

“Know the Heart of the Stranger...”

Reaching Out To Our Gay & Lesbian Children and their Families

ELIOT WALDMAN MEMORIAL LECTURE
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I remember Eliot Waldman as the kind of rabbi who seldom met a new idea he wasn't willing to consider, or an old idea he wasn't willing to challenge. In that spirit I am honored to dedicate this presentation to his memory. Cecile and I are grateful also for the invitation to be with you for the opportunity it gives us for reunion with Earline Waldman and with Hank and Sheila Bamberger, and for the chance to make new friends in your community.

There is a text, a theme, in Torah, which is repeated so often that many of us have memorized it without even trying: *v'yidatem et lev hager, ki gerim heyitem b'ere'tz mitzrayim*—and you should know the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Now we know that the word *mitzrayim* refers not only to a nation on the African continent, but to a *state of being*: a tight, constrained, closed in life-condition which we Jews have experienced repeatedly as a People—and often as individuals. So I am going to retranslate that text for a closer application to our subject: "You should know the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers when you were in the closet!"

Every Jew in this room has spent time "in the closet". Think back to the last time you were in an office or store or classroom or locker room or on a plane or at a party—and somebody told an anti-Jewish joke, or used a phrase like "Jew's him down", or wished aloud that "the Arabs would go in and finish off what Hitler started". And what did you do? Did you pretend not to have heard it? Did you struggle with the feelings which brought blood to your face or tightness to your throat? Was the speaker your boss or someone else in a position of power over you? Was the group so obviously in sympathy with what was being said that you felt outnumbered? Was the offending person a friend whose insensitivity

shocked and saddened you, but whose friendship you couldn't risk by speaking up immediately? Did you keep silent? Did you "disappear" as a Jew? If you did, then you, my friend, were in *mitzrayim*—you were in the closet.

Is there anyone in this room who bears a surname which you know to have been deliberately changed a generation or more ago—changed not because an immigration official couldn't spell the original, but because of a conscious decision to "pass" as a gentile on college or employment applications? Whoever felt forced to make that decision was *takeh b'mitzrayim*—truly in the closet! If it was your father or grandfather and he's still alive, ask him how it felt. If it was you who had to do it, I regret the need to remind you of that painful time.

Is there anyone here who remembers looking for a home "back then" in an unfamiliar city, or a new suburb, struggling to find the right words to use with a gentile real estate agent to avoid having to say, directly "we are Jewish, is that going to be a problem in this neighborhood?" If that was you, then you were *mitzrayim*—you were in the closet.

It's not nice to live in the closet, is it? Two generations ago that's where most Jews in America lived. We had created our own fraternities and sororities so that our college kids (admitted by quota) would have places to live and socialize. We had built our own hospitals, so that Jewish physicians admitted to medical school (under the quota system) would have places to practice when they graduated. We had opened our own city and country clubs so that Jewish businessmen and professionals could take lunch or a shvitz or play golf as did their gentile neighbors.

And then, we got sick and tired of the closet, and the

self-hatred which we found breeding there. We organized ourselves to fight anti-Semitism by creating the Anti-Defamation League and other "defense" organizations to take on our persecutors. We challenged the churches where hatred of our People was being preached. We lobbied liberal, and then moderate, and then the hard-core opinion-makers and lawmakers of the land. We took on the KKK, the colleges, the corporations and the covenants of restricted real estate. We found or fashioned allies in the non-Jewish community. We fought to put dignity and respect back into "Jew"—a word which others had made into a verb and given a negative meaning. We haven't finished the work, but most of us, most of the time, are "out and proud" as Jews in America, and we'll never go back in the closet!

OK. Now that I've gotten your attention, can we talk...? I want you to know the "heart" of a group of *gerim*—of strangers who are part of this congregation, this community and this nation. People who are living in *mitzrayim*—in the closet. People who feel forced to create their own social clubs, their own business and professional associations, their own high schools, their own synagogues and churches because they have been defined by traditional religion and culture as "other" as "undesirable" as "sick" and as "sinful". People who have to "pass" outside those safe places because they risk rejection, violence and death in school, at work, even at home ... because they are *gay and lesbian*, or because their *children* are.

