

Shalom, Shabbat!

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Presented by:



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Shalom, Shabbat!

Peri Smilow:

(Singing)

Melissa Rosen:

My goodness. What a wonderful way to begin this program. Thank you so much, Peri. Welcome to our Shabbat Shalom program. My name is Melissa Rosen. I am the director of training and education at Sharsheret. Many of our colleagues are on the phone and on the screen today working to create an amazing program. And a special shout out to those of you who are joining us from the Komen LA to NYC Metastatic Breast Cancer Conference. This is our third Shabbat Shalom program at Sharsheret. And although we've always been grateful for an opportunity to reconnect to recenter, we've found, and I'm sure you have too, that as we deal with months and months of this unprecedented physical isolation, these opportunities are more important to us than ever.

Melissa Rosen:

I just want to let everybody know that this program is being recorded but no names or faces will be on the recording other than those of the presenters. But if you wish to turn your video off for privacy, that option is on the bottom left of your screen. You also have the option of renaming yourself by clicking your name on your videos square. We recommend that you choose speaker view, that will allow you to focus on Peri as she sings and the lyrics that are up there. That's the easiest thing to do. So as we begin this program, however you celebrate, whatever your experience has been with Shabbat, we can all use an opportunity to recenter ourselves in the midst of treatment, survivorship, the pandemic or frankly, just the normal chaos of a life well lived. And that's really what today is all about.

Melissa Rosen:

Together, we'll enjoy song and music and explore how that enhances both Shabbat and life as a whole. And we'll each come away with a bit of inspiration for the week ahead. As I've mentioned in previous programs, there's always some level of chaos in life, work, family volunteer commitments. And of course, for those who have faced cancer and are dealing with survivorship or who are currently facing cancer, there's even more chaos. Physical, emotional, even spiritual chaos. And we all need a break. We need an opportunity to take that deep breath and it's absolutely necessary for our health and for our happiness.

Melissa Rosen:

Where we are today, in the middle of a pandemic, simply adds to that chaos. So we need that mandatory pause. And by the way, healthcare professionals have recommended taking a specific time, whatever it is, to pause from that chaos on a regular basis. And our Jewish tradition gives us just that, a weekly pause, an opportunity to rest, to regroup, to focus on what's important to us and what gives our lives meaning. That's different for each one of us, family, health, perhaps something else. And how we experience that pause is different for each of us as well.

Melissa Rosen:

Some of us celebrate traditionally, others have found innovative ways to make Shabbat meaningful or a Shabbat meaningful. Some us prepare elaborate meals, others choose takeout pizza as a break from cooking. Some of us attend services while not in a pandemic, others spend time in nature. The truth is that each person can celebrate in a way that is meaningful to them but I want to encourage everyone to celebrate, whether you've always marked Shabbat or just exploring it now, our lives deserve the pause

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that Shabbat provides. So take the time to focus on the important things in life, including yourself and make them a priority.

Melissa Rosen:

Okay. Today's guest is a real treat. As you've already heard, Peri Smilow is a nationally recognized singer and songwriter. As a performer, a composer, an educator and an activist, she has the unique ability to deeply move people of all ages to forge connections and understanding and to use her extraordinary musical gifts, her passion and her commitment to the community to create social change. Peri's going to share a few songs with us as well as share some of her own cancer experience and how music has helped in her healing. So with that, I want to re-welcome to the video spotlight, Peri.

Peri Smilow:

Thank you, Melissa. And thank you Sharsheret and thank you to Susan Komen as well, to all of you who are here for all many, many different reasons. I always believe in starting with music. So we'll sing first and then we'll have an opportunity to get to know one another a little bit.

Peri Smilow:

(Singing)

Peri Smilow:

Well, hello, everyone. So I'm so delighted that so many of you decided to come today. It's really an honor for me to be able to spend this hour with you, and in the lead up to this day for me, having been asked to reflect a little bit on the ways in which music in particular and other creative mechanisms have helped me as a cancer survivor in my own cancer journey. And frankly, in my Jewish ritual life as well. So, let me start by saying that I am an active cervical cancer patient. I recognize it's a different disease than the diseases that are supported through this organization but for today's purposes, I think the idea about what it means to have the big C, cancer and all the fears and concerns that come with it, unfortunately span really a wide array of diseases.

Peri Smilow:

And so, I'm right there with all of you who've experienced gynecologic cancer. And number two, I've been dealing with cervical cancer for 21 years. I'm very grateful that I happen to have... for some reason, a very strange form of this disease that really should have killed me a long time ago and for some reason has chosen not to. And so, when I have an opportunity to talk about my journey, I welcome it and thank you for the invitation. That song that I just shared is part of this journey. So Hineini (the song just sung), I wrote that song as a commissioned piece of music for a new mikvah that is no longer new, it was new 30 or 40 years, 35 years ago, I think at this point, in Boston.

