## D'var Torah for Parashat No'ah A Flood of Homophobia

October 2010

Rabbi David Mitchell, Radlett & Bushey Reform Synagogue To be published by Leo Baeck College

Recently, you may have heard about a terrible spate of suicides by young men in America. All six of these teenagers saw no alternative but to tragically take their own lives. Tyler Clementi, a Rutgers University undergraduate, jumped of a campus bridge. Billy, who was still at high school, was found hanged in his family's barn. Asher, a young teenager, shot himself. Each of these boys was a victim of anti-gay harassment and bullying and, unable to cope with the pain and humiliation they endured, they looked for an escape - suicide.

This week, in our synagogues, we will read the story of Noah safely floating along in his ark. This narrative doesn't just make a good children's story, it also presents a significant environmental lesson. Yet, perhaps more importantly than smiling at the familiar story and humming about those animals going in two by two, we need to pay attention to the reason why the mythical flood was sent: 'the earth had become corrupt.. filled with lawlessness' (Genesis 6:11-13). The world was destroyed, not because of a rift with God, but because people had set upon each other.

The worst of these crimes was brutal theft. In the Talmud 'R. Johanan said: Come and see how great is the power of theft. Although the generation of the flood transgressed all laws, their decree of punishment was sealed only because they stretched out their hands to steal' (Sanhedrin 108a). This theft involved taking something without a thought for the owner, without caring if someone was injured or humiliated in the process. Theft of material possessions, theft of reputations, theft of life. Humanity had resorted to violence, to bullying and to devaluing life itself.

It is not enough to read the tragic stories of bullied gay teens in the papers and tssk or shake our heads. We have to ask ourselves what we are personally doing to make this world a less dangerous place for those young men and women who, often to their initial horror, discover that they have feelings for people of the same gender. These young people can be anyone; the kid across the street that you've watched grow up; the child of a work colleague; the boy who sits next to you in synagogue; even the beloved child sitting opposite you at the Shabbat table. So what are you doing to alleviate their feelings of isolation and victimisation?

Perhaps you're someone who doesn't challenge a homophobic joke? Perhaps you're someone who doesn't challenge a youngster when you hear them say "that's so gay"? Perhaps you're someone who fails to challenge that homophobic remark? Or perhaps you're someone who stops and thinks about the pressures these young people face, especially when the world they live in, and the family they love, fail to tolerate the longings and emotions that flow very deep within them? And what about those parents

and religious leaders who encourage these young people to embark on 'change' programmes or drag them to aversion therapy? What happens when these fail, as they have proven to do in almost every instance? The answer, although thankfully it happens quite rarely, is that some teenagers look for an escape route, and sometimes, devastatingly, they find the worst one possible...

I'm sure every parent trying to come to terms with their gay son or daughter would rather live with that gay child than live with the knowledge that their child saw no alternative but to take their own life. Credible studies show that a gay or lesbian teenager is four times as likely to attempt suicide as their straight counterparts – four times as likely!

When I was at a Jewish secondary school, homophobia was never condemned. Of course, one would probably expect the staff and pupils at an Orthodox Jewish boy's school to react negatively to something that they understood from the Torah as to'evah ("abhorrent"). Yet what about those teenage boys who sat through lessons with virulently homophobic Rabbis; who suffered endless gay taunts by students and sometimes teachers? What about those boys who were so terrified of their own uncontrollable feelings that they became depressed or even suicidal?

Even if things have changed, even if society as a whole is more accepting of gays and lesbians, even if the Jewish community has shifted on this issue, homophobic bullying in schools (including the Jewish ones), like a devastating flood, is still on the rise. What's more worrying is that it, all too often, still goes unchallenged.

As a Jewish community we are actually beginning to do much better when it comes to supporting gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers, but we're still not going far enough to protect them!

So this Shabbat, when we read the story of Noah in our synagogues, let us not forget that our sacred narrative teaches that the world was destroyed because humanity had turned on itself. Let us also not forget that the rainbow was meant to be a symbol of peace and a sign that never again should or would the world self-destruct.

Not every lesbian or gay Jew will want to fly a rainbow flag. Not every lesbian or gay Jew will want to come out. But for those who do there is a growing support network for them and their families and a wide and varied smorgasbord of lesbian and gay Jewish social and cultural activities.

And for those who don't, those who are too young and too scared – what do we, as a community, do to ensure that they are safe – that they know they are loved and accepted and that their lives are so very precious?

The answer is still not enough, not by a long way!