

Our Forty Years in the Desert: a Reflection on Stonewall

By Jim Davis Rosenthal

A song for Miriam, for Moses, for Rosa and Martin, for Sylvia and Harvey.

Miriam the prophetess ... took the tambourine in her hand; and all the women followed her with tambourines and dances. –Exodus

I asked my students whether they considered their own freedoms to be dependent first on the work of Rosa Parks, and then Martin Luther King, Jr., and then Harvey Milk. At each stage they acknowledged the contributions of those who had come before them, though they had only just watched The Times of Harvey Milk, and could only piece together Kodachrome snapshots of what could not be imagined before Harvey, and now, to them, feels like air, water, or sunshine.

We then read of butch and femme lesbians in Buffalo in the 1950s, and I asked my students what freedoms they enjoy because of the example of these women. With this they struggled—with enough prodding, many women could point to strength, independence, self-sufficiency; they had moments of clarity in the haze of privilege in which some of us live. For the men, this was a tougher exercise, until I pointed to the economic benefits of equality, and more invisibly, the mere fact that their friendships with women are not disreputable or taboo—in my view, a direct benefit of the struggle for equality in the workplace and for sexual liberation.

Auspiciously, the 40th anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion corresponds in the Jewish calendar with the reading in the annual cycle of Torah portions of a mysterious and complex *parshah* (portion) called *Chukat*. The Israelites have arrived, after 40 years wandering in the desert, at the wilderness of *Zin*, where the prophet Miriam dies and the people thirst for water. Their seemingly inexhaustible well, dependent on the merit of Miriam, has suddenly dried up.

Free from bondage, but still in part enslaved, the people long for the security of bread and water, for the certainty provided by *Mitzrayim*, the land of their enslavement, the narrow places.

Stonewall was a narrow place, a sliver of a bar under Mafia control and constant threat of police raid, a place populated by drag queens, hustlers and homeless youth. Narrow, yes, until that night, 40 years ago, when Sylvia Rivera and so many other trans/queer people struck the rock that poured forth water, those waters “in the life.” Stonewall has become a myth, yes, neither the beginning, nor the end, but people need myths, as much as we need manna, water, and the shelter of the sky. In the biblical account, Moses learns that because he did not follow



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instructions to speak to the rock, but rather struck it in anger, he will glimpse, but not enter, the promised land.

I take this to be the wrong lesson, the morality tale that silences the voice that says: “Enough!” “*Genug!*” “*¡Ya Basta!*” This is the voice so many are afraid to hear, because the narrow places feel so secure, so appealing to our animal nature, to our defensible turf. But the myth is also wise beyond compare, because the promised land ... really ... none of us can ever but glimpse it. The best a *bodhisattva* or a *tzaddik* can hope for, much less we living the broken lives of the everyday, is to bring someone toward promise, to stand briefly on that mountain, and then go back for the next one.

In a numinous and rare teaching moment where one could feel the ground tremble with meaning, I asked my students, “years from now, who will be more free because of the way you lived your lives?” Whether trans or not, queer or not, Jewish or not, a friend of Dorothy or not, whoever you are, I ask the same of us all.



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