



Parashat Lech Lecha

Go Forth to Celebrate Your Gay Family

by Melissa B. Simon on Friday November 07, 2008

9 Cheshvan 5769

Genesis 12:1 - 17:27

The gay community, it seems, is in the midst of a bit of a baby boom. Given increasing access to sperm donation, surrogacy, and adoption, families with one or more gay parents are springing up across the nation. Perhaps I notice this trend more acutely than other people because I work as the Children's Educator at Congregation *Beth Simchat Torah*, otherwise known as "the Gay synagogue in New York". My job, modeling Jewish life for children from a diverse range of family constellations, exists, in part, due to this boom.

We welcomed eight new children last year, and at our recent High Holidays services we counted more than 150 children at our Children's Programs. At CBST, the impact of the growing number of children has been deeply felt. Parents and non-parents alike see the children of our congregation as our collective future. At High Holiday services at CBST, Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum acknowledged that the children in our community are never accidental or unwanted. The arrival of each child is carefully planned. Families are emerging in many different ways, but the most important common thread is that these children are shaping our community and pushing us to support them as they develop their Jewish identities.

The importance of children for Jewish families dates back to this week's Torah portion, Lech Lecha, and to the story of the first Jew, Abraham, first called Avram. In Lech Lecha, G-D tells Avram to leave his father's house and go forth to the place G-D shows him. If Avram does G-D's will, G-D tells Avram that his name will be great and he will father a multitude of nations.

The Torah portion follows Avram as he journeys towards the land of Canaan, lives there briefly, then leaves for Egypt due to famine, then returns again to Canaan. Even though G-D repeats the promise of land and progeny, G-D doesn't seem inclined to hold up G-D's end of the bargain.

We are introduced to Avram's wife, Sarai, who is barren. Her desire for a child leads her to appoint her maidservant Hagar as a surrogate. Hagar bears Ishmael. But as the text explains, even though Ishmael is firstborn and should technically be the holder of G-D's covenant in the next generation, G-D makes certain that Sarah's child, rather than Hagar's, is blessed as the



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receiver of G-D's covenant. Ishmael has his own unique destiny as some say that he is the forefather of Islam.

G-D repeats to Sarah G-D's promise of a child. Sarah can't imagine bearing a child in her old age and laughs at the suggestion. Ultimately, Sarah gives birth to Isaac, thus fulfilling half of G-D's promise to Abraham (the land was still to come).

While children play a key role in *Parashat Lech Lecha* and in many Jewish families, it is important to note that there are many different family models in the Torah. Hagar serves as a surrogate and gives birth to Ishmael. Jacob is raised with his twelve brothers and one sister by four mothers and a father. Hannah struggles with infertility and ultimately has a child. Moses is raised by an adoptive mother and as an adult is in an interfaith marriage. The daughters of Zelophehad are orphaned during the wanderings in the desert in the Book of Numbers. Ruth and Naomi create a loving intergenerational relationship. There is not one type of family in the Torah, but rather, Torah models for us a number of different ways to form a family.

The gay community is similarly full of a variety of different understandings of family. Not every family will have biological children or raise any children in their home. Family, we have proven, is something more than biological. It is a close circle of friends who see us through the most difficult times, even when our biological families have fled. It is an adopted child who looks nothing like her parent and yet shares the same laugh. It is multigenerational blessings for lifecycle events. Family is the community you construct.

Historically in gay communities, children were never a possibility, but that is changing and will continue to change as bigotry is transformed into tolerance by a younger generation. The general public has seen one generation of happy and healthy young adults who were raised by LGBT parents. Organizations like COLAGE, Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere, empower and provide support for children of a gay parent or parents. In our synagogues, children with LGBT parents are being educated about a "big-tent" Judaism, one that is open to everyone without prejudice.

The continuing presence of children in the gay community is a chance for us to have a meaningful impact on the lives of young people as a part of our covenant with G-D. G-D gave Abraham children so that he might instruct them to keep the way of the Eternal by doing what is just and right (Genesis 18:19). It is the responsibility and opportunity of members of the LGBT community, parents and non-parents alike, to raise these children to have a share in the everlasting covenant that G-D promised to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17:7). We each have a hand to play in that process, thus continuing the covenant in the generations to come.



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