Shabbat shalom. Tonight, as we have mentioned, and ritualized, is a Shabbat that we call Pregnancy Loss Shabbat, which is shorthand for the depth of what really happens on this night. This is the third year that we will bring our members' stories forward, provide resources, and make space for those in our community who have grieved or are grieving their pregnancy loss or losses. The third year in which we lift up the extraordinary and holy work of the Pregnancy Loss Small Group, led compassionately by Lisbeth Kaiser and Nicole Nemetz, who over and over again offer loving support to community members and help us make visible in our congregation that which is often relegated to the invisible in the world around us.

On this night, we refuse the stigma of talking about pregnancy loss, we refuse the inclination to sweep it away with platitudes or discomfort. And instead, this community of leaders and accompaniers and mourners themselves will share their experiences as we honor both the breadth of emotions and spiritual bereavement that comes with pregnancy loss. And we will join them in the creation of ritual through song, rhythm, story, poetry, memory, and community. Some here have grief that echoes from long ago and some are making their way through much more recent disappointments and heartache.

We see all of you. We hold all of you. We walk with all of you.

Before I share just a bit of Torah grounding us this evening, I want to thank Didi Lacher, and Ashley Taylor, members of our CBE Chesed Team who agreed to sit vigil with the candles we lit tonight so that we didn't have to blow them out for safety. Thank you for holding with lovingkindness, the hearts of those who shared a bit of their light and memory tonight.

And finally, thank you to Martin Shamoonpour and Lisbeth who will help us say what can only be said beyond words as we find ourselves part of an ancient rhythmic heartbeat.

So how does our Torah portion, parshat Bo, ground us tonight?

This is the parsha that tells of the final three plagues, including the 10th plague, the one we so rarely call on for wisdom. For it is terrible. The death of the first born is horrible. It is a divine last resort, it is not within any ethics system that we know, and it is fearful and dark. But tonight, in the context of this holy work, I want to talk about it just a little.

The first thing I want to do is make a distinction. Tonight, we are talking about pregnancy loss and this plague is about the loss of a child. And these are different things. And truly, only the person who experiences it and their partner can talk about the depth of that difference. The loss of a child is an agony that needs its own nights, its own care, its own tears, of course.

Yet there is a deep wisdom inside the Torah's treatment of this 10th plague which we can draw on tonight. And while we don't often align ourselves empathically with the Egyptians in the story, here, the lines between us and them are not quite as stark.

The text declares: “every first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the first-born of the slave woman who is behind the millstones.” This devastating loss happened also to the regular people who had nothing to do with our oppression, and to some who were themselves also oppressed. The pain of their grief seems to be universal.

This is how the text describes it. *V’hayta tz’akah gedolah* - And there shall be a loud cry in all the land of Mitzrayim, such as has never been or will ever be again.

The commentator Sforno wonders why this cry is so different from any other cry that has ever been or ever will be. These people have known losses before - probably often, given that it’s the ancient world with far fewer medicines and care than we have. So he explains like this - he says:

“The reason was that this was not a night during which a battle was being waged against the enemies of the Egyptians, an occasion when there are many outcries in the city.” So it’s not a time of war, and there is no commotion outside, and cries of this ferocity generally only happen in the midst of a battle. So what’s different here? He continues, “never again would there be such an outcry in the midst of peace.”

Consider this image. A mother, a parent, a person has just experienced a loss that has torn her in two. She is deep in a river of grief, mourning all that was and all that might have been. She is wailing, her weeping is unbridled and raw. And outside, it is perfectly peaceful, as if nothing is happening inside her home, or inside of her. Birds chirp, people make small talk, neighbors laugh together. Her suffering is amplified by the disconnect between her pain and the way the world goes on outside as if everything is fine. Sforno has suggested that this shattered heart against the backdrop of a lovely and unknowing day is the part of the grief that was so cruel and so harsh.

This can be the experience of a person who has lost a pregnancy. Because it is often minimized and stigmatized and silenced, because we don’t make enough space for people to talk about this, or because people are expected to move on quickly - a person might choose to simply live with their loss on their own, stuff it down, and conceal it, their pain amplified by the cruel contrast between their deep sense of loss and a world that keeps on spinning as if nothing has come or gone or changed. So where should the grief go? How should it be processed? How will she ever move from loss toward healing? As in our story, it is a uniquely traumatizing cry to be wrapped in a grief that the outside world cannot see, cannot bear, and does not have the tools to embrace you with.

The commentator Adin Steinsaltz, however, gives us a gentle way forward - one that CBE and the Pregnancy Loss Small Group has fully embraced. He says: The cry was unmatched - like nothing that had come before it and nothing that would come after it - why? Because, he says: the disaster … will reach every household.

Unknowingly, he has reminded us of one pathway toward healing. It is to remember that this thing that is kept so private, that we don't talk about, this thing that aches so quietly inside of us . . . touches nearly every single household. For if that is true . . . then silence doesn't make sense, stigma is irrelevant, rituals are available, and the person who knows how to hold you when you cry that unmatched cry is your next door neighbor, or your fellow CBE member. Steinsaltz's truth contends that the picture of a person wailing inside while it's peaceful and quiet outside is a mirage.

And we here at CBE have determined to dispel that mirage. In fact, we know that pregnancy loss touches many many homes, it is a grief that can be talked about like any grief, tended to like any grief, and honored in memory, like any grief. And needs to be.

And so all that we will experience tonight is a dispelling of a mirage and replacing it with something loving and poignant and real.

It is my honor to invite our speakers tonight. They are so courageous for telling their stories. Even though we don't clap in synagogue, we do want to express our deep appreciation for their willingness to guide us with their wisdom and lived experience. You might place a hand over your heart as they come forward. Or give them a gentle smile or a shared tear and offer them thanks after the service. I know that I am very grateful to each of them.

We will hear from Cathy Kolcun, Alex Rappaport, and Inbar Kishoni. We welcome Cathy first.