

Mattot-Massei 5780  
Pride Shabbat:  
Reflections from the Edge of the Wilderness  
Rabbi Betsy Forester

This week's Torah portion recounts the journeys of the Israelite nation in the wilderness, naming each place along the journey. How fitting that we should celebrate the Pride journey today. Pride is a journey that often begins with shame. Fortunately it is much better than it was even a decade ago, but even now, LGBTQ+ people face rejection and discrimination. Too many families, teachers, clergy, and even Presidents have taught shame and denied the dignity of LGBTQ+ people.

Denial of their human dignity was the worst crime of the Egyptians against the Hebrew slaves. On Pesach, we reenact our communal journey from *G'nut*, degradation, to *Shevach*, praise for what has come. Each of us is commanded, *b'chol dor vador*, in every generation, to embark on, reflect upon, and celebrate our own Exodus, our own coming out from narrow places to wide-open possibilities, where we can make the most important commitments of our lives, starting with embracing and being loved as the divinely created beings we are. The journey to self-actualization that empowers each person to contribute wholeheartedly to this world is a sacred one. That is why we celebrate the Pride journey and seek to understand its various components.

Today's Torah portion details the importance of speaking with one's true and authentic voice when we give our word, and it shows that we can, and must, figure out how to evolve societal practices that are not life-giving, such as when the daughters of *Tz'lof'chad* challenge the laws of inheritance when their father dies, leaving no male heirs to inherit his estate.

Many of you remember the day the first man walked on the moon, where you were when Kennedy was shot, or when the Packers won the SuperBowl. I know, 4 times: '66, '67, '96, & 2010--*duh!* I remember where I was when I found out that the law committee of the Conservative rabbinate had just normalized same sex marriage. It was about 14 years ago. I was sitting in a faculty meeting when the email came in, and I fell on my face.

But long before 2014, Jewish tradition had been struggling to reconcile the value of human dignity, *k'vod ha-bri'ot*, with traditional understandings of what should be permitted or prohibited, and the road was paved with much heartbreak.

In light of that, it is interesting to note that the rabbis long ago had somewhat broad ideas about gender. They were aware of 6 different gender identities, all of which they linked to anatomy. For example, an “*androgynos*” was a person with both “male” and “female” anatomical attributes, and an “*aylonit*” was a person who looked like a female at birth and later developed male anatomy. You might think that genders other than what we now call biological male and female would scarcely be mentioned by our ancient rabbis, but in fact, there are at least 1,670 references to the other 4 types in rabbinic literature. I checked my math! The rabbis were interested in gender diversity and changes in gender over the course of a person’s lifetime because they sought to understand what it meant in terms of the particulars of religious life. Fast-forward to modern times. The Conservative rabbinate produced halachic responsa on the subject of gender identity in 2003 and 2017. We have normalized all genders and invited people of all gender expressions to pursue careers in the rabbinate and cantorate.

The first time I performed a name change on this bimah for a person whose very feminine Hebrew name no longer fit their gender identity, I was confident but also a little nervous. I’d only been here 5 months and I wasn’t sure how receptive you all would be. When it was done, I held my breath for a moment, and the entire kahal broke out in song, clapping, and smiles. Pride. And we’re better for it.

When we changed our Torah service language so that we can all draw close to Torah in this sacred place without anyone needing to explain their gender, their pronouns, we were better for it.

Sexuality has been a more fraught issue because of the biblical prohibition against a “man [lying] with a man as one lies with a woman” in Leviticus 18 and the ways in which that was traditionally understood, regarding relations between 2 men as well as between 2 women. In time, the biblical source has come to be interpreted contextually, while modern science and social changes also have informed the issues involved. In the past 3 decades, the Conservative rabbinate has produced over 20 position papers on sexuality and the inclusion and rights of people who are not heterosexual. The result of all of that is that, well, as a Movement committed to halachic pluralism, we have a big tent. The Movement hasn’t moved all the way, but it has moved. Both Conservative rabbinical schools in the U.S. welcome and ordain people who are not heterosexual, yet individual rabbis still may choose whether or not they will perform non-hetero weddings.

I am proud to make absolutely clear that in this congregation, we see the embrace of all sexes, sexualities and gender expression as not just permitted, but demanded of us by Torah.

We have much to celebrate here, and more to learn about how we can help people of all sexes, sexual orientations, and gender expressions be included, supported, and celebrated. In our secular culture, last month, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that companies may not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in the workplace, while the Trump administration announced a rule that would allow healthcare providers and health insurance companies to deny care to transgender Americans. Jewish tradition has shown us that we must always balance celebration with awareness of what remains broken. This, too, is why we need Pride Shabbat. I am so pleased that after services today, two of our members will help us explore some of the LGBTQ+ journey up to now, and help us learn about challenges remaining at the edge of the wilderness.

The Sfat Emet, teaching on this week's *parashah*, adjures us to consider how we bring ourselves to the world. Our model is God, Who reveals Godself at Sinai in the deepest and purest sense that humans could grasp. God turns God's very essence into language. Whatever God says at Sinai still is up for debate, but it doesn't matter, because the point of whatever God says is to give Godself over to us. It is a risky act of love and commitment that asks for love and commitment in return. We are to learn from God's example and bring our essence into the world honestly. To me, this means that each person is called to risk everything for authentic presence so that we can serve this world fully and wholeheartedly. It also means that we are all responsible for creating the conditions that make it safe for all of us to be that vulnerable, honest, giving, and trusting that we will all be received with respect, affirmation, and love.

I hope you will join me in hoping for a world where all sacred presence, human and Divine, can dwell in safety and harmony; a world in which all of us can achieve the fullness of our human flourishing as part of God's vast, very good, and still learning, Creation.

A few minutes ago, we concluded the 4th book of the Torah, *B'midbar*, "In the Wilderness." And here we are, closer to the edge, but not yet out of it. Let us now rise if we are able, and chant together the words *Chazak Chazak V'Nitchazeik*--Strong, strong, let us be strong.

*Chazak Chazak V'Nitchazeik!*

*Chazak Chazak V'Nitchazeik!*