

## Shoftim 5778

Shabbat shalom, and happy Pride Shabbat!

A Torah portion like today's, concerned as it is with issues of governance and justice, fits well with our celebration of LGBTQ Pride this Shabbat. The Pride narrative is a story that we know well as Jews. It is a story of people whose identity was a source of shame and degradation and then, after a long and painful struggle, became a source of self-actualization and joy. We tell the Jewish story each year at Pesach and we recall it in our daily prayers, because liberation to be who we are meant to be is foundational to human thriving. The story of Pride is no less a narrative of human striving toward the same goal--to be able to say proudly, as in today's *haftarah*, "Hineini," "here I am," to show up fully in the world. And it is our story, too. Most of us carry ourselves in this world with sexuality and gender identifications, and if we want to bring ourselves into this sacred space fully, all of that comes with us. It is part of what energizes us and drives us toward connection. I am proud that here at BIC, we welcome joyfully all sexual orientations and gender expressions.

We read today that when a case baffles a court, the Israelites should seek a ruling from whomever is in charge at that time, be it a magistrate or a priest, and then follow their instructions. The Torah knows that it does not contain every answer and trusts human beings to become policy makers based on its underlying values. Over the centuries our rabbis exercised creativity and courage and there is no aspect of human life they are afraid to touch. But on LGBTQ issues, until very recently, they have been stymied by the explicit prohibition of homosexual intercourse between men, in Leviticus. In 1992, the law committee of the Conservative Movement produced a document calling for synagogues and organizations to welcome gays and lesbians as members, but it upheld its policies of exclusion from the rabbinate and from marriage to partners of the same sex.

Well, where there is rabbinic will that is based on truth and justice, there is (pretty much always) a halachic way. There are other Torah laws that the rabbis had mitigated or overturned long before this one. Each case is different and must be handled carefully, but the process of halachic reasoning can be quite malleable. In 2012, our rabbinate moved and offered halachic possibilities for both ordination and marriage. Do you remember where you were when Kennedy was shot? I was not yet born, but I remember where I was when I saw that news flash from the Conservative rabbinate. Now, our rabbinical schools are heavily queer, and Conservative rabbis may perform same-sex marriages.

Pride is a journey. Some journeys are quick and others are slow. The Exodus happened fast, perhaps too fast to be absorbed by the generation that was redeemed. By contrast, today's haftarah paints the return from the Babylonian exile as a slower process in which the Israelites needed to wake up, move, and build. The LGBTQ struggle has a long history and it is important for us to remember that Pride--true, internalized pride--has been hard won, from the nights of uprising that took place in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan in the summer of 1969 to the present moment. We are not all the way home, but the transformation since then feels miraculous to me.

So I want us to celebrate Pride as an extension of our own liberation narrative. And I also want us to think about where each of us is in that journey and why we need Pride Shabbat.

In the Book of *B'midbar*, following the populist rebellion led by Korach, God performs a miraculous act to affirm Aharon's legitimacy as High Priest. God has Moshe write the name of each tribe's chieftain on a different staff, with Aharon's name on the staff for the tribe of Levi. All twelve staffs are then placed near the Aron Kodesh overnight.

When morning comes, the staff of Aharon--and only that one--has brought forth sprouts, blossoms, and ripe almonds. Moshe brings shows the Israelites all of the staffs, proving Aharon's legitimacy (Num. 17:23-24) in a luscious display.

The author of a midrash in *B'midbar Rabbah* wonders (Numbers Rabbah 18:23) if there is something intrinsically unique about Aharon's staff. The author offers these possibilities: (1) The staff actually belonged to Moshe. It was the same staff that had performed wonders in Egypt. (2) It was the staff of Yehudah, the son of Ya'akov, which he gave to his daughter-in-law, Tamar way back in Genesis (Ch. 38). And (3) It was not in the least bit special. Moshe had actually taken a log of wood and split it into twelve equal staffs, so everyone could see there was no trickery in the test.

Each of those three interpretations offers a different take on Aharon's worthiness, and my colleague, Rabbi Guy Austrian, has related them to three different ways that affirmation of LGBTQ people takes place. I'd like to share his idea with you. Imagine that Aharon represents an LGBT or Q person, and God, who affirms Aharon's legitimacy, represents not only those with ultimate power but everyone who creates conditions of rejection or acceptance.

If the staff is really Moshe's staff, it represents affirmation based on being part of someone's family. "We accept you despite your gender expression or sexual orientation, because we respect, or love, your family members." It's like "everyone's got a gay cousin" or politicians and religious leaders who change their minds because of a queer family member. That is the staff of "compassionate toleration." It serves a purpose, it's a first step, but it's not enlightened.

If the staff is Yehudah's staff, passed down through the generations, it represents affirmation based on history and roots. In this application, queer people didn't suddenly spring from nowhere. This staff affirms that there have always been queer Jews, and if we read carefully we can find them in our canon. This staff shows that queer Jews have a lineage in our history, and we celebrate those who carry forward that difference.

And what if the the staff isn't special at all? Then it represents every individual's equal and essential potential to be worthy of blessing. As the midrash says, you are all cut from the same timber. Our sexual and gender identities do not define us any more than the color of our eyes or whether we are nearsighted or farsighted. The gifts we bring to share with the world are all that matters. That is the staff of *normalization*, by which I mean that it truly does not matter, and that we can all show up freely and fully, with the expectation that we will meet one another with loving acceptance. That is that staff I am hoping for, for it represents a time when we can all be who we are without having to explain, without needing to come out, without needing to make our private lives public in order to feel that we are adequately known and seen.

So where is BIC now, and why do we need Pride Shabbat? It seems to me that as a community we are somewhere in the process of putting away the staffs of celebration and picking up staffs of normalization. I think we are in a good place, relatively speaking, and hope that we will continue to grow together as the tide of social change pulls us further than we might have imagined possible less than a decade ago.

We need a Pride Shabbat for two reasons. First, as I hope I've shown, because Pride is worth celebrating in a sacred Jewish space. But also because humanity still needs to be raised up. As long as queer teens are kicked out of their homes, and sleep in the streets, and commit suicide at a higher rate than straight teens; as long as the State of Israel denies gay couples the same rights to welcome children into their families as straight couples; as long as Zionists are alienated from a lesbian march because some people cannot see how one can be serious about LGBTQ rights AND a Zionist; as long as queer people do not enjoy full equal rights and dignity in every state in the "free country" of America, as long as transgendered people are not welcome in our Armed

Forces, as long as LGBTQ individuals can still be fired from their jobs and denied housing and services, just because of who they are, as long as LGBTQ people remain at higher risk of substance abuse, homelessness, depression and anxiety; as long as religious people continue to lose their moral courage in the face of certain texts; as long as people still need to agonize about coming out, we need to look hard at the staffs we are holding and make sure that they are the most helpful ones we can raise.

The midrash concludes: “The same staff that sprouted for Aharon was stored stored in the Aron Kodesh. It was in the hand of every single king [of Israel] until the Holy Temple was destroyed. Then it was hidden away. And this same staff will in the future be held in the hand of the Messiah, speedily in our day.” I pray for the day when we no longer need Pride Shabbat. Until then, let’s savor the redemptive moment in which we live. I join Rabbi Austrian in saying, “Let’s keep loving, let’s keep making Torah, and let’s keep working to build a world of justice” founded on compassion and grounded in love. May this Pride Shabbat bring us a bit closer to a redeemed world.