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On this 5th annual Pride Shabbat we all celebrate with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Jews, along with their friends, allies, and families. We are certainly blessed to living in the 21st century, in a state with progressive laws and to have such an open and welcoming shul here at TBZ. There have been many victories to cheer, but still many political struggles to wage and minds to enlighten before we can rest.

At Kiddush 3 weeks ago I was minding my own business discussing the meaning of life with my nonagenarian buddy Kal Neufield, when Meredith Joy asked me to say a few words at this Pride Shabbat. At first I assumed that she had misinterpreted my new unusually colorful spring wardrobe. But she explained that she was looking for a somewhat more indirect perspective on the sexual orientation inclusiveness that we all treasure at TBZ. Although having a root canal sounded like a lot more fun to me, I couldn’t decline a request from Meredith who has worked so hard for many years for the betterment of this synagogue. Also, yesterday, Sivan 22 was my mother’s 20th yartzeit. As you will learn in a moment, I think that she also would have encouraged me to speak today.
Obviously, I will be preaching to the choir here this morning. But, unfortunately, nobody asked me to speak at Young Israel or any other Orthodox shul this week.

We will get to the parsha and the sad story of Korach and his poor sense of timing in a few minutes, but first let me tell you a little about myself and my connections to the rainbow crowd.

I am just your average old, straight, white Jewish guy from Nebraska. And just for its added shock value, I will admit to you that on rare occasions I have actually voted for republican candidates. Of course, my wife Julie banished me to our unfinished basement for many nights during those particular campaigns.

Now back to Nebraska. My mother’s half brother, my Uncle Herman, first appeared in my life when I was 16. He lived at a hotel in downtown Omaha. All I was told about his prior life was that he had spent a lot of time in Las Vegas. I never understood why my mother was the only family member who was willing to include him in our family events. He was the only adult male that I had even known who never married. In retrospect, I’m pretty sure he was gay – but such matters just were not discussed in 1960’s Nebraska. I now realize that my mother was commendably ahead of her time.
Prior to TBZ, we were members of a traditional conservative egalitarian minyan in Newton. Although same sex marriage wasn’t yet legal in Mass., the issue of a gay couple wanting to celebrate their aufruf (aliyah to the torah before the wedding) at our Minyan was discussed at one of our quarterly town hall meetings. A large majority of the group said absolutely not. My wife and I found that attitude quite shocking and that was one of the many reasons that brought us to the more enlightened pews of TBZ about 13 years ago.

My oldest daughter, Zoe, came out the following year when she was a sophomore at Wellesley College. Zoe and my wonderful daughter in law Carolina celebrated their 4th wedding anniversary a little over 2 weeks ago. We had a beautiful aufruf at Shabbat services here at TBZ and had the honor Reb Moshe officiating at their wedding. We are also blessed to be living in an age of modern medical technology; through which Zoe & Carolina are expecting the birth of their first child in about 6 weeks.

Another connection for me is via my favorite niece’s 17 year old child who is transgender and is currently undergoing medical treatments to help her transition to the female that she is/wishes to be. My niece was worried about how the Acton/Boxborough High School administration would react. She was
surprised and relieved when she was told that this was quite a routine matter and you just have to “fill out this form.”

The final and most problematic of my connections is in the Orthodox branch of my family. Almost all of the males on my paternal uncle’s side are orthodox rabbis. I have always tried to stay close to them, although our very different halachic standards have not always made that easy. One of the young men (who is not a rabbi) is gay and we are thrilled to be attending his wedding next month. As you might imagine, my orthodox relatives are having a very hard time with this. As of now, it looks like the parents will come to the wedding, but not the siblings. This has been very painful for all involved. The contrast with sharing our joy with the TBZ community couldn’t be greater.

