

## Erev Rosh ha-Shana II 5778 Drash

By David Schwarz

In early September, I had the pleasure of attending the 23<sup>rd</sup> Conference of the World Congress of LGBT Jews. Our gracious hosts in Paris were the members of Beit Haverim, a vibrant Jewish LGBTQ cultural and social organization, although not a congregation as such. Indeed, it is striking that outside the US, there are virtually no LGBTQ synagogues, unless we count the liberal mixed congregation in Amsterdam. It is equally striking that within the US, we now have only 3 counterparts – in NY, Fort Lauderdale, and Los Angeles – with perhaps two additional halves provided by the mixed congregations in Atlanta and San Francisco.

How different things are from forty years ago, when ‘gay and lesbian’ congregations first came together in Boston, Chicago, Miami and many other major cities, to give openly LGBTQ Jews a place to worship. Today, of course, the doors of most synagogues are open to us – and many are being lured away by the resources of larger, and usually wealthier, mainstream congregations. In response, some LGBTQ congregations have evolved away from their sexual/gender-based identity – redefining themselves more broadly as ‘liberal’ or ‘progressive’, and reaching out, in fellowship, to all like-minded Jews, LGBTQ or straight. Is this a vision, then, that should tempt Bet Mishpachah? Certainly, we have never intended to isolate ourselves from the larger Jewish community, and, certainly, we have always embraced a notion of ‘family’ that includes our straight sisters and brothers who wish to join with us. Nonetheless, I think there are at least two reasons why we maintain our LGBTQ identity, and why we should resist temptations to move mainstream.

The first is simply the question of ‘fit’. The mainstream may welcome us, whether we join it individually or as a congregation. But, sooner or later, we will find ourselves a minority among our fellow mainstream congregants, who mostly have, or seek, more traditional family structures that go with being straight – and congregational worship and lifecycle observances will likely reflect that perspective. So, if we hope for a religious experience that fully celebrates our identity as LGBTQ Jews, a mainstream congregation is likely to fall short – even one that still calls itself ‘Bet Mishpachah’. The question is not acceptance, but interest and focus – the time and attention a mainstream congregation can afford

to pay specifically to its LGBTQ membership. While it is wonderful to be accepted as we come together with our straight sisters and brothers, we live our sexual and gender identities 24/7 – and if we want services and congregational events that speak *fully* to who we are, then we belong here at Bet Mishpachah as we currently define it.

This suggests a second reason for our own LGBTQ congregation. The Jewish mainstream now acknowledges LGBTQ compatibility with our traditional faith and values. So far, so good. But, we are committed to the idea that sexual and gender diversity *illuminates* the Jewish tradition – and, indeed, the human condition – in special ways. That idea is relatively new – at least as something that can be talked about out loud. And, here at Bet Mishpachah we do talk about it. Week after week, we explore the spiritual dimensions of sex and gender – among other ways, in the dialogue of worship that is documented in our soon-to-be-published new Siddur. That discussion is central to our congregational life, because we are an *LGBTQ* congregation; were we not, sexual and gender issues would drift to the periphery, or we would simply discuss them in another venue. So, if we want to continue to have that conversation *as a congregation*, and as an integral part of our worship, we will have to continue as we are. Rather than joining or becoming just another liberal or progressive synagogue, then, I propose that we be conservative -- ‘conserving’, treasuring and building upon Bet Mishpachah’s Jewish LGBTQ heritage.