

Pride Shabbat D'var Torah-

Shabbat Shalom-

It is such an honor to give the dvar Torah this morning. As some here may know, I tell pretty much everyone I meet that I have the best job in Boston. It feels really incredible that I have the opportunity to open a dialogue with you during Pride Shabbat, a moment in the TBZ calendar that is near and dear to my heart.

The entire month of June is national Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Pride month. Just like the Jewish liturgical calendar has its holidays, celebrations and memorials, the queer community has a ritual calendar all its own, and June is pretty much the high holidays of the gay calendar. Now just like any good Jewish holiday, Pride has it's fun, outgoing moments of celebration. These are the loud moments - parties, music, giant floats filled with sequins and amazing costumes. These are the moments when all those who identify with the LGBTQ community - young and old, rich or poor, every race and ethnicity, radicals, liberals, and conservatives - all come together to celebrate their identity - in public, with pride, and joy and glitter. It is beautiful, it is fun, and it is amazingly powerful to see this community celebrated in Boston and cities all over the country with such an open heart. Especially since today there are many, many queer and trans people who suffer continued oppression, marginalization and violence. The jubilation of a parade is powerful and deep in juxtaposition with this stark reality.

But there is another side to Pride. There is a quieter side - Like the tshuvah process we find during the *yamim noraim*, Pride month gives us all a chance to assess our core values, search our souls and make goals for the year to come. It is a moment when we can re-open dormant conversations and recommit ourselves to making all spaces not only welcoming to queer and transgender people, but fully inclusive, with politics and principles of queer liberation fully weaved into the fabric of the community. The parades and parties lack depth and political awareness without this gay tshuvah, and without the parties, the mardi gras beads and glitter, we would miss celebrating queer identities out loud, in public and with so much pride. We need both.

Gay teshuvah may not happen at the parade, but it can happen in other communal moments - in small gatherings, in discussions, and in synagogues, churches and other holy places. This happens when anyone, not just queer or transgender folks, but all community members take a step back and ask the hard questions - Do LGBTQ people have equitable rights? Is there full inclusion here? Who is marginalized in my community? What have I done to make the world a safer place? What does more look like - more rights, more access, more inclusion?

I have to admit - I really have no idea how to fully answer these questions - But thank God, as Jews we of course have Torah to guide us and ground our conversation-

This week we read parshat Chukkat. In the middle episode of the parasha, we have the abrupt death of Miriam. Miriam is the one who finds all the wells and water for the

Israelites on their long trek to the promised land. And of course, immediately after her death, the Israelites are complaining again - They don't have water. They are thirsty, they are angry and they are argumentative - Why did you bring us out to this horrible place to die? You **made** us leave Egypt and now here we are in this barren place. This is a familiar trope - the Israelites may have been led from slavery to freedom, but they have also been led from civilization to wilderness, and very often they just do not have the resources they need to survive - physical or emotional.

Moshe and Aaron immediately fall on their faces, pleading with God for water. God commands Moshe to take his staff, assemble the people to come witness a new miracle. God tells Moshe this time to speak to a rock and there will be water. Moshe follows God's orders partially, he takes his staff, gathers the people, but instead of speaking to the rock, he speaks to the people, saying " Listen you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?!" Then, he raises his staff, striking the rock twice. Water pours out, everyone drinks - but God is not happy - By not following the instructions perfectly, Moshe shows a lack of trust in God. God punishes Moshe and Aaron - they will not be the leaders who bring the people to the land of Israel. After all their work, all their sacrifice, they will never reach the promised land. The newly formed well is named the Waters of Merivah, the waters of quarrelling.

I find this episode crushing - after all Moshe's growth and leadership - he will never see his hard work come to fruition.

The rabbis interpret the reason for the harsh punishment in several different ways - Rashi believes Moshe's sin was striking the rock rather than speaking to it. While Maimonides argues that Moshe is being punished for his anger, and for calling the Israelites "rebels."

Rashi's point is straightforward - Moshe did it wrong. God didn't want Moshe to cause the water, God wanted Moshe to say words to ritualize the miracle. We do this all the time. For example, the food that grows from the ground is miraculous - so we say brachot, blessings in order to recognize the miracle. Our blessing does not create the food, but creates a moment of communal awareness of God. Moshe doesn't speak to the rock - he speaks to the people - The message is jumbled- his action is not symbolic it is causal - he hits the rock, water comes out. It seems to all that it is Moshe, not God, who is causing the miracle.

This is a harsh punishment for a botched ritual - However, this emphasizes how important ritual is - speaking to rocks does not bring water - but if God is going to make miracles, our responsibility is to recognize that the miracle is not our doing, and give thanks. Ritual really matters. It allows us to see and recognize what is real, deep and holy.

