In the last ten years the gay community has made more progress in the area of civil rights than in the prior one hundred and fifty. We in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender community have established not just a strong political and legal voice but also an exponential increase in social and cultural acceptance and full inclusion in many religious denominations. The Jewish Community has been varied in its response overall but generally ahead of the organized religion curve on this, and shows growing mainstream consensus in it’s approach at least to gay marriage if not gay relationship. Indeed, the Conservative Movement’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards did finally approve models for gay marriage just three years ago on June 1, 2012. Cultural and familial understanding of the nature of transgender people and their rights is growing more slowly, but is moving forward.

Given the existing victories, and the imminent, hopefully positive decision from the Supreme Court on marriage equality one might question why we continue to have Pride marches in 2015. After the Stonewall riots and the first Pride march in 1969 gays knew what was at stake. One wonders when we see the many corporate participants in Boston’s Pride Parade who seem to be seizing a big pink marketing opportunity, where the politics of Pride have gone. Which bring me to the next question: Why do we continue to have a Pride Shabbat at TBZ?

The reason is this: despite the gains there remains a moral imperative to advocate for LGBT rights in America and around the world. To think that because we have gay marriage now means that we live in a post homophobic post transphobic non-sexist society is as naive as it is to think that we live in a post-racist, post anti-Semitic America. Police brutality in black communities has upstaged violence againsts gays and trans people in the news recently, but discrimination and violence against LGBT people in America is alive and well..
To illustrate the effect of violence on psychological health in the gay community I’m going to quote briefly from a 2010 study in the American Journal of Public Health I came across recently entitled “Pervasive Trauma Exposure Among U.S Sexual Orientation Minority Adults, and the Risk of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.” Bear with me… Among other variables, the study cites the contributing risk factor to PTSD “Prevalence of Interpersonal Violence Overall” in the Male Heterosexual grouping to be 24.95%. In the “Gay Male Sexual Identity” category that number doubles to 50.69%. For Heterosexual women that contributing risk factor for PTSD jumps from 26% to 60.21% for lesbians. Similarly rates of suicide among neglected and abused gay and trans teens are disproportionately alarming.

Gay bashings in assumedly safe gay neighborhoods remain periodic occurrences. On the international scene, significantly in parts of Africa and in Russia to name just two areas, persecution of LGBT people is pandemic. We in Massachusetts live in a progressive bubble in the self described “cradle of liberty” in the first state to adopt gay marriage. I am often surrounded at TBZ by warm and supportive congregants. The personal hypothetical question “How can I live openly as a gay Jew among the masses in Jamaica Plain? for instance, is perhaps one of the most “ho hum” non issues in recent memory. But what it means to be gay and a Jew in the larger Jewish community for me has been a slower evolutionary process.

Over the past few years I’ve found great pleasure at being actively involved outside TBZ in Nehirim, the organization for LGBTQ Jews founded by my friend Reb Jay Michaelson. Nehirim announced on May 4 that it would cease to exist as a non-profit. Coincidentally KESHET closed one of its remote offices at Mosaic headquarters in Denver at the end of last
year. The sense of the leaders of these important Jewish LGBT support organizations seems to be that Jewish gay advocacy and support may be incorporated with other active existing organizations and funded programs in large urban areas. Sadly for me, Jay states that Nehirim has done its job as a non-profit but that it will continue in some other form as yet unclear, at least to me.

At TBZ I reluctantly withdrew this year as chair of our LGBT Committee in response to the apparent lack of enthusiasm among other gay congregants to increase programming. After talking with Rav Claudia and others, we concurred that the needs of the group were being served satisfactorily by our regular Pride observance and our annual D’var at the Yom Yippur Mincha service. It seems as though additional educational community outreach here isn’t seen as imperative in this already gay friendly congregation. Indeed, we’d appear to be preaching to the proverbial choir if we had one. Gays have it seems been so completely assimilated at TBZ that any request for further inclusion may be seen as redundant.

Jews and gays have both been ambivalent and fairly self contradictory on the issue of assimilation. We see ourselves as different in many ways from the mass culture and both look to preserve many aspects our own uniqueness. At the same time we crave anonymity and to be seen as being just like everybody else. Gay Jews are outsiders within a group of outsiders. The reality remains though that gays are innately different from the larger groups in more respects than sexual orientation alone. Many of our sensibilities, what has been called our dual nature and a number of other distinguishing characteristics beyond the scope of this brief talk tend to manifest for example in our over-representation in the performing arts and service professions.
When I think about belonging and acceptance I am regularly reminded of the verse in Robert Frost’s poem “Death of a Hired Man” that goes “Home is the place where, when you have to go there they have to take you in”. To me home is a place that is created around the dynamics of radical self and other acceptance. As a psychotherapist my experience and distinctness as gay man have contributed a certain personal depth and breath to the healing tools of self-compassion and non-judgement.

The continuing struggle for me as a gay Jew has been how to graciously accept my own congregation’s welcome and tolerance and yet find myself comfortably at home. I often wonder whether mere tolerance is really enough, or perhaps more complex but relevant, how can I bring my particular assets to our community here at TBZ? To be given the honor to stand here again on Pride Shabbat and to be able to voice these question, is perhaps part of the answer. I am deeply grateful for that opportunity.

Shabbat Shalom.