

# Rabbi Denise L. Eger's sermon on our 25th Anniversary Shabbat Celebration

Striking at Holy Rocks: On Chicago and Israel

Rabbi Denise L. Eger

Shabbat Shalom

Tonight I had a different sermon. A sermon to celebrate our 25 years of our Congregation and to imagine together the next 25 years. But that will wait for another Shabbat because the events of the past week cry out to us. Affect us. Right in our kishkes—at our core. Two pivotal events one in Chicago and one in Israel speak to the nature of our communal identities and also to the core of what our congregation values are all about.

For 25 years Kol Ami has given voice to values of inclusion and diversity. Long before it was fashionable. Before even Macy's changed their logo for June to a rainbow. Long before any other synagogues marched in pride events, Kol Ami stood for LGBTQ Equality. Our original vision of our congregation was to be a place truly where gay and straight people together could create a dynamic Jewish home. 25 years ago most synagogues had no real place for Gay people—even Temple Israel up the street—wouldn't let gay people have a commitment ceremony in their sanctuary. I know I officiated at the first one there for our temple members. Same thing at Steven S. Wise synagogue. I officiated there for two of our members. The rabbis didn't or wouldn't back then. Many day schools were not prepared to handle the children of Lesbian and Gay parents. And the larger Jewish world, Federation, AJC, Jewish National Fund wouldn't touch gay equality issues.

Even in our own Reform Movement 25 years ago- better than Conservative Judaism and of course Orthodox Judaism each who were anti-gay at the time, our own Reform Movement wasn't always so embracing.

But this congregation and our work together helped make that change.

Lots of change. Quickly. Because we together imagined a synagogue where we could let all the different parts of who we were come together. Gay and Jewish. Straight Ally, Lover of Israel, Lesbian parent, Person with HIV, intermarried husband and wife, Single parent, single person, married, long term relationships, whatever your status in the safety of Kol Ami we created a synagogue a Jewish place of meeting, study, spiritual celebration, arts and social justice that helped us bring all of the parts of our identity together under one banner.—The Kol Ami banner.

And we have had a false sense of security in some ways. But this week was a wake-up call.

First in the Midwest- when Jews went to celebrate Pride. Nothing remarkable in 2017 that a Jewish lesbian should want to march in the Dyke March in Chicago. Nothing remarkable that they should march with a pride flag with a Magen David in the middle. Simply a lesbian Jew displaying her pride at bringing all of her identities together. And evidently something that she has done in previous years. But this year prior to the parade a woman who works for the organization A Wider Bridge—which brings together the gay community in the US and the Israeli gay community (and who we have hosted and worked closely with at Kol

Ami) was asked to leave and remove her flag because it was making others uncomfortable. Uncomfortable because it was a symbol of "Zionist oppression". "The star of David was a Zionist symbol," they say –"like the Israeli flag."

Make no mistake this is a familiar trope. Anti-Semitism and Anti-Israeli hatred all wrapped into one. The Magen David, yes appears on the Israeli flag—but as you and I know was a symbol of Jews and Judaism long before the creation of the modern state of Israel. The Yellow Star was the ultimate symbol of oppression by the Nazi of the Jews. The organizers were striking out at the Rock identity, the Jewish foundation of their core.

The Organizers of the Dyke March believe they acted justly. After all their official position supposedly is anti-Israel anti-Zionist. They claim they are pro-Palestinian. But not anti-Jewish.

They like many gay organizations are being held ransom by the far left. By those who so believe in an idea called intersectionality that they have lost their ability to think.

Intersectionality is an idea invented by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw an important civil rights advocate to describe overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression. This can include gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, nationality, sexual orientation among others. And asks that a person is linked with all the other oppressions throughout society.

Thus the difficulties the Palestinians experience become the same oppression that Gay people suffer. But here is the problem with that thinking and in the Chicago case in particular—they believe Jews aren't oppressed but rather do the oppressing. Israel is described as the white, European power mongers- which I might add is an old Anti-Semitic canard—of Jews and power. In some places this is expressed as Jews controlling money and media. And it confuses things in the world of identity politics.

