Yarden:
When Samuel and I were asked to speak at Yom Kippur services, we were honored, and our mothers were, needless to say, very proud. At TBZ we have found a religious community that acknowledges and values us exactly as we are. When we realized that we were asked to speak about Leviticus 18, we knew that this would be a bit more of a challenge than we had initially thought. Well, that’s TBZ, asking us to grapple with the tough questions of Torah, community, culture, and the world.

“V-et zachar lo tishcakv mischkevi isha to-eva he” “You shall not lie with a man as one lies with a woman, it is an abomination.”

While other communities might choose to remove this text from the liturgy as a statement about inclusion, TBZ chooses to continue to read it and asks us to wrestle with the text, with what it says, what it might mean, how it has been interpreted and the way in which the text has been usurped as divine and biblical justification for homophobia, bigotry and discrimination against the LGBTQ community.

Samuel:
Growing up gay, with a gay little brother and a trans cousin in Texas, in a deeply conservative Latino community, gave me some perspective on this hate and bigotry and in particular Leviticus. The word abomination can take root quickly in a young mind. The thought of being impure can cripple you. But then I’d turn my head. There was my brother David, perfect. Even if a little annoying. And there was my cousin Brynn, perfect. Even if she did hog all the good parts in every Disney duet.

So we built our own world, as so many of our queer sibilings have, where we were perfect and we were beautiful. Frankly, I was very happy in that world even if I knew eventually I’d have to fight for my right to take up space. It’s something I hear often in my work as a high school teacher. Students - particularly those who have suffered trauma - don’t always want to fight. Sometimes they just want to live. Sometimes they want to put on some lipstick and eyeliner and ignore the ugly, hateful, hurtful things outside.

So - and I hope this isn’t too late - I should ask my husband for forgiveness because when he told me he wanted to reframe Leviticus 18 in a positive light I don’t think I made a very… beautiful face.

Yarden:
Context is everything. As a first year medical student, each system of the body was taught one at a time. When we got to the mind, or Psychiatry, I saw homosexuality on the syllabus. It was wedged between lectures on paraphilias, and sexual deviance. Despite never explicitly claiming that homosexuality was pathology, surely the context in which it was presented sent a clear message to young impressionable and aspiring physicians.
This pasuk is also embedded within a chapter of sexually deviant acts. It discusses forbidden unions. Relationships between men and their mothers, men and their daughters, men and their sisters. What is clear from the text, is that the relationships are between men and the other.

However, when we read the pasuk in question “V-et zachar lo tishcakv mischkevi isha to-eva he” the text states, “You shall not lie with a man as one lies with a woman.” Why is this needed? Could the text not simply have said “V-et zachar lo tishcakv” “You shall not lie with a man” However, the Torah goes on to say “as with a woman” This always confused me.

Of course, there is the obvious interpretation. And given the context it does seem obvious. Why even ask this question of the text you might ask? Why not accept it within its context, as a dated and backward historical view of the world and move on. Surely, there are parts of the Torah that we accept in their imperfection.

As my husband can tell you, I rarely just accept things for how they are. And if 14 years of day school education have taught me anything, it’s those differences, those subtle hints in construction and wording, that open a portal to the text.

As if he were a woman. Why include it? Is it possible that the prohibition is actually about how we see our partners? Perhaps it’s not about the lying, but about the way we see our partners for who they are. If one is partnered with a man, or a woman, see that person for who they really are in their entirety and not as you would like to see them or as what they are not.

The relationship between David and Jonathan is not vilified, instead their intimacy is celebrated because of their honest relationship. They acknowledged each other honestly, they saw each other and one another’s neshama. Maybe, this text tells us that in our relationships we must push ourselves to see, acknowledge, embrace and respect the person in front of us for who they are. Seeing the person in front of you as the person they are. There surely have been stranger messages in Torah. And, its true for community as well.

At TBZ we celebrate the diversity of our community. We don’t transform people. We don’t ask them to be someone other than who they truly are. But that is our context. But outside this building, outside the comfort of this community, we face a different reality.

**Samuel:**
Every year when we read about Hannah during Rosh Hashanah I think of my mother, who named me Samuel after years of trying to have a child, and of my mother-in-law, who similarly yearned for a child and named him Yarden Samuel. I think about their prayers and well I think about what a gift I am to my mother! … But this year, I read it differently. This year I was Hannah. And I cried. Both because I understood a little better our mothers’ yearning and because I could imagine the joy of building a family with my husband.
But a few days later, we are here. And again I’m that child wrestling with Leviticus. Sure here, in JP where we live, at TBZ, in Boston, in Massachusetts, the family we want is possible. And our rights - as gay men, as married gay men, and, hopefully one day as gay parents - are secure. But outside - back in Texas, in Houston, in my family’s community, in my childhood home, not only are those rights not secure, but the hate and, LAWFUL, discrimination fueled by words like the ones in Leviticus, make the idea of Yarden and I raising a family seem at times impossible.

But that’s the thing about my husband. When I find myself tangled, spiraling, sinking into the world in my head of what’s impossible, he brings me back. He looks at me as who I am - not all the names I’ve been called, all the labels I’ve been given, all the assumptions I’ve had to carry - and he offers a radical rethinking, a promising reframing. And that is what we so often need to break what has been and move toward what could be.

Yarden:
This Yom Kippur let us as a community, make a commitment to see our partners, our children, our parents, and the members of our community as they are. And outside of this beautiful context, may we continue to fight for a world in which everyone is seen and everyone is safe. gmar chatima tova.