A few weeks ago, in the New York Times Sunday Review, there was a short column entitled “Justice at the Opera.” The column was about a talk given by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg at the Glimmerglass opera festival in Cooperstown N.Y.

At the festival, Justice Ginsburg discussed an aria called “I Accept Their Verdict” from “Billy Budd,” the opera based on Herman Melville’s novella.

Budd is a sailor who is sentenced to death after killing an officer on his ship who had falsely accused him of organizing a mutiny. The aria is sung by Captain Vere who believes he must uphold the sentence as lawful since he must follow the letter of the law.

Justice Ginsburg noted that Melville based the character of Vere on his own father-in-law, a Massachusetts judge who had ordered that an escaped slave be returned to his owner. The judge, Ginsburg said, opposed slavery but was obliged by his oath to uphold the law.

Justice Ginsburg was discussing this in the context of, as she put it” the “conflict between law and justice.”
A member of the audience asked Justice Ginsburg whether the Supreme Court was either art or theater. “It’s both,” she responded, “with a healthy dose of real life mixed in.”

This story and Justice Ginsburg’s comments about the conflict between law and justice helped me in thinking about how to approach my d’var this afternoon about sentence 22 in Leviticus18 that we read today. This is the sentence that calls it an abomination for a man to lie with a man as one lies with a woman.

I asked myself what does it mean when there is a conflict between how a law in the Torah is interpreted when the “real life” results of that interpretation cause enormous grief and despair.

I decided to approach this question from three perspectives- the halacha, my personal connection to this sentence, and finally the broad challenge for all of us as Jews.

First- the halacha. This is the perspective that I thought would be most difficult. After all, I am not a Torah scholar and there have been many halachic and scholarly interpretations and reinterpretations of this sentence.

What I discovered was that approaching this sentence from the halachic perspective turned out to be fairly easy-- and it is TBZ that has made it so.
Five years ago, when Alan and I first came to TBZ, I wondered how our Rabbis and our community would address these words that have brought so much pain to so many people.

A part of me was hoping that TBZ would simply reject the tradition of reading Leviticus 18 and replace it with other readings.

But the chapter was read and when Leviticus 18 sentence 22 was read - the entire congregation stood up in protest.

TBZ- along with Congregations all across this country- recognize that when a law that was designed for the people of Israel to live with and thrive with is having the opposite effect – when the law is not just- the process of interpretation can find new meanings in the text by which living and thriving is possible.

And Reb Moshe recently reminded me of the very Jewish concept of Kevod HaBreyot- respect for all living creatures -variously translated as individual honor or human dignity. This, Reb Moshe said, was an essential concept used in the Conservative movement’s opening up of marriage and rabbinic school to LGBT Jews.

We reinterpret because we are the ones who must determine what a text means in our time.
In Jewish law we live by the commandments. That means not have one’s selfhood stifled or in hiding; not be bullied or bashed; not, God forbid, commit suicide. But live, pridefully and openly and joyously.

Which brings me to my second area of reflection- my personal story.

Although Alan and I lived in Phoenix, Arizona for over 35 years- not exactly a bastion of liberal thought - we were part of a small progressive community and considered ourselves open minded about homosexuality.

Yet, 20 years ago, on the last day of spring break of his senior year, our older son, Daniel told us he thought he was gay. A few hours later he got on a plane and flew back east to school leaving us perplexed and frightened.

What would this mean? Would he be safe? How would this affect his future? He wanted to be a doctor- a children’s doctor. Would this even be possible now?

And in those first difficult days, it was our younger son, David, who helped the most. David was preparing for his bar-mitzvah and the synagogue we went to required a half hour drive back and forth so we had time to talk in the car.

On one of these drives I said something foolish like- “I wish I could press a button and Danny wouldn’t be gay.”
I could see David’s expression out of the corner of my eye- we all know the look that only a thirteen year old can give when he thinks you’re some kind of idiot.

And he said something like “what are you talking about- then Danny wouldn’t be Danny.” And, of course, he was right.

Yet, I never felt comfortable talking to our Rabbi and it took me awhile to tell my friends and family. And I do remember Leviticus 18:22 being read at our synagogue year after year and no one, including myself, standing up or objecting or even discussing it with friends.

And now, twenty years later- Alan and I are here at TBZ. We are the proud parents of our son, Danny, who is a doctor at Boston Children’s Hospital and is living his life as a gay man --pridefully, openly and joyfully.

Danny is blessed to be living in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts where last summer he married Scott, the man he has loved since college. And, most incredibly, they could together adopt their beautiful baby, Claire, who is now four months old.

And twenty years later, right here in Boston, we have the blessing of a wonderful organization called Keshet- an organization that works for the full equality and inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Jews in Jewish life.
Keshet has a program that I wish our family had had 20 years ago. It’s called the Parent and Family Connection offering support to parents and family members of LGBT kids through the help of mentors -affirming the space in the Jewish community for them and for their children and family members.

Which brings me to my third area of reflection- How does the very Jewish ideal of building a better world through actions of love fit with the “real world” results of Leviticus 18:22?

In many of our prayers, before the word chesed comes the word oseh. Oseh Chesed. One does chesed. Keshet does chesed. Their leaders and supporters know that the world will only be repaired when chesed erupts in an act of justice.

It is not enough for us to feel love for someone internally or even to constantly tell the person how much we love him or her. Ultimately our actions speak --which means we are tasked with showing love through deed.

Rabbi Soloveitchik, a leading Jewish thinker of the last century, when teaching about Rosh Hashanah said: “A person’s task is to perfect both himself and the nation. God judges the consequences of a person’s actions for society and the world—not just their impact on the individual.”

In other words, to be a Jew means to do chesed- to speak up.

To be a Jew means to identify with the poor, the hungry and the homeless- to be suspicious -not of wealth- but of complacency.
And to be a Jew means acting in the public square on issues of our time:
- whether it’s supporting immigration reform that will take millions of people out of the shadows;
- or working toward the day when each and every American has decent, affordable health care and enough food to eat;
- or expressing outrage at today’s economic inequality or horror at Russia’s persecution of gay people.

And, just an added note after reading Rav Claudia’s piece in the recent TBZ newsletter – Koleinu and listening to Suzie’s eloquent comments on Rosh Hashanah.

To be a Jew means to support a pluralistic Israel in which women have the right to live without fear because they are women.

And to be a Jew means to support those brave women at the wall who believe that they and their daughters and granddaughters have the right to sing and to pray at the most holy place in Judaism.

And, finally, to bring us back to Leviticus 18: 22- to be a Jew means that we live by the idea that all people are created equally- B’tzelem elohim- in the image of God.

And when we look at our children and at other people’s children we know that each one is worthy and each one is enough-- just exactly as they are.
I am so proud and thankful to be part of the TBZ community that is built around doing Chesed:

- a community that chooses to wrestle with Torah, and to proudly embrace the traditional reading of the day, with all of its pain and challenge;
- a community that refuses to give up the right of interpretation;
- And a community that believes that every human being is created in the image of God and that affirms the presence of God in every loving relationship.

Carol Kamin
Yom Kippur
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