The actions of the Chicago Dyke March are inexcusable essentially denying a person legitimate right to express all of their identity. Let alone the fact that dykes marching down the streets of Ramallah would be murdered. There is no free expression of LGBTQ identity in Palestine or anywhere else in the Arab world. Iran throws us off of roofs. Egypt gay men are rounded up and shot. Saudi Arabia lesbians are raped; Turkey we are imprisoned. Yes, Dyke March Chicago—you have lost your minds. The ability to think. And the only place in the Middle East where LGBT people can celebrate, and have their marriages recognized—yes-Israel. One of the largest Pride celebrations in the world. But when we mention things like this... we are all accused of Pink washing—meaning trying to negate Israel's evil status as colonial oppressor by uplifting the safety and security of the LGBTQ community in Israel. This is another problem with intersectionality.

But this isn't new in the LGBT world. It was only last year at Creating Change—the signature conference of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force that a riot ensued when a group of far left anti-Israel queer people shut down a Shabbat oneg reception hosted by A Wider Bridge. Again under the so called banner of anti-Zionism the rioters chanted "Death to the Jews". "From the River to the Sea Set Palestine Free",—which of course means destroying Israel.

This is common in the LGBT world in San Francisco, New York and other places that it is no longer safe to be pro-Israel and gay. And we have seen it in Chicago now. (A place where there no longer is a gay synagogue I might add)

Here in Los Angeles we have avoided this by the work of our synagogue. I have built strong relationships with our LGBT leaders and elected officials. Our synagogue and you our members have in your work in other parts of the community proudly shown your love of Israel. We as a congregation in our mission statement say that we love and are committed to Israel. And we work toward and support an Israel that we dream of—a strong and democratic Jewish state. We believe that an Israel that we don't have to turn a deaf ear to the pleas of the Palestinian people either. We together with others can be proud of Israel's achievements while holding in tension the parts of Israel we are saddened by. And we can work to support and change our homeland—through the organizations we support—working for peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

But the far left can't seem to hold two complex thoughts together. Hence a Jewish Dyke is asked to not march with her Jewish pride flag. Because someone might mistake the symbolism. Excuse the treifa comment, this is hog wash.

The problem with any idea that becomes so rigid is that you lose your ability to discern reasonably or to exert judgement and as a result you oppress others. And that is what the Dyke March did—oppress Jews from expressing their true selves.

Empathy is what we all need. The ability to see the human being across from us. That is how we know racism is wrong. That is how we know Islamophobia should be stamped out. And yes we need to work for the day when Israelis and Palestinians can live side by side in peace. But the danger of Intersectionality is that it can be just as intolerant. And that is as bad as the oppression it seeks to mitigate.

Which leads me to the second problem this week—and that was from Israel itself. From the Prime Minister and the Cabinet who voted to quash the compromise deal that was negotiated to create egalitarian prayer space at the Kotel, the Western Wall. The Prime Minister gave this bone to the Charedim, the black hats to keep them in his government and to stay in power as they have threatened to withdraw from the very fragile coalition that is the current government of Israel.

Even as we love Israel and work to defend her right to exist we also see that it isn't all roses. Our identities as Reform Jews were attacked again. The compromise plan negotiated over 5 years, was reached between the Israeli government, the Reform and Conservative movements and the group the Women of the Wall which for more than 20 years has sought to have women's public prayer at the Kotel. The compromise reached last year was to build out a section of the Kotel near the Robinson's arch area—which would connect to the current Kotel Plaza which has become an Orthodox synagogue. But most importantly and this is the main sticking point, where the PM is backtracking in his bow to the Charedi right wing, is that it scrapped a commission that would oversee the newly built area that included representatives from our movement and Conservative Judaism and Women of the Wall. And this is really what the Charedim objected to. Because in their minds it means de facto recognition by the Israeli government of other streams of Judaism. Never mind that this was court ordered. The Israeli Supreme Court ordered the government to find a solution. Never mind that the deadline was approaching because the Netanyahu government has literally dragged its feet and purposely delayed over the last year so he can keep his grip on power and the PM's office.

