

Gender Identity and Expression

Shabbat, December 8, 2017

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Following upon Nilene's words and the efforts of our committee and our congregation over many months, we turn to our tradition for some words of strength and guidance.

I am reminded of a scene from the second season of *The West Wing*,¹ where President Josiah Bartlett goes to battle with a talk show host about interpretations of the Bible. The talk show host calls homosexuality an abomination because in Leviticus 18:22, the text reads, "You shall not lie with a man as with a woman; such a thing is an abomination."² President Bartlett's response is priceless:

I'm interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7, "When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not be freed as male slaves are."³ She's a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, always cleaned the table when it was her turn. What would a good price for her be?" My chief of staff, Leo McGarry, insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly says he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself or is it okay to call the police?

Bartlett continues his line of questioning, in a monologue that now seventeen years after this episode first aired, remains timely. We have before ourselves an ancient book, a timeless tradition, texts that we keep at the focal point of our congregation and that form the basis for our individual and collective spiritual journey. And yet, in some regards, the texts that we cite can be used as a vehicle for greater pain and suffering. We cannot allow such behavior or such "tradition" to guide our judgment and direct our process. Where Torah challenges us with an ancient value, we must use our gifts of heart and mind, of generosity, of sensitivity and love to ask how God is guiding us, how God is teaching us, how God invites us to participate in the process of making our world a better place.

In his book, *Putting God Second*, Rabbi Donniel Hartman, President of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem writes:

In truth, Judaism, like all religious traditions, can be likened to "a tale of two cities," with the best of stories and the worst of stories, the most just and the least just of laws...The question that religiously committed people must face is which collection of verses to quote, emphasize, and weave into the tapestry of religion's essence. Which narrative will ultimately prevail? Which passages will nurture and comprise the beating heart of faith, and which will be relegated to the ideological dumping ground of verses that, according to the Talmudic adage, "never were nor were ever meant to be implemented, but were written only as objects of theoretical study."⁴

We could spend our time quoting Leviticus 18:22. We know that there are others who will take our tradition, people from other communities who might say, "But the Bible says." Yes, these views are out there.

¹ <http://westwing.bewarne.com/second/25admonitions.html>

² Leviticus 18:22.

³ Exodus 21:7.

⁴ Donniel Hartman, *Putting God Second*, p. 41.

And Jewish tradition teaches us to love our neighbor. Jewish tradition teaches us, more than any other commandment in the Torah, to love and show deference to the stranger in our midst. Jewish tradition teaches us the value of *hachnasat orchim*, offering hospitality and welcome to other people in our community so that we may have the opportunity to get to know them and to get to know their story. Jewish tradition teaches us that every single human being is created in the image of God and blessed with a Divine spark in their soul.

Aren't these the verses that we should be quoting? Aren't these the verses that should be guiding us on our journey? Our Social Advocacy Committee has charged our community with a very special goal - to affirm and embrace the lives of community members, settled in our congregation and beyond our walls, who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, community members who are exploring their gender identity and/or sexual orientation, and who are looking for a place that they can feel at home, where they can be welcomed, and where they can be affirmed for who they are as individual human beings, created in God's image.

Earlier in our service tonight we sang, "Let there be love and understanding among us. Let peace and friendship be our shelter from life's storms." Through our actions, through our words, and through our loving efforts, may we come to witness a time in which God's *sukkah* of peace, may be spread over and envelop us all.