Peri Smilow:

Mikvah is a ritual Jewish bath. And in a traditional setting, it's used in very prescribed ways for cleanliness. And this amazing community, largely of women in the Boston area decided years ago, what would it be like if as Jews, men and women, we could use a ritual Jewish bath. For example, when we finished chemotherapy or radiation, what would it be like for example, if we could have a ritual bath, when we're told, for example, that we had hit the five-year mark and as a result, we didn't have to go back to see our doctors again. So I was invited years ago to write a piece of music that would reflect my own journey. The mikvah is not about cancer but to me it was.

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Peri Smilow:

And when I was asked to write a piece of music that could be used to support the mikvah, I chose three texts that are illuminated in the pools at the mikvah in Boston. And the three texts were the ones that I sang, one at a time. Hineini, here I am in the image of God. The second one is, Oh God, this body is all I have. I never meant it as this body is all I have but rather this body is the only body that I have. If anything happens to this body, I don't get another one. And that was very moving to me as a piece of Jewish texts that notion that this is what I've got. And I'm so lucky that I get to sing these songs. So that's where that came from. So this journey... There's so much to talk about and each one of you could be where I sit today and tell your personal story.

Peri Smilow:

For me, music has been a binding agent. Any of us who've been through a cancer journey, know that the unknowing, the scared times, the convincing ourselves times, the what's next times, can be the hardest. For me it was, anyway, has been on this journey. And so for me, music and Jewish ritual have sort of filled in those gaps. It's allowed me to build a bridge to sanity and... I don't even know exactly how else to say it but sort of keeping on the path. So I wanted to give a few examples of ways in which I've used Jewish ritual and music. I just gave the example of music. I'm a composer. So I use the skills that I have to reflect my journey. I'm lucky enough to have had the opportunity to put out four albums of contemporary Jewish music. For those who don't know me or didn't know me before now, I've really been lucky to spend and have a 25 year career writing and performing contemporary Jewish music.

Peri Smilow:

My music is sung in congregational life. But I also spent a lot of time in education and in social justice work as well, which also has really fed me. But I found myself at age 39 diagnosed with cervical cancer and having gone through as many of you may have, six weeks of daily radiation. And as I was getting to the end of the radiation period, I remember thinking to myself, as much as I hate this, I don't know what I'm going to do when it's over, because this is what I know, this is my regular... it's my structure. And so, I went looking before I finished radiation for some kind of a ritual structure that would help, again, like the music did bridge from the cancer back to a regular normal, everyday life.

Peri Smilow:

But what I found, what I decided to use was a menorah. And I decided to borrow the ritual of Hanukkah, which is the lighting of a menorah, every one additional candle for each night of the eight nights of Hanukkah, only I did it in reverse. So I had a menorah and I on the eighth to the last day of radiation, I lit eight candles. And I said a shehecheyanu for that day. I said a blessing for, thank you, God, you got me to my eight to the last day of my six weeks of radiation. And then I had a glass of wine and I did a little dancing. And the next night, I set myself a beautiful table and I lit seven candles. And the next night I lit six. And every night I had something to look forward to. And on the last day of radiation, I lit the last candle.

Peri Smilow:

And I knew it'd be okay. I knew that if I lit that last candle, that I had made the bridge, that I've used the ritual, then it's sung the songs, that I had done the hard work and the spirit work to launch me into a healthy life after radiation. And on the first day that I didn't go to radiation, I was okay, because I had lit all those candles. And I knew that I was ready to move on to the next thing.

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Peri Smilow:

Another thing that's been very, very useful to me and perhaps it's been to many of you, is the writings of other people. And so, at the end of our time together today, I'll share with you a particular poem that's been with me by a magnificent writer named Mark Nepo, a poet named Mark Nepo, who himself is a survivor of cancer for many, many years, who talks about... In his poetry, he talks a lot about just the thing I was just mentioning, which is for those who get sick and die quickly, it's a horror show for them but also really a horror show for their family members. But for those of us who live for a long time with a cancer diagnosis or a past cancer diagnosis, again, finding ways to move through is what Mark Nepo writes about.

Peri Smilow:

And it's what I try to do as well. A little bit later in this conversation, we're going to talk about the Jewish value of something called hiddur mitzvah. Now, hiddur mitzvah is this amazing Jewish idea that it's not enough... I think most people, Jews and non-Jews alike know about the idea of mitzvahs, which mostly get translated as good deeds. For some of us and I will never speak for all but for some of us, when we get sick, we find ourselves making deals. I'm going to be really good. And if I'm really, really good, maybe I won't get sick again. If I'm really nice to the people that are mean to me, if I really... If I eat all my vegetables, right?

