

Pride and Resilience - Temple Beth El/Chadeish Yameinu 2019

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It's great to be back here. For those of you who don't know, I grew up in Santa Cruz, and in this congregation. I started Hebrew School just down the hall a whole 23 years ago, when I was six, and stuck with it until I was 16. (Thanks for not kicking me out, Paula and Rick - I know I was a handful.) It's great to be home.

When Rabbi Eli initially reached out to me to ask me to speak tonight, I was stumped. Flattered, sure - but stumped. I'm just a nice Jewish butch - I've got this shayne punim, sure, but what could I possibly have to say that merits a drash on Pride Shabbat? But then, I realized that the two identities that have most shaped my life are my queerness and my Jewishness, and started thinking about how those two things have informed each other, how they interact, and how much the Jewish values I grew up with have shaped how I understand my experience in the world as a lesbian.

The first time I remember being proud of being different was in the third grade. My class was doing some sort of family history project, and I'd noticed many of my classmates didn't seem to know their families' backgrounds, or have cultural traditions outside of Christmas. My dad and I were driving somewhere, and I asked him about it - something to the effect of, why is this project so hard for other people when it feels so easy for me? Given that this was over 20 years ago, I don't remember his exact response, but the gist of it was - you're Jewish. Because you're Jewish, you know your story, you know who your family is and who your people are, and that gives you a grounding in the world that makes you lucky and will help you throughout your life.

So, Judaism was the lens through which I first saw and valued my own difference - and still is, often. I guess you could call that moment with my dad one of my first "coming out" moments: that is, I saw this part of myself that was different than "normal" people, and I struggled to understand it and how it impacted my experience in the world, and found pride in that. As an adult, I look back on this and feel so lucky - because of my pride in my Jewishness, I have always seen difference as an opportunity for self-knowledge, and as a place to ground myself, rather than to feel shame or fear. As I've come into myself as a butch lesbian, a gender non-conforming queer woman, this has been such a gift - but, I'm getting ahead of myself.

I was raised with what I thought were traditional Jewish values - being smart, doing good in the world, taking care of others, wrestling to understand big ideas and how the world works - and of course, having the quickest and most biting jokes. My family is big and loud and competitive, a network of aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents and step-grandparents who are always lovingly trying to outdo each other and have the last word - and who take the mandate of *tikkun olam* seriously, and encouraged me to do so as well. And growing up at TBE, I had those values reinforced - the drive to do good, engage with the world thoughtfully and critically, and to take care of people around me. The focus in my family on *these* values, as opposed to more conventional ones, gave me room in other ways because I wasn't being pressed on gender or

sexuality. I felt pressure to do well, be smart, do right in the world - but it didn't matter if I was a tomboy while I did that. I always felt comfortable and, to be a little cheesy, joyous in Jewish spaces - it always felt like home.

So that's the happy part of my story. When I started coming out as queer, it wasn't so easy. Santa Cruz has a reputation for liberalism and acceptance it doesn't always deserve. I got bullied - in Hebrew school, at Shoreline Middle School, at Santa Cruz High. I didn't even really acknowledge my own queerness until the 9th grade, when it hit me like a thunderbolt that I had a crush on Marjorie in Drama class - but even if I hadn't known, my peers had been able to sense something different about me for years prior, and had treated me accordingly.

It was hard to be a queer teenager, wrestling with my gayness when I didn't have any role models, when I didn't really know any other queer teens, and before the internet was what it is today. I spent my four years of high school simultaneously getting into LOTS of trouble (sorry, Dad), and holding my breath, hoping that getting out of Santa Cruz would bring some relief, help me feel easier in my skin, help me find community.

It did, and it didn't. I spent an uneasy few years at college, trying desperately to find a way of being queer that felt authentic to me and wasn't just what the cool queers told me I should be - genderqueer, trans, an anarchist, etc. Based on my experiences at my small public liberal arts school in Washington, it seemed like being a lesbian mostly meant being really angry and wearing lots of Carhartt and having a terrible haircut (I have a better haircut now, but the other things still hold true). I explored lots of new ideas and identities, but I still felt adrift, still felt like I was holding my breath. I hadn't yet found an authentic way of being.

I moved back to the Bay Area after college, and after stints in Americorps and working at a dog shelter, wound up working for a Jewish non-profit that works on LGBTQ issues in the Jewish world. Through that job, I was exposed to a range of Jewish experiences, and, for the first time in my adult life, really started interrogating the Judaism I was seeing. Sometimes, it felt so foreign to the Judaism that I grew up with that I was shocked. But it also helped me appreciate the Jewish community I grew up in, the version of Jewish values that I was raised with, and the clarity with which I equated *Judaism* with home.

At the same time, I was finding the vibrant queer community in the Bay Area. I started finding those role models I'd longed for so desperately in high school. I started seeing multiple kinds of LGBTQ identities, and realized there was more than one script I could follow. And finally, I started to feel comfortable in my skin - a skin that looks like this. For the first time, I could breathe - be myself, see myself and love that person.

