

Ok, so I'm a few days early.

With LGBTQ Pride Month falling, as it does, in June to commemorate the 1969 Stonewall Riots in Manhattan which served as a tipping point for the American gay liberation movement, this *Erev Shabbat* message is perhaps a few hours premature. Yet, this internationally observed celebration which honors individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans-gender, and queer and more broadly raises issues of equality and inclusion particularly as they relate to sexuality and gender identity is important enough that I wanted to bring it to our attention as soon as possible. How much is our congregation enriched by the diversity that exists within it!

One of my frustrations as a religious leader is when Judaism's sacred texts are presented monolithically, without the nuance, debate, and rich commentary that are as much a part of our tradition as the Bible itself. I speak here of the Religious Right which has co-opted some of Torah's admittedly challenging verses exploring male-male homosexuality and has used these words to prohibit gay marriage, the ordination of gay priests (and gay rabbis too, in certain communities), and even the right treatment of gay and lesbian individuals. For me, this interpretation of sacred literature is not only morally problematic in that it leads to inequality at best and hatred and violence at worst, but it is also intellectually lacking. It ignores competing Biblical values seemingly at odds with these sexual prohibitions (as, for example, the idea that "it is not good for man to be alone" or that we are all created *b'tzelem Elohim* – in God's image). It denies the socio-historical context in which these texts developed and the extent to which law has always been flexible and adaptive enough to accommodate changing understandings of the world around us. It neglects the enormous tradition of commentary that has developed to grapple with these difficult verses and to re-interpret them in ways that preserve both the sanctity of the text and the sanctity of the human being as much as is possible.

LGBTQ Pride Month, however, is not necessarily about political or religious or legal rights; it's simply about countering hatred and homophobia, celebrating sexuality and gender identity in its diverse forms, and creating institutions and communities where all people feel safe and accepted. Even in synagogues such as ours, where I hope that we do a fairly good job at welcoming individuals and families of all different configurations and persuasions, I am aware that we can sometimes send unintended messages about what is "normal" or "good" to our members and especially our young people. Do the story-books that we read to our children feature families reflective of the full spectrum of modern life? When we talk to teens about healthy relationships, does our language assume that boys will date girls and that girls will date boys? Does the writing on our synagogue forms and publications make particular assumptions about how families are organized? Do we go out of our way to make it clear that all are welcome within our congregational home or do we just expect that people will feel comfortable to enter here?

I hope it need not be said that the doors of the clergy here at BHCBE are always open – to individuals who are gay or straight, out or questioning; to families of all shapes and stripes and configurations and sizes; to parents and grand-parents, teens and tweens. And over the next few months, we will be undertaking a number of different initiatives to better reflect the commitment to inclusion that is very much part of our mission as a sacred community. Later this fall, at the USCJ Biennial Convention in Schaumburg a group of our lay-people and professionals will be undergoing a training through Keshet, one the premier organizations working for LGBTQ inclusion in the Jewish world, and we are in the process of adding a sticker to our website indicating that we are an LGBTQ friendly congregation. We also pledged through Keshet to mark LGBTQ Pride Month by writing a piece in celebration of this important event and through doing so are listed on their website (<http://www.keshetonline.org/pride/>)

as a partner organization. Finally, we are undertaking some communication audits this summer to make sure that our print and electronic copy signals inclusion: of interfaith families, of individuals abled in their own way, of members of all ages, stages, life situations, sexual-orientations and gender diversities. If you have an interest in becoming involved in any of these efforts, please let me know!

Happy LGBTQ Pride Month, a few days early! I am so happy to celebrate together.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Annie Tucker