemo; your father waste away from Alzheimer's; your sister's relapse into alcoholism. The simple truth is that we know nothing about the inner life of the person sitting next to us on the plane, in the subway, the car behind us in traffic. We know nothing unless we choose to listen. Quiet desperation? What about quiet resilience. Quiet courage. Quiet hope.

And with that I wish you all resilience, courage, and hope and enough quiet to hear the shofar in your own lives throughout the year ahead.

Shana tova.