Over the centuries, the rabbis have been pretty good at reinterpreting (often very creatively) biblical verses to make Jewish law compatible with contemporary community ethical standards. This has been the case for the Orthodox as well with two glaring exceptions, both involving gender points; the issues of equality of women in Jewish prayer and religious leadership and the loving inclusion of Jews with all sexual orientations. While I respect the intellectual bind that my Orthodox family find themselves in given their strict constructionist legalistic mindset, I don’t see how they cannot be swayed by
the unnecessary pain and suffering that train of logic results in. I sense that attitudes are changing. I am hopeful, but not optimistic, that my Modern Orthodox brothers and sisters will come around soon. If not, we may have to wait for the current older generation to die off in the midbar of their misunderstanding of Torah values.

I don’t think that my family history is all that unusual. Demographic “proof” is hard to come by, but I estimate that somewhat greater than 5% of human beings are born members of the GLBTQ community. So unless you have a really small family, or you are very non-observant (and I don’t mean religiously), or are a statistical anomaly – your extended family and the GLBTQ family is one. (BTW the initials GLBTQ just doesn’t roll off the tongue easily and it sounds a little like a secret code – I think we need to find a better name for the team)

Now,

Turning to this week’s torah reading but with a somewhat kooky twist:

Korach (a first cousin of Moses and Aaron) along with 250 “chieftains, leaders of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute” challenge Moses & Aaron “You have gone too far. For all the community is holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you rise yourselves above the Lord’s
congregation.” That challenge has a nice modern liberal ring to it, don’t you agree?

Moses suggests a little test to see how they do at performing an incense offering with their own fire pans at the entrance of the Mishkan. Since we are reading from one of the 5 books of Moses and not the Book of Korach, it is not hard to guess that it didn’t go well for them. God incinerates them all by fire. Their families were sucked into a major sink hole and buried alive. And to make his point even more clearly, God arranged for a plaque that killed 14,700 bystanders.

How could Korach have expected anything else? He and his followers had been part of the Exodus and witnessed the miracles of the ten plaques, parting of the sea, manna, pillars of fire, the events at Mt Sinai, the sons of Aaron getting zapped for trying to offer incense offering on their own. You would have to be a bit delusional to think that Moses and Aaron didn't have God in their corner. In last week’s parsha, when the spies gave their pessimistic report about the difficulties of conquering the promised land, God said to Moses “How long will this people spurn me, and how long will they have no
faith in me despite all the signs that I have performed in their midst? I will strike them with pestilence and disown them...

Korach may well have had a very nice progressive point about inclusivity, but his timing was poor. It is as if we tried to stage a big GLBTQ Pride parade this week in Uganda, or Nigeria, or Iran. In case you are not aware, homosexual activity is those countries (among many others) and punishable by long prison terms or the death penalty. Trying to break new ground for social justice is commendable, but if tried in the wrong place in the wrong time can result in being pushed into that broken ground and buried as we see in this parsha.

You would think that the fire pans that the 250 chieftains tried to use for their offering would have been considered super treife and sucked into the pit and buried along with them. But oddly, God tells Moses to have Aaron’s son Eleazar gather all of the pans from the charred remains and hammer them into bronze plating to cover the altar. This was to serve as a reminder to all of what happened when Korach challenged the priestly order.

I prefer an interpretation offered by Rav Abraham Isaac Kook (who was a great Talmudic scholar and Cabbalist and served as the first Ashkenazi chief
Rabbi of British Mandate for Palestine). Quoting from the bottom note in Etz Hayim Chumash, Rav Kook, teaches that “the holiness of the fire pans symbolizes the necessary role played by skeptics and agnostics in keeping religion honest and healthy. Challenges to tradition are necessary because they stand as perpetual reminders that religion can sink into corruption and complacency. Plating the altar with the fire pans of the rebels is meant to remind us of the legitimacy, indeed the potential holiness of the impulse within each of us to rebel against religious stagnation and complacency that can infect religion.”

So, speaking as a proud nephew, father, cousin and great uncle I pray that we will all stand up and continue working together to ensure that none of us are ever denied the universal human rights and respect to which we are all entitled.

Shabbat Shalom