Chai Guy

This rabbi has HIV, will travel

September 1, 1999 By Shana Naomi Krochmal

Temple Sholom's austere stained-glass windows look out on Chicago's Lakeshore Drive. The atmosphere encourages synagogue visitors to sit primly and whisper, but Rabbi Marc Blumenthal—on a three-day sojourn from his home base at Temple Ami Shalom in Los Angeles—is doing his best to stir things up.

Blumenthal has been invited by CHAI, the Chicago HIV/AIDS Initiative (*chai* is Hebrew for "life") to deliver a speech billed as "When the Rabbi Has AIDS." Before he tells his story to the diverse crowd of 30, he and I sit in a corner of the sanctuary to discuss the unique obstacles faced by Jews with AIDS who look to their community for support. "There are a lot of statistics on HIV in this country, but we don't break things down on the basis of faith," he says, his New York accent undimmed by his seven-year stint in LA. "That's probably a good thing, but it means we don't know how many Jews have HIV."

He warms to his words. "And there is a general reluctance in the Jewish community, both traditional and progressive, to deal with so many of the issues that HIV prevention covers. There's this idea that there are no Jewish alcoholics, there is no Jewish domestic violence, Jews are perfect. HIV focuses on all that stuff. These are the issues basic to life itself, that religion *should* be concerned with."

The 43-year-old rabbi is affiliated with the Reform movement—a denomination that recently began to ordain openly gay men and lesbians. As one of only two openly HIV positive rabbis in the United States, Blumenthal says he is on a mission from God: "I'm not about condemnation. You can talk in general terms about AIDS in any community, but until you identify it with a face and a name, it can't become real.

"I am very open about the fact that I am an HIV positive gay man," he continues. "Part of my role is to say, 'Here I am. AIDS is not just some abstract threat. Everyone, including rabbis, may be infected.'"

Blumenthal tested positive in 1987, but he waited until five years ago to publicly reveal his status. "It was just before protease in-hibitors, and I didn't know if I was going to live much longer," he says. "It was the healthiest thing I could have done for my-self." Since 1995 he has taken AZT, 3TC

and Crixivan “three times a day, religiously,” keeping his viral load undetectable. “Dealing with a life-threatening illness changes things,” he says. “I am all too aware that there are no answers, and I’m more open to the power of prayer.”

Blumenthal serves as board chair of the AIDS National Interfaith Network and heads the AIDS committee of the Union of American Hebrew Congre-gations, the national organization of the Reform move-ment. He spends a great deal of his time speaking about HIV to Jewish students and youth groups around the country. “We’re talking about stuff they never thought they’d say out loud, let alone to a rabbi in a synagogue,” he says.

Blumenthal says that Jews should recognize that being concerned about the spread of HIV is in no way contradictory with Jewish ethics. “Saving a life is one of the primary commands of *mitzvot*,” he says, referring to Jewish law. “It is my obligation to act on information that can save lives.”

As a rabbi, Blumenthal knows that his role comes with its own special responsibilities. “Some people may sleep through sermons, but many people listen,” he says. “They really do want leadership. AIDS is an issue in real people’s lives—not to discuss that from the pulpit would be an error.”

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