Pride is a ritual that really matters - not because it necessarily **does** something new. Rather, pride is the recognition of where we are and where we are going. In 1986 my newly out cousin Phyllis was part of the group that put together the first AIDs quilt in memory of those who had recently been lost to the new disease. As family lore goes -

Phyllis had been closeted for some time, but that year she marched as a recently out lesbian down the streets of NYC. Out of nowhere, she heard someone screaming her name, and from the crowd on the sidelines, an older woman, her mother and my Aunt Clara darted out to give her a hug, before running back to the sidewalk. In 1986, that was a remarkable, astonishing example of acceptance and love.

In June of 2004 I marched with a tiny, new group called Marriage Equality NY, which had sprung up in response to the judicial ruling in favor of gay marriage in Massachusetts just three weeks earlier. Then in 2010, I was with Keshet, the organization that fights for GLBT inclusion in Jewish life, marching alongside my future wife JoJo, surrounded by a huge loving community. If someone had told Phyllis in 1986 that her then toddler cousin would someday march in pride with her wife and then write a sermon about it - she never would have believed it. The world has really changed even in my lifetime.

Each ritualized pride celebration serves as a snapshot of where we are and where we hope to be going. It is a moment to gather, and realize that we can and receive water - but not because one person banged it with a stick. Rather, the rock overflows with water because many hands have come together to recognize oppression and fight for justice - and we need to stand back, notice and say a blessing.

Now, Maimonides believed Moshe is punished for calling the Israelites "rebels" - The Israelites are asking for something they need to survive. Their anger is rooted in

desperation, while Moshe's anger seems rooted in frustration, perhaps reasonably, that he is responsible for the needs of so many people.

The lesson here seems clear - whether we are the leader or the follower, our tradition compels us to recognize the holiness of each soul and do what we can to take care of each other. Moshe's dismissal of the people as "rebels" because they have a need, is unacceptable. I want to push this message even further - I believe that we are not only compelled to be inclusive of queer and trans congregants when they are in the room, when they have the immediate need for inclusion- but also, we are compelled to fight for GLBTQ liberation all the time, even if we do not have a single queer or transgender community member. Why? because it is right - and because it makes our community a stronger, more holy place. Fighting against the oppression of others is not a selfless action - we have to ask ourselves - How am i invested in this liberation? Why is it important for me to actively make the world a better place? When we fight for the rights of others, we are recognizing God, and shaping a world that we can be proud of.

But how do we do this? In my experience, TBZ is already incredibly welcoming - I want to highlight that we are already doing so many things right. Even the fact that we have a yearly pride shabbat is an enormous step forward in the life of congregational Judaism. Not too long ago, a service like this would have been very rare. GLBT designated synagogues popped up in major cities because queer Jews did not feel welcomed or accepted in "mainstream" congregations. Today, such mainstream congregations have

rainbow stickers on their doors, and proudly talk about GLBT rights and issues from the bimah. It's a whole new Jewish world.

However, though there is gay marriage in Massachusetts and a recent Transgender Equal Rights act - we do not live in a society free of homophobia or transphobia.

Though I know I'm married, and you know I'm married, the US government does not know I am married, and JoJo and I have 1,138 fewer federal rights than the straight married couples in the room. We cannot live anywhere - we need to live somewhere that doesn't have active discrimination against us on the books. If we cross certain state lines, our civil marriage is effectively annulled.

Its more than marriage rights - For me, being visibly queer means that sometimes people stare, and sometimes they ask if I am a boy or a girl, and sometimes people are rude. For others it is worse - physical violence and bullying, lack of job security, lack of family support. This is all compounded by intersections of other brands of oppression - classism, racism, disability discrimination. Life is harder for queer and trans folks who are poor, black, immigrant or disabled.

There is much work to be done and there is much more we can be doing at TBZ. I want to suggest that the first step is not necessarily action - we shouldn't just start hitting some stones - No, instead, together we need to address the difficult questions -

Do LGBTQ people have equitable rights? Is there full inclusion here? Who is marginalized in my community? What have I done to make the world a safer place? What does more look like - more rights, more access, more inclusion?

And through this dialogue, our conversation might lead us to new ideas, new work and to a world that we have yet to dream of.

Moshe might have missed this - his fatigue, his many years of leading them in circles might have disrupted his moral compass. Maybe Moshe was just not the right person to lead the people into a new land. Maybe he was too used to the old mode of existing to step even one foot into a new reality. Perhaps we will be like Moshe, traveling through the wilderness, only to die on Mount Nebo, overlooking the promised land without ever setting foot there. Or maybe together, we will push past the old paradigms, and together work towards a world of liberation, freedom and equality. I'm in.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Pride Sameach