Peri Smilow:

So this is not that. This is a whole other thing. This is the idea that we have the option as humans to choose good and to choose joy. And hiddur mitzvah says, that's awesome if you choose to do that. And it's even better, if you decorate it with beauty, that is to say, if you do the thing you do, that's the mitzvah for others, for yourself. You put out goodness in the world, how much better is it if you do it with more people, if you do it more beautifully, if you sing it, if you draw it, if you dance it, if you're joyful, when you do it. And so, hiddur mitzvah has been the very thing that's kept me... Let me say it a different way, people say to me often, including family members, how do you wake up every morning knowing that you have cancer in your lungs that isn't going to go away and could come back and bite you at any time? How do you do it?

Peri Smilow:

And the answer is number one, I'd be lying if I didn't say it isn't hard. But because I'm going to sing and dance and I'm going to decorate the mitzvah, I'm going to find a way. None of us know how much time we have, nobody. In the meantime, we're here and we have a chance to explore what's hard and to be honest with people about the things that are difficult for us. But we also have the option to choose mitzvah and to choose to sing it. And that's my choice. It's not right for everybody. That's just where I am.

Melissa Rosen:

That was perfect. That was beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing something so deeply personal and frankly inspiring. So part of my job right now, was to explain what hiddur mitzvah is but Peri did it so much more beautifully than I can. But what I do want to say is, I want to suggest that song, that music... as she has so beautifully said, also fulfills that mitzvah by enhancing our entire lives, including Shabbat. For many people, music is a way to relax, to express joy, to lose oneself a bit. And I am sure that Peri would agree that anyone can sing. Your voice does not matter, what matters is how the song affects

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you. I cannot carry a tune to save my life, yet every week as I light my own candles, I sing the blessing, the bracha, and I intentionally do it slowly and loudly.

Melissa Rosen:

And for me, just like Peri was talking about those candles, counting down, that one minute of song or whatever it is, is my transition into calm for the week. And so, don't feel you can't sing, you can't draw, you can't do whatever it is, this is for everybody. Everybody finds their own way to beautify. And while Peri sings her next song, I want to encourage each of you to think of something you do or something you have that beautifies your life in some way, something that brings you joy, that enhances meaning. Please put that in the chat box, that's located in the bottom of the screen and we're going to share some of those anonymously after this song. And those will be ideas that will inspire everyone else today.

Peri Smilow:

So this song was written for three people I was very, very close to, who were going through treatment at the same time that I was going through treatment. And all three of them succumbed to cancer. The first verse talks about my cousin. Second verse talks about an amazing Jewish educator in the Boston area named, who died of breast cancer in her 40's. And the last one speaks about the former head of the ADL for the New England region. I encourage each of you, even while you are muted, the chorus is really easy and the words are here. I'm going to encourage you to sing along, listen to the first chorus. And then the second and third chorus, sing as loudly as you can and raise your voices with me please.

Peri Smilow:

(Singing)

Melissa Rosen:

Wow. That is just beautiful. Thank you.

Peri Smilow:

Thank you.

Melissa Rosen:

Okay. So, I see that the chat box is going a little crazy and that you've shared some things they're meaningful to you. So my wonderful colleagues that, Becky Koren, who is the Illinois program coordinator and Jessica Jablon, who is the Valley Outreach program coordinator, have been monitoring the chat box and are going to share some of... the participants thoughts in the hopes that they will inspire you as well.

Becky Koren:

Okay. So I'll start. Someone said, playing piano, violin and fostering animals from the shelter, fulfill my life.

Jessica Jablon:

Someone said, gifts and tokens from friends like a gemstone or artwork.

Becky Koren:

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Someone said, sacred music is the way I decorate mitzvahs.

Jessica Jablon:

Someone else said, journaling.

Becky Koren:

Cooking, nourishing meals and having fun while cooking.

Jessica Jablon:

Somebody else said, for me, drawing different characters, making jewelry, cooking, baking.

Becky Koren:

Someone said, knit scarves, hats and baby blankets that I donate.

Jessica Jablon:

Writing poetry allows me to process.

Becky Koren:

Playing guitar and singing as well as cooking for myself and my family.

Jessica Jablon:

Playing with my children.

Becky Koren:

Someone said, I draw and sketch in the night when the insomnia is in full force.

Jessica Jablon:

Making masks for my former chemotherapy center.

Becky Koren:

Someone said, updating info and pics in my heritage, colorizing, old photos, cooking creatively, unhealthy, getting inspiration from nature and Shabbat with my husband.

Jessica Jablon:

Somebody wrote, who said, I've written a spiritual healing prayer song. I also feel great purpose to live by helping others, especially people with disabilities and learning math.

Becky Koren:

And someone said, taking walks with my husband.

Jessica Jablon:

And somebody said, family dinners walks on the beach time with my kids.

