

Ori Wasserburg
Shabbat Sh'lach L'cha 5779

When Rabbi Lekach-Rosenberg asked me to speak tonight, I was super hesitant. I'm quite an anxious person in social situations, and speaking in front of a group is one of the things that most heightens my anxiety. But when I thought about this opportunity to speak during what is being dubbed "pride shabbat", it felt like it made a whole lot of sense, even with all my complicated feelings about Pride month. My process of living as an openly trans person corresponds really closely with my reconnection with Judaism over the past three years. These two aspects of my identity continue to be closely intertwined, and that connection feels very related to what comes up for me every week at Shabbat services when we sing Hashkiveinu, the prayer for peace. I hadn't heard this prayer before coming to Shir Tikvah but the first time I heard the Tracy Friend version of the prayer (which we'll be singing tonight), I felt this sensation of melting into my body, never wanting the song to stop, a feeling of deep settling and a kind of soulful sadness. One of the aspects of the prayer that continually strikes me is a line that's only part of the prayer on Shabbat: "sukkat Sh'lomecha", which is translated to "the shelter of your peace".

This request to be covered by a shelter of peace feels both deeply beautiful and also complicated. I actually don't believe that a peaceful world and a sheltered world are the same thing. Growing up, my "shelter of peace" was created by whiteness and money. And this shelter was not at all expansive- it had closed walls and closed ceilings; it was built with police around the outside and a whole bunch of big systems that were designed to make me feel safe at the expense of BIPOC folks, disabled people, working class people, and queer and trans folks. My shelter was deeply disconnecting- it prevented me from knowing that living in this world as a queer and trans person was even remotely an option. My shelter was created at the expense of other peoples' sense of peace and safety in this world, and created a deep disconnection for me from myself, my communities, and so many other people.

But in discussing this with my sweetie, they helped me realize that the shelteredness and false peace of whiteness and wealth is not necessarily the same type of shelter that's conveyed by the Hebrew words "sukkat Sh'lomecha". It doesn't seem like we have many words in English that convey the same meaning as "sukkat Sh'lomecha", but a sukkah seems far more open and expansive than the way that I have thought about the concept of shelters. According to a video I watched on BimBam.com, Sukkahs are supposed to have at least 2.5 walls, that can be made of any material, and a roof that's constructed with natural materials, like tree branches, and must leave openings to see the stars. Thus, an open sukkah allows us to look around and see

what's outside – it allows us to witness the deep lack of peace that exists around us instead of turning away and pretending that violence isn't happening.

Singing this prayer in this community has given me the opportunity to feel into what moments of peace and connection can feel like in a shelter of peace that's much more like a Sukkah than the type of shelter I grew up in. The "shelter of peace" that surrounds me when I sing this prayer at Shir Tikvah feels like one with many openings in the top that give space for the trees, the stars, our ancestors; and openings in the sides that allow me to feel into the connections of those around us, to really witness each other in our joy and in our pain, to mourn the reality of the world we're living in, and to deeply commit to supporting and fighting for ourselves and each other.

Each week, this prayer feels like a moment of permission to rest and feel settled within myself, and to feel into the beautiful, powerful, deeply caring queer and trans community that exists in this space. This community continues to teach me that being held within a shelter of peace doesn't have to mean disconnecting, but can look like facing the hardness of this world collectively, holding each other close, and supporting each other in working towards a world with more Sukkat Sh'lomecha.

Part of feeling into the peace is collectively feeling into the sorrow. In moments of collective sorrowful song, I have an even deeper trust and belief that these shelters of peace will expand to encompass more and more beings and experiences. As we sing this prayer together tonight, I pray that all of our shelters of peace continue to grow to be more expansive, and that they continue to nourish and connect us in ways that allow us to mourn, sing, laugh, heal, and find moments of peace within ourselves and each other. Shabbat Shalom.