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Shabbat Sh'lach L'cha 5779

## **Shema Kavanaugh**

I first started coming around 1967. My Dad died that same year, and because of Mom's attitude about gay people, I couldn't come out to family. However after she passed I did come out to the rest of my family. They cut me loose, so my family has been chosen ever since.

It's been a long and twisted journey since I first began venturing out of that closet.

Bar raids in the sixties and seventies.

Friends all around me dying from AIDS beginning in the eighties.

Over the years, attacks on our community by haters and police.

'Still we found community and joy in the bars in those early days. After Anita Bryant visited Houston in '76, we began as community to mobilize more fully. Then came the HIV years, and amidst friends and loved ones dying around us and no one seemed to give a damned, we built our own infrastructure as we waited for the rest of the world to evolve. The mayor at the time when asked about the HIV crisis simply responded "Shoot the queers." I point with pride how we came together in community in those days.

In 1990 I met Skip. He was the first true love of my life. He touched my soul like no one ever had. What an amazing human being he was! Skip showed by example what real love looked like. A brilliant and beautiful soul and we were so happy together!

Then one day in July of '97, he became ill, collapsing in our apartment and rushed to the hospital. It was viral encephalitis. Soon he slipped into coma, and after a few weeks, a turn for the worse. That final morning, holding him in my arms as he slipped away. My one true love was gone. The nurse let me sit with him alone for ten minutes to say my goodbyes, then the family was ushered in as I left. I drove to the little gay coffeeshop we frequented, and when a waiter asked about him, we both shed a tear together.

Fate wasn't finished with me yet. Less than two weeks later, I'm preparing to walk Q-Patrol, a street patrol in our Houston gayborhood to help curb gay bashings. I'm laughing with my friend Dee, a well-known trans activist in Houston, when suddenly she

collapses to the floor. Holding her, the last words she would hear were me crying, "We love you Dee!" I felt for her pulse in vain. Friends applied CPR but she was gone. Two people I cared for deeply had died in my arms in less than two weeks. I sat rocking back and forth on the floor that evening, lost in a darkness I had never known before. This was the darkest hour!

Hear oh Israel the Lord our G\_d, Adonai is One. It is said each of us carry within a spark of the divine. Those sparks illuminated my way as beautifully queer souls helped nurture and loving spirit allowed me to heal. Prayer and community rescued me in a world that had seemed to spin out of control. My community has grown beyond the parameters of my old gayborhood, and community...all of you... continue to help illuminate the way, and I am so filled with gratitude. Baruch Hashem.