

Miriam Rothenberg  
D'var Torah  
4/20/2013--Acharei Mot/Kedoshim

Shabbat Shalom.

**Sixteen words**...as its presented on page 691 in the Etz Chaim Chumash.

**Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence.** Leviticus 18:22

So much has been said/written/debated regarding the endless interpretations of this often controversial verse. However, *my two cents* worth doesn't include scholarly footnotes or long debates. In this very rapidly-changing world, understanding the present requires remembering the past.

As many of you know, my family has been steeped in Jewish observance and learning. My father Norman (of blessed memory), attended JTS and was a religious school teacher. I celebrated my Bat Mitzvah many moons ago in this very space as the congregation was known as Temple Shaarey Zedek. I participated in USY activities, went on a USY-on- Wheels trip and attended Camp Ramah-Canada for 2 and a half summers in the mid-1970s. Thirty years ago this summer, I traveled to Israel on a month and a half American Zionist Youth Foundation program. Since losing my parents, I've learned to chant haftorot, read Torah, and lead Mincha and Maariv services.

The Conservative Judaism of my childhood seemed like an impenetrable white, male heterosexual fortress. A predominantly patriarchal-oriented relic attempting to balance current halachic interpretations and modern life. Over these years, I've experienced some connections here, a benign *sense of place*. However, more recent feelings of disconnection and ambivalence have slowly emerged. Even when I've stood on this bimah chanting haftorot, I feel anger and confusion. It's like a silently painful, invisible eruv draped tightly around my being. Ascending Mount Everest or K2 would seem easier to navigate than climbing the few steps up onto this bimah.

Defining myself through creative endeavors has been an ongoing theme in my life. I've studied piano and acting, showcased my writing during open readings, participated in dance meditation groups, journal writing workshops and drum circles. And yes, I've modeled for UB and Buffalo State art classes. Based on those experiences, I'd probably refer to myself as a quiet, artistic misfit.

Speaking of word usage, more specifically, those sixteen in Acharei Mot, hold a personal resonance. Sexuality, for the most part, was an awkward subject growing up. Not many words spoken, especially around here. And no one--either from within this often self-absorbed congregation or from a clueless movement--to help break the silence. Yes, I was the quiet, artistic misfit...and gay.

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Passover. Once again, we told the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Since October 2010, I've experienced *devastating* periods of unemployment. Currently, I dwell in an enormous dark cloud, with few escape routes. In his advice to networking groups, a local career counselor tells job seekers to use this opportunity in creating a new narrative, to tell our stories. But words, however carefully sculpted into a whole form, don't always tell the entire story. My story seems best told through the shame, tears and enveloping silence which have become a constant companion. But that constant companion doesn't help fill a deeply profound longing...the empty space in my heart, my soul, my bed. And the empty space next to me as I sit among the congregation. And no one to kiss at the end of services.

As some of you are aware, there have been many stretches of time that I did not walk into this building. Those frequent absences have prompted two gossipy TBT congregants to directly ask me a personal and insensitive question, "...so... why have you left the congregation?" No matter how curious I am, I would **NEVER, EVER** ask anyone that question.

From Wordpress blogger **sxchristopher** "...*coming out is so hard partly because you have to do it on your own. Solo.*" The essay continues "...*your silence is a statement. And it says, "I consent to my invisibility and inauthenticity.*" **Now** I understand my frequent absences from this congregation. If I *was* to break the silence with a personal statement, it would need to occur on *my* time, using *my* words. But I feel compelled to ask my own question...do I **really** belong here? I can't answer that with a 100% yes. I've learned that the coming out process doesn't include a clearly-defined road map or an answer key. It's an ever-evolving series of trial, error and a potent mixture of emotions. And for some us, a long, difficult healing journey.

If I was asked how to *really* acknowledge the LGBT community from within Conservative Judaism, I would suggest one important goal. It is essential to create and

maintain safe, open environments for those who identify themselves—privately/publically—as lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender. Those safe, open environments would hopefully inspire the development of LGBT leadership. Perhaps, my coming out, in this synagogue and on this particular Shabbat, can contribute to a larger discussion, which is *very* long overdue. As I witness an amazing and increasingly worldwide societal tidal wave in favor of marriage equality, it's necessary to remember how grass-roots communities are needed to offer love, support and guidance to LGBT Conservative Jews.

I'm sure a few of you are assuming that this D'var Torah is all about me. Wrong. It's about the past—remembering my LGBT brothers and sisters. Some led secret lives, in order to fit the preferred societal values, to keep their jobs or escape persecution. It's about the present—the bullied LGBT teen who doesn't have an adequate support system. It's about the future—paving a difficult road to complete LGBT acceptance and participation in Conservative Judaism. It's about having the chance to tell our stories.

The Torah was given in the **midbar**, the wilderness. Our ancestors endured numerous hardships on the journey to the Promised Land. As LGBT community, we've struggled through our own emotional and spiritual exile.

From a recent **G-d Squad** column, Rabbi Marc Gellman offers some poignant commentary. While giving Passover blessings, he states how the Hebrew root of the word, **Mitzrayim**, can refer to “...*a narrow passage between two cliffs.*” He suggests that “...*you might visualize Egypt as the narrow place(s) you're going through right now.*” He concludes his blessings, adding, “...*I do pray that you have the courage and love to complete the journey to your own promised land.*”

We in the LGBT community are sojourning from that restrictive, narrow place to a path of holiness and wholeness...to live our truth.

Conservative Judaism is at a critical juncture, and I feel *cautious* optimism. Things are uncertain, but one thing I do know...there's much work to be done. Shabbat Shalom.