But being a person like this has its challenges. I'm gonna let you in a little secret - walking through the world looking like me is not easy. I'm sure, this being Santa Cruz, you all are familiar with the term "micro-aggressions," but in case you're not, it's those quiet little moments when someone communicates to you so clearly how much you disgust them, how offensive they find

your existence, all without having to use a slur or threaten violence. It's when the cashier at Goodwill refuses to take money from my hand; when the woman on the bus stands up when I sit down next to her; my neighbor's "Yes on Prop 8" bumper sticker; the job interviews that have been over the second I walk through the door; the stares I get when I walk down the street, go grocery shopping, ride BART, try to use a public restroom. These moments are often invisible unless you live them, but they add up, and they *wear* on you. I come home so tired, so drained, so angry. And these are just the microaggressions, the quiet stuff: this is before taking into consideration the overt hostility. The times my wife and I have been refused service at restaurants, in places as liberal as Petaluma. The men who follow me on the street in Oakland and Berkeley, threatening violence because of how I look. How I ask my wife - who's femme, who looks how a woman is "supposed" to look - to go into gas stations and stores on road trips, because I'm afraid of what will happen if I leave the car.

Many well-intentioned and well-informed people - regardless of their sexuality and gender - think that, in 2019, with gay marriage having been legal for 6 years, Target and Walmart selling Pride t-shirts, and Pete Buttigieg on the campaign trail, things must be fine. I'm here to tell you that, while things are definitively better than they were 50 years ago, but they are *not* fine. In a state as liberal as California, in a place as welcoming as the Bay Area, homophobia is alive and well. The examples in my life are mild: nationally, the big picture is even more unsettling. Since the start of this year, 10 transwomen are known to have been murdered for being trans - six in the last month. When you look up homophobic violence, the attacks you find are not in conservative bastions - they are in the Bay Area, Portland, Houston. On the anniversary of the Pulse nightclub shooting this week, a Christian group held a "Make America Straight Again" conference. Hate crimes against gay and trans people are, in fact, on the rise in the last few years. LGBTQ youth engage in self-harm and attempt suicide at staggering rates. Nationally, LGBTQ people are seeing our rights rolled back - workplace protections, healthcare, adoption rights, and more. More and more "bathroom bills" and other anti-queer legislation are proposed every year. Politicians in the highest levels of power regularly question the humanity of LGBTQ people. All of this, in 2019.

Like I said, it gets exhausting. There is a level of background noise - fear - that is always present because of who I am, how I look. Loving myself, being grounded in myself can only take me so far. There are days I wish I could have Harry Potter's invisibility cloak, and hide my beautiful butch punim from the world just so that I could get a break from all the staring. I don't have that, but I have something that comes close - those Jewish values I talked so much about.

See, being grounded in my Jewishness helps me to weather the hatred I face in the wider world because I know I have a home to come back to. I have a sense of self that is rooted in a history that stretches back thousands of years, in a culture and ethnicity that has always been on the margins of society. Because I am Jewish, I was forced to - blessed to - recognize my difference at a very young age. And even as a kid, I loved being different - it meant I got to know who I was. It meant I had to think about how the world saw me, and think about how to navigate that. It meant I had to think about what was important to me and what I would do to stand up for my

beliefs, as well as stand up for myself. That grounding that I got at home; in my aunts' kitchens at seder; and here in my Jewish community - all of that gave me a framework for which to understand my queerness, and to navigate moving through the world as a (very) visibly gay woman. I feel, to borrow a phrase, doubly blessed in my difference: the sense of home I feel in Judaism has helped me build resilience, has helped me weather what I face as a queer person.

My Jewish family, my Jewish community - this Jewish community - instilled in me a keen sense of justice. Through Judaism, I learned *zedakah* didn't just mean charity - it meant taking righteous action. I understood that *tikkun olam*, this idea of healing the world, was not something you achieved through prayer - it was something you achieved through action (by praying with your feet, to paraphrase Heschel). So here is my Pride month ask for you, the community that taught me this, that has helped me love myself and find a sense of home: *take action*. Put your Jewish values to work.

There are so many ways you can make the world safer for LGBTQ people - and this is true regardless of your gender or sexuality. We can take action on so many levels. On a personal level, you can look at your own beliefs - where are your growing edges around queerness? How do you feel about people like me in your bathroom? How much value do you place on your daughter's beauty, your son's athleticism? Are you speaking up when your family, friends, coworkers say problematic things?

You can take action locally - donate to the Queer Youth Task Force, or the Diversity Center. You push for LGBTQ inclusive curriculum in your children's schools. You can ask your doctor to develop more inclusive intake forms. You can interrupt street harassment when you see it. You can take action on a larger scale - elect politicians who will fight for the rights of LGBTQ people. Volunteer for the Trevor Project. Call your elected officials (even on up to the White House) any time something about LGBT rights is in the news. Put your Jewish values to use - make the world a better place for everyone.

Thank you for having me here tonight. I am so grateful, and so proud, to have been able to speak to you - to be here, and be *home*, in so many ways.

Happy Pride, and shabbat shalom.