It was a steaming hot summer evening in New York City on the night of June 27th, 1969. Actress Judy Garland had just been laid to rest and the patrons of the Stonewall Inn, a small gay/transgender bar in the heart of Greenwich Village, were in no mood for a confrontation. Just past midnight, as they were mourning the loss of one of their beloved heroines when, plain clothed police officers from the Public Morals Section entered the bar to conduct a routine raid to punish those ‘homosexuals, transsexuals and other social deviants’ who continued to defy the City’s dress and morality codes. Unlike other nights when raids were conducted, the patrons of the Stonewall Inn – mostly low-income gay men and transgender women of color – physically fought back to the complete astonishment of the New York City police, the gay community of New York, and the entire country. In the days that followed, massive demonstrations and ‘riots’ broke out across the Village demanding gay liberation. A year later, in cities across the country from Boston to New York to San Francisco, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender men and women marched and celebrated the Stonewall Riots and called for people to come “out of the closets and into the streets!” The American LGBT rights movement and Pride were born.

The Stonewall Riots were very much ‘the parting of the Red Sea’ for the LGBT community. Like the ancient Israelites who left slavery in Egypt and wandered the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula for forty years, the LGBT community journeyed on a liberation march for forty years – one full of joy and sadness. Early victories and recognition in the 1970s were trampled by a conservative backlash, assassination of LGBT leader Harvey Milk, and soon after the catastrophe of AIDS in the 1980s. The 1990s saw a reemergence of commitment to reaching ‘a social Zion,’ where LGBT equality and rights could actually be achieved.

Here in Massachusetts, we were one of the first states to protect lesbian, gay and bisexual youth, protect sexual orientation in our non-discrimination laws, and allow lesbian and gay couples to adopt children. Matthew Shepard’s brutal murder in 1998 and the film Boys Don’t Cry in 1999, depicting the murder of a young transgender man in Nebraska, rallied the community to fight for human rights protections for the entire LGBT constituency. Yet it was not until 2003, when the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that the state could not bar same-sex couples from legally marrying, that the walls of Jericho were finally breached. Massachusetts joined the Netherlands and Belgium in allowing same-sex marriage and, arguably, changed the tide of history: after 2003, marriage equality was achieved in Spain, Canada, South Africa, Norway, Sweden, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, New Hampshire, Washington D.C. and, most recently, in Portugal.

While these victories are impressive, the establishment of an ‘LGBT Zion’ is far from certain – even here in Massachusetts. Until our transgender brothers and sisters receive their full civil and human rights in the Commonwealth (and indeed all LGBT people across the country), the march for liberty continues. The Jewish community of Massachusetts has been instrumental in supporting and advocating for LGBT equality – through organization such as Keshet and through coalitions of synagogues and rabbis demanding equal rights for their lesbian, transgender, bisexual and gay congregants. At TBZ, our own rabbis, Reb Moshe and Rav Claudia, have been continuously made this welcoming of LGBT people, and through recent initiatives coordinated by the synagogue’s LGBT Committee, hope to make this place even more inclusive of gay, bisexual, transgender and lesbian congregants.

On the eve of the 40th Pride celebration here in Massachusetts, we can view the Jewish experience of persecution and journey towards a spiritual homeland akin to the present journey
LGBT people are still trekking on. As Jews, we know what it like to be persecuted for who we are and know what it is like to wander the globe for a safe home seeking spiritual happiness. We have been outsiders just as the LGBT community has been and now know what being part of the mainstream means, just as LGBT people are learning today. With greater acceptance, comes more responsibility. In a Jewish context, this means that God asks us Jews to celebrate our lives and be thankful for what blessing we have, while being ever mindful that we must continue tikkun olam, repairing the world for the generations who will follow us. Pride can been seen in a similar light: a celebration of our lives as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender men and women, while stressing the importance of our own queer tikkun olam for the next generation, so that one day we can all live in full dignity and happiness as God intended for us when she created us in her image.

*Shabbat Shalom and Happy Pride.*