



by Howard Steiermann

Chant Hallel for Pride!

Will you be chanting Hallel this Shabbos?

Why recite Hallel? The Orthodox Union website describes Hallel as “six Psalms (113-118), which are said as a unit, on joyous occasions, when the praise of G-d is particularly appropriate.” It goes on to explain that these occasions include the three major festivals of Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot as well as Chanukah and Rosh Chodesh.

For many people, this weekend of LGBTQII Pride is a joyous occasion, and I will be chanting Hallel with my congregation in San Francisco.

I remember the month after I came out I volunteered at our Pride Parade so I could stand along the parade route, which allowed me to not only see every contingent, but allowed me to feel like I was part of this large, fun, colorful, important celebration! From Dykes on Bikes, to elected officials to PFLAG, to numerous contingents from the Jewish community, I was standing tall, proud of who I was. Proud of the complete me, not just some parts recognized by the mainstream of society.

I shared my excitement with my mom on the phone that night: over two hours of floats and groups, proudly marching down Market Street! Mom loves her gay son unconditionally, and was like a ‘second mom’ to a coworker who was thrown out of his own family for coming out. You can imagine my surprise when Mom said, “What is there to be proud about in being gay?”

My first response was something like, “Well, I’m as proud to be gay as I am to be a Jew.” Just like there are a lot of famous, ‘visibly Jewish’ Jews, there are lots of “famous” gay men and women who are visibly gay in the world. This was the barometer of pride I assumed my mother had in mind: famous people. But I wasn’t proud about ‘famous people’ so the analogy didn’t hold. So then I had to ponder, why do I feel proud?

In her Pride Shabbat drash (sermon) three years ago, my Rabbi, the fantabulous Camille Shira Angel, wrote:

“‘Pride’ is defined in Webster’s as “a reasonable or justifiable self-respect.” Pride in the form of self-respect and self-esteem has often been an elusive quality of life for multitudes of GLBT people. We have been the victims of misinformation and spiritual violence from time immemorial. After centuries of being made to feel ashamed by the Scriptures and their commentators, a synagogue filled with Jews unafraid to be gay and lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, straight but not narrow, queer and questioning, wrestling and holy honest – living with joy and enthusiasm stands as a radical TRIUMPH! It is nothing



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short of MIRACULOUS, WONDROUS, SUPREMEY DIVINE. Being your real self with honesty and enthusiasm is always a great triumph; but joining in community where the authenticity is palpable and magnetic – this is a gift whose worth is beyond measure.”

If I had had those words to share with my mom in 1993 I would have! But I didn’t have the words then. So here, today are the words I ultimately shared with my mom:

What Pride means to me changes from year to year, but this year, in 2008, Pride means living my life without shame, without hesitation. Pride means engaging my complete self with people. Pride is knowing that people love me, not in spite of me being gay, Jewish, a man, or a Harvard MBA, but because of all of the life experiences that contribute to the person I am. Pride means that people really do value my feelings, intuition and soft manner and don’t judge me for how far I can, or cannot, throw a ball!

Pride for me this year is a recognition that we’ve come so far that my fourteen-year-old cousin can ask me to serve as a reference for him as he applies for a summer job, with no thought that I’m gay. My sexual orientation doesn’t get in the way of our relationship, nor does it keep him from the thrill he’s gotten all these years in outsmarting me in quickly finding the hidden Afikomen [‘dessert’ matzoh] during our family’s annual Passover seder.

Pride is knowing that my family sincerely hopes that I find a wonderful mate. They display this by asking for details after each of my dates; by asking me to envision how tall my beloved will be (by holding the Havdallah[end of Sabbath] candle as high as I hope my bashert [beloved] is tall); and by eagerly including all my friends at family events and meals.

Pride is being me. Knowing that I was made b’tzelem Elohim [in God’s Image], and working with others to use our individual strengths together to create a better world.

Even after working with two different voice coaches, I still can barely hold a tune. This Pride Shabbat, as in all since I’ve Come Out, I will proudly lift my voice in chanting Hallel, this most joyful of queer holidays.

Howard Steiermann is the second son of German refugees and spends his life working as a real estate appraiser, volunteering and eating chocolate chip cookies. He moved to San Francisco after completing his MBA at Harvard. He’s served as President of the 500 student Brandeis Hillel Day School, as a Board member of the Jewish Community Federation (JCF), as Board Chair of JCF’s LGBT Alliance and Board Secretary of Jewish Family and Children’s Services. He has volunteered with a number of other organizations (all in an officer capacity), primarily those serving either the Jewish or gay communities. Howard also completed the two year Wexner Heritage Foundation study program and received the 2000 Lloyd W. Dinkelspiel Award for outstanding young leadership.



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