As a *rabbi* I want you to know about them because I am convinced that our Tradition has wrongly reviled and rejected homosexuals for centuries and we must now *change* our attitudes, our teaching and our behavior. As a *father* I want you to know my heart, and the heart of my lesbian daughter, because we and our family got sick and tired of living in *mitzrayim*. We're "out and proud" as members of the gay/lesbian community and we're not going back to the closet!

While many of our children and parents can't yet risk the dangers of coming out; some have begun to organize educational and advocacy efforts on our own behalf. Gays and lesbians have learned from the Jewish experience: "If I don't stand up for myself, why should anyone else?!" We're marching down the streets of major cities in Gay Pride parades. We filled the Mall and the streets of Washington with a Human Rights demonstration. We're putting our

case before the public on television. And we're lobbying for our rights in the executive suites of the corporate world, and the legislative offices of state and national lawmakers. And we're taking our case to the churches and synagogues. This, in a few pages, is what we want you to know—as a beginning.

Homosexuality can be defined most simply as an inborn orientation which shows up sooner or later as a physical and affectional preference for persons of the same sex. An overwhelming majority of mental health professionals have rejected in recent years, the invalid teaching that it is an illness, or an arrested development of "normal" heterosexuality.

Scientists are still trying to determine whether there is some genetic determinant for sexual orientation. Some recent investigations have uncovered evidence which points in that direction. It is clear that a large percentage of gay and lesbian persons have some sense of themselves as being "different" from as early as four or five years of age. It is as "natural" for them to be attracted to persons of the *same* sex as it is "natural" for others to be attracted to the *opposite* sex.

A sizeable majority of those who are studying the diversity of sexual orientations in human and animal populations are persuaded that attraction to those of the same sex is no more a "deviance" in need of correction than is left-handedness.

Unfortunately, from about the Middle Ages onward in Western culture, homosexuality has been socially defined as a "problem". Fear of that which is different, fueled by Biblical quotations torn out of context coupled with inadequate scientific data have cruelly stigmatized and separated millions of gay men and women who had no more "choice" in the matter of their orientation than did their straight siblings or neighbors.

How ironic—how painful—it is to realize that our society has defined *diversity* in the biological world as a *necessity*, celebrated for the rich fabric of flora and fauna God has woven for us in all of Nature—with the exception of the *human realm*, in which we have learned to separate ourselves by inborn characteristics such as skin color, racial features, handedness or sexual orientation. [By the way, are you aware that in Japan lefthanded people are so stigmatized that some schoolchildren, unable to

learn to write with their right hands, have been driven to suicide?!)

How ironic—how painful—it is to realize that our beloved Jewish Tradition has contributed the basic source-text used by so many “religious” people to justify the persecution of gays and lesbians! In the 18th chapter of Leviticus we find a list of prohibited sexual behaviors, mostly regulating relations between family members. The list includes the warning not to “come near a woman during her time of uncleanness.” At the end of the list we are warned: “Do not allow any of your offspring to be offered up to Molech, and do not profane the name of your God, I am the Lord.” Then follow these words: *Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is a toevah—an abhorrence.*”

The passage goes on to remind the people that “. . . all those abhorrent things were done by the people who were in the land before you, and the land become defiled. So let not the land spew you out for defiling it, as it spewed out the nation that came before you. All who do any of these abhorrent things—such persons shall be cut off from their people.”

There are two other references to male homosexual behavior in the Torah. The Talmud has not much more to say on the subject, as it is assumed that “Jews don’t do such things, so there is no need to discuss it.” Lesbian behavior is given similar brief notice. So it appears that homosexual acts make their way into the texts of our Tradition primarily in the context of pagan behavior, often associated with idolatrous cultic rites.

Neither the Torah nor the rabbinic tradition show any awareness of homosexuality as an inborn orientation. Heterosexuality is simply assumed as the norm for all humans; and presumably “straight” people are told “don’t engage in homosexual acts, along with a number of other deviant behaviors which you might *choose* to commit because of lustful desires or passions.”

Nowhere in our ancient Tradition is there any consideration of the existence of longlasting, monogamous, loving and committed *relationships* between persons of the same gender. Only in recent decades have Jewish religious leaders begun to look at this reality and to begin challenging old ideas, assumptions and prejudices which can no longer stand as truth or as valid moral guidance.

