

Why We Still Need LGBT Synagogues

The following is the sermon Rabbi Green at her welcoming service on July 19, 2013.

by Rabbi Laurie Green

So there I was on the checkout line at the Coop about a month ago and it caught my eye – the June cover story of *The Atlantic*. It read, in BIG letters, “What Straights Can Learn From Same-Sex Couples: Why gay marriages tend to be happier and more intimate – by Liza Mundy.” Now I had to get that.

The article compiles studies which statistically compare heterosexual couples, gay men, and lesbians on a number of different matrices, such as how they divide up the housework. You should all get the article because there are a couple of things in there that actually surprised me. But yes, most of it we already knew, even if our straight friends didn't.

I'm sure you couldn't possibly (sarcastically) guess:

- Who plays more power games with money?
- Who is obsessed with egalitarianism to the point of absurdity?
- Who cheats most?
- Who cheats least?
- And who doesn't have to cheat because they're in an open relationship?

Yeah, I thought so. Duh.

But apparently, we fight fairer, and thanks to us, the straight world is starting to discover that men can fold strollers. It's not all that hard after all. So I guess the straight world is starting to catch on.

And yes, we Jews apparently have a few things to teach the rest of the world, as well. The Dalai Lama asked several Jewish leaders for our secret to surviving in exile and by several accounts he's actually implementing some of our advice.

Nicky, a congregant of mine in Buffalo, is finishing her Ph.D. in sociology focusing on how Rwandan women have rebuilt after the genocide. She tells me that Rwandans are convinced that 90% of white people are Jews because all the white people they see are Jews. Nicky has made several trips to Rwanda over several years, and she keeps trying to convince them that most white folks and most Americans are actually Christian, but they think she's crazy because all the whites working in Rwanda are Jews. Apparently there are hundreds of them and twice a year, for Rosh ha-Shana and for Pesach they all converge on the capital to be Jewish together and then return to whatever villages they were volunteering in. No wonder Rwandans love Jews.

Perhaps it is not coincidental that in a few days, we have a Jewish observance of love and hope – Tu B’Av. No, not Tu B’Shevat or Tisha B’av (which was a few days ago) , but Tu B’Av , also known as Israeli Valentine’s Day and as Yom Ahava (Love Day). Tu B’Av actually dates back over 2000 years. The Mishna in Ta’anit 4:8 tells us: “There were no days more joyous than the 15th of Av (Tu B’Av) and Yom Kippur, for on those days the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in borrowed white clothing . . . and the daughters of Jerusalem would dance in the vineyards seeking marriage partners.”

Just as the rabbis give us a list of tragic things that happened on Tisha B’Av to make it a day of mourning, we are also given a list of joyous things that occurred on Tu B’Av to make it a day of joy and love. As I was studying a few days ago, I found the list and I was pleasantly surprised -- overjoyed actually.

Some of you may remember that on my first Shabbat here two week ago I spoke about the Supreme Court victory over section 3 of DOMA and how it came during the week the Torah spoke of Zelophehad’s daughters. In *Parshat Pinchas*, a man named Zelophehad dies leaving five daughters and no sons. The women go before Moses to ask to inherit in their father’s name. Moses takes the question before God and God replies, “their cause is just.” God creates a new law that allows women to inherit when they don’t have any brothers. But just a week later, in *Parshat Matot-Masei*, some men complain to Moses that if the women marry outside the tribe the tribal holdings will be reduced. This time Moses doesn’t go to God, but amends the law himself, saying that women must marry within the tribe in order to keep their inheritance rights. I complained how it’s always the women or LGBT folks or racial minorities or the poor or whomever has no power that have to sacrifice their few rights for the greater good. Well, apparently on Tu B’Av, the marriage ban was lifted and women who inherited land were permitted to marry whomever they chose! How gay!

I ask, “What is the purpose of LGBT Jewish community?”

Now I want to be clear that if you’re here tonight, I’m including you in our LGBT Jewish community, even if you are neither Jewish nor LGBT. If you’re cool enough to be here, you’re cool with us! We are so blessed by our wonderful straight members. We don’t care who you sleep with. If you join a gay synagogue, you are an honorary gay. We are so blessed by our wonderful non-Jewish members as well. Now, some of you are not Jewish on a mere technicality, which is easily rectified by the way, if you’re interested. But even if you never make Shabbat or if you make Shabbat while loving Jesus, we’re glad you’re here. It’s okay. Jesus made Shabbat. We need all of you. Bet Mishpachah wouldn’t be the same without you.

We have all been asked “Do We Still Need LGBT Synagogues?” After all, now there are so many straight synagogues that are welcoming and inclusive, well, only to a point, of course, but certainly it’s a whole new world than it was 20 or

even five years ago. In a few cities, there are even Orthodox communities where one can be out. Even gay people will suggest that we don't really need gay synagogues any more.