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Melissa Rosen:

So as we get ready to conclude, Peri is going to sing the priestly blessing, which is a perfect way to end as we can all use all the blessings we can get this year. And we are all in our own homes but please feel free to join in with the words on the screen. And then when she's concluded, we have a couple of quick messages and then we'll be able to part ways a bit refreshed.

Peri Smilow:

Thank you. Thanks, Melissa. Just real quick, before I share the priestly blessing, I promised that I would share this poem by Mark Nepo. It's very short and it goes like this, free fall. If you have one hour of air and many hours to go, you must breathe slowly. If you have one arm's length and many things to care for, you must give freely. If you have one chance to know God and many doubts, you must set your heart on fire. We are blessed. Every day is a chance. We have two arms and fear wastes air.

Peri Smilow:

So I'll leave you with the priestly blessing. The threefold benediction of our Jewish people, it goes back thousands of years. This one is for you.

Peri Smilow:

(Singing)

Peri Smilow:

Sing it with me from home, ready?

Peri Smilow:

(Singing)

Peri Smilow:

If you are able, please find a way to stay connected to Sharsheret, find a way to support them and all the people who need you. Thank you very much to all those of you who organized this day. And I wish everybody an easy journey.

Melissa Rosen:

Peri, we cannot thank you enough. This was a beautiful 45 minutes, just absolutely moving. Thank you. So I do. I want to remind you that Sharsheret continues to be there for all of you. We help women as you know, with breast and ovarian cancer, genetic mutations that raise diagnostic risk. But if you're facing a different cancer and need support, call us, we will help you in any way we can. And we can make connections for you to other organizations as well, that deal with your specific type of cancer. We continue to offer online content. You can always go on, you'll be able to see this online next week but we'll send you a link. And we have more programs coming as well on. I just want to point one out in particular, on November 17th, we are launching our national book club and we are discussing Letty Cottin Pogrebin's book, How to Be a Friend to a Friend Who's Sick, to coordinate with Caregivers Awareness Month.

Melissa Rosen:

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So not just for you but for the people and love ones in your life. And that's something I want you to keep in mind. Remember, we have a dedicated team of social workers, a genetic counselor. We've been here for you for 20 years and we will continue to be here for you. I also want to let you know that we're about to put a link to a very brief survey evaluation survey in the chat box. Please take just a moment to fill that out because it really does inform future programming. And again, don't hesitate to be in touch. I want to thank each one of you for being here today and wish you a Shabbat filled with quiet, with joy, with inspiration and comfort, a Shabbat filled with Shalom. And once more, special Shabbat Shalom to Peri. And thank you for being here.

Melissa Rosen:

Shabbat Shalom, everyone.

Peri Smilow:

Shabbat Shalom, everyone. I'm happy to stick around for a little while and play.

Peri Smilow:

(Singing)

Peri Smilow:

Shabbat Shalom, everyone.

About Sharsheret

Sharsheret, Hebrew for “chain”, is a national non-profit organization, improves the lives of Jewish women and families living with or at increased genetic risk for breast or ovarian cancer through personalized support and saves lives through educational outreach.

With four offices (California, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey), Sharsheret serves 150,000 women, families, health care professionals, community leaders, and students, in all 50 states. Sharsheret creates a safe community for women facing breast cancer and ovarian cancer and their families at every stage of life and at every stage of cancer - from before diagnosis, during treatment and into the survivorship years. While our expertise is focused on young women and Jewish families, more than 15% of those we serve are not Jewish. All Sharsheret programs serve all women and men.

As a premier organization for psychosocial support, Sharsheret’s Executive Director chairs the Federal Advisory Committee on Breast Cancer in Young Women, Sharsheret works closely with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and participates in psychosocial research studies and evaluations with major cancer centers, including Georgetown University Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center. Sharsheret is accredited by the Better Business Bureau and has earned a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator for four consecutive years.

Sharsheret offers the following national programs:

The Link Program

- Peer Support Network, connecting women newly diagnosed or at high risk of developing breast cancer one-on-one with others who share similar diagnoses and experiences

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- Embrace™, supporting women living with advanced breast cancer • Genetics for Life®, addressing hereditary breast and ovarian cancer
- Thriving Again®, providing individualized support, education, and survivorship plans for young breast cancer survivors • Busy Box®, for young parents facing breast cancer
- Best Face Forward®, addressing the cosmetic side effects of treatment
- Family Focus®, providing resources and support for caregivers and family members
- Ovarian Cancer Program, tailored resources and support for young Jewish women and families facing ovarian cancer • Sharsheret Supports™, developing local support groups and programs

Education and Outreach Programs

- Health Care Symposia, on issues unique to younger women facing breast cancer
- Sharsheret on Campus, outreach and education to students on campus
- Sharsheret Educational Resource Booklet Series, culturally-relevant publications for Jewish women and their families and healthcare Professionals

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