So it is that in 1977 our Central Conference of American Rabbis resolved to “encourage legislation which decriminalizes homosexual acts between consenting adults, and prohibits discrimination against them as persons...” And by 1987 our Union of Congregations resolved to “Encourage lesbian and gay Jews to share and participate in worship, leadership and general congregational life in all synagogues....to develop educational programs....to promote understanding and respect....and to employ people without regard to sexual orientation.”

By 1989 our Union’s delegates acknowledged that too little progress had been seen, and declared that “Our union of congregations must be a place where loneliness and suffering and exile end, where gay and lesbian Jews can know that they are accepted on terms of visibility, not invisibility; that we place no limits on their communal or spiritual aspirations.” That year’s resolution called for a more energetic program of outreach and education.

In 1990, after five years of careful study and debate, our Reform rabbinical organization affirmed (though not unanimously, I must point out) that right of gay and lesbian rabbis to serve our People as spiritual leaders; and currently a special committee is exploring the subject of sanctifying the committed relationships of same-sex couples with full recognition of their validity within our community.

Many rabbis are already officiating at such ceremonies. Many congregations are changing their bylaws so that the term “family membership” can legitimately include gay or lesbian couples and their children. A growing number of congregations are electing openly gay or lesbian rabbis to lead them. (I had the high honor of participating in the installation of one of these women as assistant rabbi at Temple Rodeph Sholom in Manhattan last month.)

Our counterparts in the Reconstructionist Movement have moved their deliberations in this area with greater dispatch; and have produced a position paper on Homosexuality and Judaism which I think you’d find most helpful in laying out the facts and the Jewish value criteria by which their position was reached.

The Conservative Movement is struggling with the subject and encountering greater resistance from the more traditional wing at the Seminary and within the rabbinate. But more liberal voices are clearly being heard, and making an impact. A most

useful responsum by Rabbi Bradley S. Artson is among the reprints I have brought, which I hope you'll take home for study and further discussion.

Not even the Orthodox can ignore this issue any longer. In spite of official pronouncements of unyielding opposition to homosexuality, a handful of individual rabbis are taking the first steps toward change by offering a compassionate and understanding attitude to gay and lesbian people who've dared to come out to them.

We are engaged in a social revolution. Like all social revolutions there are spurts of progress met with counter-revolutionary resistance. Some of our Reform congregational leaders are taking strong positions and making policies of welcome and inclusion first. They tell their members: "This is what we think is right. You elected us to lead, and that's what we are doing! Now come and learn what we've learned and join us in this new and sacred venture." These leaders then follow up with educational programs and opportunities for dialog so that their people can talk *with*, not just *about*, gays and lesbians. They take a checklist such as the one I've provided for you tonight and they systematically review every aspect of temple programming to make sure that the welcome and inclusion are real, not just theoretical.

Other congregations are taking a more cautious route. They insist that both traditional and liberal positions be heard. They are concerned about "rocking the boat" and risking the alienation of more

conservative members. They're cautious and they're slow; but they're sticking with the process toward change.

Still others are simply ignoring the entire issue, hoping that if they wait it out we will go away. "Besides," they say, "We don't have any gays in our congregation, so why should we even discuss it?"

"Well, look again," we say. "We're everywhere, and we're in your temple too; but we know you well enough to stay in the closet, at least a while longer. One of these days we'll be calling on you, and we hope you'll be ready by then."

This week we're studying the Torah portion *chay Sarah*. A central event in this narrative takes place at the community well. Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, has arrived after a long journey to seek a fitting wife for Isaac. His criterion for success, I'm sure you remember: a generous response to his request for water for himself, with a spontaneous offer to care for his camels, as well. Along comes Rebecca. His prayer is answered with refreshing waters and an invitation to dinner. Wonder of wonders! The woman is *mishpochah*! He's come to the right place.

Our gay and lesbian offspring and their dear ones are looking for hospitality, too. They want to be visible in your congregation, able to drink the refreshing waters of Torah and to eat the satisfying meal of inclusion as they are, welcomed without reservation as members of your congregational *mishpochah*. Will this be the right place?