I want to suggest otherwise, that indeed we still need LGBT synagogues. I'd like to share four particular reasons why we as gay Jewish communities have much to teach.

One of our greatest strengths is our commitment to *k'lal Yisrael* and to Independent Judaism. This is out of necessity. We couldn't have a gay Reform Temple and a gay Conservative shul and so on. We don't have the luxury of the closed nature of a particular denomination. We have to make room for everyone, and this is one of our greatest strengths.

Another of our strengths is our ability to be traditional, yet progressive. For the last four months, since we made our match, I've been telling everyone who will listen that I'm most looking forward to wanting to *daven* in my own shul. You may know this is most unusual for rabbis. I used to think this was just a problem for Reform rabbis but I've asked countless Conservative and Orthodox colleagues, and they report the same problem, albeit for different reasons. 95% of rabbis are most unhappy in this regard. But Bet Mishpachah is exactly how I like it, lots of traditional Hebrew chanting and *nusach*, with just enough feminist grunge and creative poetry to be my style.

I suspect there are two reasons why we are so good at being both traditional and progressive. The first is related to our commitment to *klal Yisrael* and Independent Judaism. You can't get the organ and choir Classical Jews and the conservadox *nusach* Jews in the same room on Yom Kippur without figuring this out. What a blessing of independent congregations.

I also think this is precisely because we are gay and religious. Religiosity requires a reverence for tradition. Being out requires a progressive viewpoint, even if you are a Log Cabin Republican. I know I couldn't get up every morning if I hadn't figured out that it is possible to be both traditional and progressive in the same breath.

Another unique attribute of most LGBT synagogues is that they are for adults. We don't offer pediatric Judaism. Somehow, in the 1950s, in the midst of the suburban, stay-at-home mom, 2.2 children phenomenon we forgot that Torah is not for children. We've made it all about the kids, and grown-ups need only drive carpool. But not gay shuls. Even gay synagogues that offer great children's programs usually do a better job of serving adults.

In early June, I was at my last meeting of the Buffalo Board of Rabbis and my colleagues were asking me about you. I told them that I was so excited to go to a place where Judaism is for adults. Mostly jokingly, but with a little seriousness,

I suggested that without pediatric Judaism I had no idea what to do, and I asked for suggestions to program for grown-ups. My Conservative colleague, who is a very wise rabbi, said, "I know." Perry often offers sage advice, so I really eagerly awaited his thoughts. "What, what should I do?" Perry answered, "God, Torah..." at which point I interrupted "and Israel. Gee thanks, why didn't I think of that?" I have never before in my life seen a congregation where not one single member is there for the kids. Not one. Some of us have kids, that's great, but that's not why you came to Bet Mishpachah.

Finally, we have a greater sense of ownership of our community. We really make Bet Mishpachah our home. Because it's not for the kids or for the in-laws. It's only for us. Because we can't do it anyone else's way. We can only do it our own way.

I have a confession to make.

I never thought I'd serve a LGBT congregation. I wasn't opposed but it was never in my plans. I never thought I'd be here for two reasons.

First of all, I didn't want to be marked in that way. It's hard enough to be young, and female, and lesbian, and fairly newly ordained. I figured who needs it. But after two very straight pulpits, I figure that if folks aren't convinced by now that I can lay nicely with straight people, than forget it.

Second, we LGBT Jews are crazy. You know it's true. Jews have their own particular brand of *meshugana* (crazy). And queers have their own flavor of *meshugana*. A congregation full of gay Jews, my God, that sounds insane. But there is *mishagas* (nonsense) everywhere. After two congregations each with their own unique *mishagas*, I figure this is a crazy I understand.

For the record, there are a number of straight synagogues that share these values of *klal Yisrael*, progressive tradition, ownership and Judaism for adults. There are even a few here in the DC Metro area. They are great shuls.

But we are unique. We are special!

No match is perfect. No rabbi is perfect. But I think I just might have found my *besher* (destined) congregation.

So my true *besher*, my wife, Mira, our son, Gus, and I are so thrilled to be here. We are overjoyed to be part of the Bet Mishpachah *mishpucha* (family).

This is *Shabbat Nachamu*, the Shabbat after Tisha B'Av. This is the day when God stops being angry at us, and we begin to usher in the period of consolation and forgiveness leading up to Yom Kippur. No wonder Tu B'Av and Yom Kippur are the happiest days of the year. A day celebrating romantic love, and a day

dedicated to personal renewal. What could be more Jewish, more gay, or more joyous? What a cause to celebrate?

So my wish for each and every one of you, is that we be blessed with a Shabbat full of shalom, and a Tu B'Av full of love.