

4th Annual Pride Shabbat D'var
June 14 & 15, 2013
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Shabbat Shalom. This year I was given the honor to chair the LGBT Committee here at TBZ and recently volunteered to speak at the Pride Shabbat Services. When Rav Claudia told me that my limit was 5-10 minutes, I was a bit apprehensive, thinking “What could I possibly say to fill that much time? “ As I started to put my thoughts together however I began to feel more like someone winning a Tony Award, trying to squeeze a lifetime of experience and dozens of thank you’s into a New York minute. Well thankfully this isn’t exactly the Tony’s, so here goes.

One might question why are we bothering to define ourselves distinctly as queer Jews in a diverse congregation which already seems sufficiently welcoming. Why take one shabbat during June Pride month to call attention to ourselves as gay Jews and ask the congregation to share in our experience? My thinking is that it is important for us to remain visible to dialogue and process the moral and ethical questions which continue to challenge us, and to our broaden our communal sense of spiritual inclusion.

One clear reason for us to take note of Pride as Jews is because we share a common and overlapping historical experience as oppressed minorities. Further, the politics of gay liberation coincide in principle with a view of Jewish teachings which emphasize compassion and social justice. Personally it is important to me as a queer Jew to practice an ongoing spiritual reintegration. To be invisible is to assume that all of us here understand and accept the complex nature of sexuality and gender expression and are all committed to a new level of moral engagement.

To understand the continuing urgency in the gay civil rights movement and it’s parallels to the Jewish experience, it’s important to review briefly, or as briefly as I can, the history of the

gay liberation movement. We all agree that things have changed as far as social attitude exponentially in the past ten years. Social justice efforts for gay community over the prior 40 years had been slower and incremental.

The Gay Liberation Movement was born at 1:00 AM on June 28, 1969, at a hole in the wall bar on Christopher Street in New York's West Village called The Stonewall Inn. This bar was at the time literally an underground meeting place for the most marginalized of gay folk. Transvestites, young gay outcasts living on the street and others met late at night to drink and dance in this Mafia owned establishment, then the singular gay bar in New York. Homosexuals had become the target of ongoing harassment, raids, arrests and assaults by the NYPD.

On that day in June, which happened to coincide with the funeral of Judy Garland uptown patrons who had gathered at the Stonewall fought back. Police harassment met with resistance and quickly escalated to violence. The Stonewall Riots drew hundreds into the street in support. Things would never be the same. After the Stonewall riots in 1969, many LGBT people—even those who did not witness the rebellion—were inspired to contribute. Gays began organizing, protesting and mobilizing. On July 4, 1969, a year after the Stonewall riots, Craig Rodwell with many others in the Mattachine Society picketed in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia in what was called the Annual Reminder.

Rodwell returned to New York City and organized Christopher Street Liberation Day on June 29, 1970. The March was the first gay pride march in the United States covering 51 blocks from Christopher Street to Central Park. Hundreds of thousands now participate annually in the New York City Pride March.

The story goes on. Most recently Minnesota became the twelfth state to legalize gay marriage. Yet married gays in those states are denied over 1100 federal rights as their marriages are not recognized in federal law. Challenges to the Defense of Marriage Act and California's Prop 8 are to be decided by the Supreme Court shortly. Earlier, Supreme Court Justice Kennedy voiced his concern that we are going too fast into what he called "unchartered waters". He oddly wondered aloud about the long term effects on the institution, somehow missing the fact that heterosexual marriage has not shown any effect whatsoever attributable to Massachusetts nine years experience with marriage equality. Why would it?

Let's be clear: Homophobia not marriage equality is the social evil of our time. Homophobia is founded in profound ignorance, self loathing and the institutionalizing of privilege and paranoia. It equates to racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism. Despite the legal gains, many still hold on to the politics of self-righteousness which they document with skewed and inaccurate biblical interpretations or assumed prohibitions.

Earlier this week, on June 11 we noted the 50th anniversary of Gov. George Wallace's defiance of the US Supreme Court order to desegregate the University of Alabama. We recall he ultimately backed off when confronted by the National Guard sent to Tuscaloosa by President John F Kennedy.

We would of course be naive to think that racism has somehow disappeared from America as a result of 50 years of progress for blacks since then, including the election and re-election of a black President. Clearly racism still exists as police racial profiling, biased sentencing and incarceration practices, xenophobic immigration policies, and low expectations in the classroom, just to name a few.

The struggle for gay equality is not over. We are too frequently shocked back to the painful realities of high gay teen suicide rates and hate crimes. Just a few weeks ago a crowd on Christopher Street demonstrated not far from the site of 1969 Stonewall riots, marking the death of 32-year-old Mark Carson in Greenwich Village. Carson was killed in the early morning hours of May 19th as he walked with a companion through the Village just blocks from the Stonewall Inn. A man charged with murder as a hate crime shot Carson in the head and in the heart while shouting anti-gay slurs.

Gays and Transgender people in our Commonwealth and around the country still lose jobs because of sexual orientation or gender expression despite new found legal protections. Parents of out gay teens abuse and neglect their children by tossing them into the streets, exposing them to high rates of drug and alcohol dependence multiple health risks and exploitation. School bullying continues to be underreported and rationalized despite the best efforts of local officials and school boards.

It is gratifying to see that overall the mainstream Jewish community remains the most tolerant and accepting of all religious groups, demonstrating currently a 76% support of same-sex marriage. We as Jews as a result of our history and values have a particular sensitivity to and investment in advocating for the rights of other minority groups. During Pride we remember the 100,000 Gays who were exterminated in the holocaust along with the 6 million. Gay Jews have been a vilified subgroup of the most vilified people in human history. To become complacent now, considering recent rapid changes in attitude and improving legal status is to ignore current realities and Judaism's prophetic mission

In my work as a psychotherapist with young people in particular I am often struck by the relationship of shame and guilt to depression and the addictions. For generations, gays have had

to live closeted in fear, shamed and denigrated by religious institutions, diagnosed and criminalized by the medical/legal establishment. Much of the resultant suffering has appeared over the years in statistically significant higher rates of Alcohol/Drug Dependence and suicide among gays. Gay liberation has helped open the closet door for many and has helped to instill a healthy sense of pride, inclusion and safety for the gay and transgender community.

Pride is more than the absence of denigration and exclusion, just as health is more than the absence of disease. Pride is the sense of radical self acceptance and the celebration of one's own personhood. On this Pride Shabbat let us be especially grateful to join in the celebration of the lives and work of our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender congregants, family, and friends.

Shabbat Shalom