Nearly one year ago, on July 3, we stood together on this spot and were married by Rav Claudia – joined both by Jewish law and, as she delighted in saying, “the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.” Indeed, we were doubly blessed, to be welcomed into our new life through the rich traditions of a Jewish wedding and the hard-won rights of citizens to exercise their privilege to form a legal, martial union with the person they love. To have both of these sanctions is something that we will never take for granted, and we will continue to work to ensure that more people in more states – and ultimately all Americans – may have the experiences, rights, and protections that we were granted when we stood here last July. Yesterday, with court ruling that gay and lesbian married couples cannot be barred from federal benefits brings us closer to this.

When Rav Claudia suggested that we speak on this very special Shabbat, and share some of our experiences, we were honored to do so. We want to use the occasion of our wedding for a teaching that could engage aspects of our joining together with some sources from our tradition. It is worth noting that in the Talmudic commentaries concerning sexual relationships between women, many are in response to the earliest mention of such a possibility– one that specifically addresses the reason why marriage between women is prohibited. We are all familiar with well-known passages in Leviticus (18:22, 20:13) that admonish the children of Israel to refrain from same sex encounters, but this is voiced as explicitly between men; however, an early commentary on Leviticus, the Sifra (Aharei Mot 8:9) actually speaks about – and against - women marrying one another. The context is interesting here. The midrash is offered not to explain the passage that is very familiar, but rather an earlier verse (18:2-3), the one that opens the broader discussion of what behaviors are outlawed: You shall not copy the practice of the land of Egypt where you dwell, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws. To this line, the redactor, thought to be associated with the
school of Rabbi Akiva, commented: And what did they do? One man marries another man, a woman marries a woman, and a man marries a woman and her daughter, and a woman marries two men. What is being addressed here is the topic of marriage – perhaps best defined in this time as a physical and emotion attachment that threatened or was an alternative to a heterosexual union. The author may have been projecting back to the existence of such marriages in these early cultures, because in his own time, under Roman rule, single sex marriages, although not in the same legal status of as heterosexual ones, were fairly common – among both men and women, with several emperors having husbands. Thus in Sifra, there is the assumption that such arrangements existed in earlier times as well. There are many later commentaries addressing Sifra, with one of the most quoted from the Rambam’s monumental Mishneh Torah (‘Issurei Bi’ah 21:8.). He focuses on physical intimacy between women, as equivalent to the marriage in Sifra, and forbids it- but notes that there is no negative commandment against it. But there are consequences: a flogging for disobedience (mardut) should be given, since they have performed a forbidden act. A man should be strict with his wife in this matter, and should prevent women who are known to engage in this practice from visiting her, and prevent her from going to them. The concern here would seem to be the fear of being lured into a relationship, a counter-marriage, of a going over to them.

So, the threat of women entering into unions was a powerful one, with severe costs. We stand here grateful that we are able claim the right to a marriage between women, not forgetting those who in the past millennia could not; we should also be mindful however that this possibility perhaps had a much longer history before that in humankind. But on this Pride Shabbat we also would like to share with you what made our wedding similar to Jewish tradition rather than different from it, and talk briefly about two aspects of the wedding shared by all: the ketubah and the chuppah.

The origins of the ketubah are far from the symmetrical document we signed; rather, it was created to protect the wife and outline the husband’s obligations. This of course is predicated upon strikingly different gender roles and hierarchies. But we also know that in the mystical traditions of Judaism, the concept of the entry into marriage is so
important that we all partake in it on each Friday night. What is remarkable to us is that Kabbalat Shabbat is also distinctly female. We welcome the Sabbath bride and we are all in a sense married to the tradition of Shabbat. Thus, the ketubah is signed each week; one that exists for all and cannot be limited to nouns or names. Our ketubah is part of both the mystical tradition of mutual responsibilities that we as Jews have for each other and the commitment we make to our traditions and to Adonai each week.