There is a fundamental problem. The betrayal of the PM to Diaspora Jewry with this decision is of crisis proportions. And here is why. The Kotel is not just Israeli—it is Jewish. It was for generations the symbol of our longing to return to the land—an expression of our Jewish yearning. It is why it used to be called the Wailing Wall because we

still mourn the destruction of the Temple and our sovereignty as a nation. And in 1967 when Israel unified Jerusalem and captured the Old City and the Temple Mount and the cry came – “Har Ha Bayit b’yadenu-the Temple Mount is in our hands”, the whole Jewish world rejoiced. Jerusalem was one and the Kotel—the place of our collective longing, symbol of our people was in Jewish hands for the first time since the year 70.

Yes, you heard that—since the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in the year 70.

Reform and Conservative Judaism are second class citizens in Israel. The corrupt Chief Rabbinate in Israel excludes Reform and Conservative rabbis from marrying people, converting people, burying people. Our synagogues receive no state funding in Israel as do Orthodox ones. Our schools do not receive funding as do orthodox schools.

And for decades we have worked to change the status quo-growing our movement without the government. Suing in the courts when necessary. Seeking change through the political system. And the Kotel compromise was a significant and symbolic change.

In February 2016 at the CCAR convention in Israel during my presidency we held the first service at the site of the egalitarian prayer space. It was the first service following the agreement. 350 Reform rabbis davened the morning service and we read Torah there. I will admit most of the time the Kotel has left me cold. I was always uncomfortable in the women’s section. Trying to pray. It felt unfamiliar when I was separated from other members of my family. It felt inauthentic when the guards would look at me in pants with a disapproving eye. But that service with my colleagues brought tears to my eyes and joy to my heart-to pray our melodies, aloud, men and women together next to the Kotel—next to the symbol of our people’s journey and history was a spiritual highlight I will cherish. This is what should be available to anyone who comes to the Kotel; To pray as a Jew with their authentic identity.

Whether from the Right or left of the political spectrum—orthodoxies and rigidity create problems because human beings smother if held too tightly. Judaism knows this. It is unfortunate the Israeli Orthodox rabbinate doesn’t. It instead, like the PM, is desperate to hold on to power in a changing world.

The outrage in the Diaspora world has been swift. Our own Rabbi Rick Jacobs and the Conservative movement leaders were on the ground in Israel. For the first time in 30 years AIPAC leaders went to Israel to meet with the PM in an emergency meeting to tell him the fallout from this was too much and to reverse course. American Jewish Committee condemned the PM’s action as well as the powerful Jewish Federations of North America.

The Orthodox former chief rabbi of England condemned it, Lord Jonathan Sacks. Even a group of 200 Modern Orthodox rabbis here in the US condemned this. The holy rocks of the Kotel carved and placed so long ago must continue to be a place of gathering for ALL THE JEWISH PEOPLE to pray, not just some.

Symbols do matter. They speak to us of who we are and what we stand for as individuals and the community. The Pride flag, the Magen David, The Kotel, Kol Ami, not the building but our congregation. Each of you -the people are the symbol of a set of values that we cherish.

Those values include being all of who we are-Jewish and proud of all our identities. Comfortable in our own shoes. Gay and Straight, Queer and Bi and Trans, Jewish, Lovers of Israel, lovers of our non-Jewish family and friends, committed to erasing,

racism, and Islamophobia, and most of all doing what we Jews believe—Seeing everyone as created in God’s image. B’tzelem Elohim.

This week’s Torah portion is Chukat in the book of numbers. Moses has encounter with a different set of holy rocks. He is to speak to the rock to quench the thirst of the Israelites in the desert. In his frustration he strikes the rock. Waters come gushing forth—but as the Torah describes it—they are like flood waters—overwhelming. The PM is no Moses, but he too has struck out at the holy rocks of the Kotel. And he will not be able to stop the copious waters of outrage, and protest around the world from his action. Already he is backtracking. And the brief filed in the Israeli Supreme Court will be heard July 30. But striking out at holy rocks doesn’t work. And in fact it didn’t end well for Moses who as a result of his actions, disobeying God’s request that he speak to the rock—not hit it, he is not allowed to finish his mission to cross over into the Promised land. Perhaps the PM should have paid attention.

I hope that soon-we together as a congregation can stand at the Kotel together—in the newly refurbished egalitarian prayer space and sing out together just as we do here on Shabbat. And sing of our joy and love of being Jewish. And sing of our joy and love of being all of who we are.

Then we will know a taste of that true freedom that God has given to each of us.

Ken Yehi Ratzon.