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Congregation Rodeph Sholom

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Boy of Many Colors

Back through the years
I go wonderin' once again
Back to the seasons of my youth
I recall a box of rags that someone gave us
And how my momma put the rags to use
There were rags of many colors
Every piece was small
And I didn't have a coat
And it was way down in the fall
Momma sewed the rags together
Sewin' every piece with love
She made my coat of many colors
That I was so proud of

With these autobiographical lyrics, the legendary Dolly Parton reflects back on the terrors, traumas, and triumphs of her life. As she would reflect, “I like to think of myself as a Girl of Many Colors, not just a coat, because I have all kinds of moods and I experience them all. I think that’s what makes a human being.” While many know of her fame and fortune, few know of her childhood poverty, the death of her baby brother, the physical injury, the broken heart and shattered family. And her battles with depression that brought her close to suicide. But for Dolly, these are the pieces that make up the tapestry of her being. In her courage to bear the darkest and most difficult aspects of self, she named the experiences of millions out of hidden spaces.

Dolly is an icon for myriad reasons. For me personally, she was the someone who seemed capable of joining anyone in any pit of their life. I come from a family with fractures and trauma, with addiction, depression, anxiety, suicide, and plenty other layers of the human experience. While therapy has given me a larger context and broader toolkit to understand and hold these layers of experience, Dolly’s lyrics were some of my earliest encounters of knowing whatever my trauma, whatever my struggle, I was not alone. In a world that would mask these over as things not to be shown, stories not to be told, feelings not to discuss, Dolly brought it all out into the light. Through the showing of secrets comes the comfort of connection.

In the pantheon of Jewish blessings (yes, there really is a blessing for everything), one of the least used is a simple blessing that can only be said in a gathering of at least 600,000 people:

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, chacham bara'zeem.

Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, Ruler of the Universe, knower of hidden things.

In an experience that can easily leave us at best with the feeling of anonymity, and at worst with the feeling of irrelevance, we affirm that God's place is in bearing witness to all that is hidden, that God bears witness to the heart of each person. In such witnessing, the blessing invites us to see the power of a God who creates belonging through knowing what is hidden.

In a society in which so much remains sequestered from sight, and at a time in which we all must live in distance from one another, our hiddenness, our struggles, our mental health are even more shadowed from view. Even our inner circle, those of us blessed with family or friends who may know the pits of our life, may likely be farther from us than ever before. This also means we bear the responsibility to bring ever more layers of life back into the light. In our service tonight and throughout our community, we want to take time to name and know the depression faced by so many. The anxiety. The bipolar disorder. The schizophrenia. The loneliness. The alcoholism. The diagnoses spoken, and challenges beyond language. The feelings of loss, of brokenness, of abandonment, of exile. In the blessing of community, we bless God who knows all that is hidden. In the embrace of community, we acknowledge the responsibility to hold connection especially in the struggle.

In our Torah portion, we witness Joseph's great reveal of his true self. As a boy, his own family abandoned him in a pit, his coat of many colors torn and bloodied, adrift from place and belonging. The trauma of slavery and servitude, the incredible ascension of power and new identity in Egypt. But in many ways, through all the years, Joseph never left that pit. The sense of incompleteness, of violence received and injustice caused, of solitude and secrecy. Joseph keeps hidden his truths, though never escapes them. And, even after encountering his brothers again, it takes testing and manipulation to finally come to the place of naming his many colors: *Ani Yoseph* – I am Joseph, I am the one you sold into slavery even as I am also the one who stands before you as viceroy, I am the one whom God saved, and I am the one who now saves your lives. I am my trauma and my triumph, I am what is seen and also what is hidden. I am Joseph. My name means "God will add", I will be many things. And in my name, through my name, I choose to name it all.

Our sages imagine that after the events of this reveal, Joseph chooses to return to the wilderness, to go back and visit the pit of his childhood. For those of us who imagine that denial and secrecy mean "the past is the past," this may be a confusing act – why return to the symbol of brokenness? But for many of us, we know the hiddenness we try hardest to erase never really leaves us. In the midrash, Joseph returns to the pit not to relive his struggles, but to name them, to bring them into the light. And in them, the sages imagine he utters a blessing.

For me, I imagine this not as the blessing of erasure or elation. This was the blessing of revealing what was concealed. Proclaiming a God that witnesses all that was hidden. In the blessing of this community, we hold the responsibility to do the same. We who face depression, we are not alone. We who battle anxiety, we are not alone. We who live with addiction, we who feel abandoned, we who sit in hidden pain and secret suffering, we are not alone. Words won't heal any such struggles, but naming them may ensure we face them together.

If you are suffering silently, we are here. If you struggle in hiding, we are here. If you fear the solitude, we are here. More than ever, our hidden battles and silent struggles may feel like impossible weights. Please, let us be with you in all layers of your life. May we come to see that we, each of us, are people of many colors. That we, as a community, are made of the pieces of myriad lives and experiences. In knitting together our whole selves, in naming both the pit and privilege, we forge the comfort of connection.

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, chacham harazeem.

Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, Ruler of the Universe, knower of hidden things.

Blessed are you God, who gives us the capacity to name and be known, and through knowing, come to hold all that is named. Blessed are you God, who gives us the gift of the community, built upon our capacity to see one another, and act accordingly. Blessed are you God, who is with us even in our hiddenness, and invites us to do the same.

“Back through the years
I go wonderin' once again”

Broken and beautiful

Fractured and strong

The bearer of both angels and demons

I am a boy of many colors

Blessed to be in a community of so many more

In this space, we return to the pits

To the hidden spaces

To the many things that give meaning to our name

And we speak them

Together.

May we be safe – we who feel fracture and fault, we who feel fear and failure. May we be free – we who are shackled with struggle, judgement, shame, may we breathe in embrace. May we find space, space to just be – we, people of many colors, we cloaked in patches of things inherited, things created, things endured, may we see that here in community we find our space. May we find our way back home, naming it all, holding it all in belonging. Together.