Our ketubah represents the best of a community coming together to support a gay family in the making. We knew we wanted and in fact felt a deep need for one. We chose our particular ketubah with our son, trusting each other to find what we wished together. Rav Claudia and Reb Ebn created a document that reflected who we are, in Aramaic. The hand calligrapher took this on and recreated it in the form that was required. Finally, Rav Claudia and Reb Moshe read it through to be certain it was the ketubah we needed and wanted.

Our ketubah is a living document and carries meaning for us everyday. It affirms our commitment to each other and to Charlie. It says to him that our family is here to stay and grow. It reaffirms our right to be with each other in a legally sanctioned way, one that protects all of us. It serves as a reminder that we will work things out. It tells us to keep fighting for the LGBTQ people who do not have this choice. It is a witness to a day when many different people came together to show their love and unwavering support. We look upon it everyday and are sometimes moved to tears by its beauty. It is here and so are we.

There are similar feelings we brought to the chuppah. It’s meaning is “covering,” and with all its many variations, is easily still distinguishable: a cloth held aloft by four poles, one placed at each of its corners. The word appears to first have meant an actual room, perhaps where the marriage would be consummated. But in the Talmud, in Avot, there is a reference to the chuppah as a more transitory space; it is considered to be akin to the tent of Abraham, open to all. It is a space created in which the couple is to be married, but it also symbolizing their future home, and their commitment to the values of chesed.
and hospitality. This responsibility was woven, we might say, into the very fabric of the chuppah itself. Although in its traditional meaning, the chuppah is the exclusive space of the heterosexual couple, there is a very strong metaphysical meaning, where, like Abraham’s tent, it is open to everyone who will accept the responsibilities to be taken on there. The Zohar (Preface 8a), whose presence is so much a part of Kabbalat Shabbat, offers a very powerful metaphor. **In the Gemarrah tells us that before the giving of the Torah, Hashem held the mountain (Sinai), over our heads, warning us to accept the Torah, or risk being buried alive on the spot. Nevertheless, our sages understood the incident another way. The mountain above our heads was actually a Chuppah, a marriage canopy, and that the acceptance of the Torah was akin to the wedding ceremony. By accepting the Torah, Hashem and the Community of Israel became wedded to each other.** Thus, the chuppah can be seen as less about the specific genders of those under it, than about holding the mutual intention, as Kimbell said of the ketubah, that in standing there one is making a commitment and accepting all that comes with that.

The chuppah over our heads on our wedding day brought generations of family to our canopy, as it was created by two tallit, bringing the memory of many lives to shelter us and witness our marriage. One tallit was carried by a young man from the small city of Seret, then in Bucovina, now Romania, at the turn of the century; he took it across the Atlantic, first to Orchard Street in the Lower East Side, and then to Baltimore. The other travelled from Europe in the other direction; carried in haste from Vienna in 1938, with decades of use in Haifa, before coming to the next generation, here in Boston. Both dated to before the Holocaust, and had they not left Europe when they did, neither these tallitot nor their owners would probably not have survived. For us and for Charlie, we felt that the bringing of generations together is also the responsibility to the memory of those before us, and the blessings of family at time when we received the sheva brachot. It is so fitting for us that it is in this week’s parsha, Naso, that Moses receives the priestly blessings, being told that the power of saying these words “**shall link My name with the people of Israel.**”
Our marriage forged another link in the chain of Jewish families from the past and stretching onward to the future. Does everyone need to make this choice? No. There are so many different ways to be a family. We have the freedom to make this choice and not everybody wants to or can do it this way. When people decide to come together to create a family within our communities, the LGBTQ community and the TBZ community, it is time for each of us to stand with that family and celebrate its existence. This is what TBZ, our friends, and family did for the two of us and for Charlie. This is what we will do for anybody else. This is what Jews do for each other. It is the way it should be. It is our commitment.

Shabbat shalom!