



Keshet is a national organization that works for full LGBTQ equality and inclusion in Jewish life.

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Temple Emanuel

For You Too Were a Stranger: Becoming an Ally to LGBTQ Community, by Daniel Bahner

Good Shabbos everyone! Thank you, very much, for welcoming me to your community! I want to especially thank Rabbi Robinson and Rabbi Gardenswartz for extending the invitation! As you read in my biography, I work for Keshet, a national non-profit, based here in Boston, that works for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer equality in Jewish life. In my role, I work with Jewish communities around the country, from synagogues, JCCS, Federations, day schools, to family and children service agencies, camps, and youth movements, across spectrums, to give them the tools to make their synagogues more LGBTQ inclusive. While the work of institutional change, of changing the structures of our communities to be more welcoming, is important, I want to focus on a different area of this journey, the individual journey, and what it means to be an ally.

An ally, in the context of civil rights, is an individual from a member of the dominant group (in this case, heterosexual and individuals who feel comfortable in the gender they were assigned) who works to advance the rights of an oppressed group (LGBTQ community). I want to start with some historical context, because it is important for allies of marginalized communities to understand the history those communities. So let me tell you the story of LGBTQ civil rights in this country, because it is integral to understanding the work that we are doing right now.

One way in which oppression works is by silencing the history and stories of marginalized communities in favor of supporting the dominant narrative. In Western, American society, the dominant narrative is that people are heterosexual and cisgender (that is, not transgender and only either men or women). Any other narrative is perverted or immoral. As such, the history of LGBTQ Americans throughout history has been one of silence, erasure, pain, or oppression. We are not inventions of the modern age, but rather have existed since time immemorial-it is only our stories that have been forgotten and devalued. Often times, we have been forced to hide our authentic selves, live in the closet, fearing for our safety if we expressed the deepest wishes of our hearts and souls. Laws were instituted that made it illegal to both act on these desires (laws around sexual behavior, such as anti-sodomy laws) and for wearing clothes not deemed socially acceptable (there were laws in place that allowed men who dresses as women to be put in jail). Police would raid our social spaces for illusory reasons. Our fellow citizens would police us with their words, forming stereotypes and lies that we are threats to societal order and, worse, threats to "women and children".

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the FBI and police departments kept lists of known members of the LGBTQ community, their favored establishments, and friends. State and local governments followed suit: bars catering to our community were shut down, and their customers were arrested and exposed in newspapers. Cities performed "sweeps" to rid neighborhoods, parks, bars, and beaches of gay people. They outlawed the wearing of opposite gender clothes, and universities expelled instructors suspected of being queer.^[1] Thousands of LGBTQ individuals were publicly humiliated, physically harassed, fired, jailed, or institutionalized in mental hospitals. Many lived double lives, keeping their private lives secret from their professional ones. These experiences leave scars and wounds that may never truly heal.

In spite of this, my LGBTQ siblings thrived as best as they could. Creating art, making progress and advances in science and technology, even serving as leaders of our society. We also did not take this lying down. Before the Stonewall Riots, in 1966, at Compton's Cafeteria, in San Francisco drag queens and other gender non-conforming folks were sitting in this establishment when police arrived to arrest those dressed as women. A riot ensued over the span of a few days. This brings me to Stonewall, the event which scholars and activists mark as the birth of the modern LGBTQ civil rights movement. The Stonewall riots happened on June 28th, 1969, in response to police raids at this particular bar in the West Village of New York City. Led by two

trans women of color-Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, they rebelled against the police act. Following this, other actions sprouted up around the country and the Gay Liberation Front was formed, the first known organization to fight for Queer rights with Gay in its title. From there, things expanded. The first “Gay Pride”- Christopher Street Liberation Day-was held on June 28th, 1970 in NYC to mark the anniversary of the Stonewall riots, the reason Pride is in June, and NYC Pride falls when it does. By 1972, Pride had spread to Atlanta, Buffalo, Detroit, Washington DC, Miami, Minneapolis, Philadelphia and SF.

The 80’s brought on the AIDS crisis. This decimated the community, particularly amongst gay men. We were left, abandoned by many in our country—so we had to protect ourselves. This era sparked a renewed sense of urgency; we were fighting for our lives, the phrase, “Silence=Death” came into use during this time. One way allies can learn about the history of other communities is by exposing themselves to their art. In this case, *The Normal Heart* is a play, written by Larry Kramer that depicts this part of his life. *Angels in America*, a Pulitzer Prize winning play by Tony Kushner is also a really great representation of being queer in America in the 1980s.

The 80s is also the decade I enter the scene, so let me pause and enter myself into the story.

I was born and raised in Southwestern Ohio, in the suburbs of Cincinnati, in 1987. When you think of the Midwest and imagine what growing up there must have been like, it is probably pretty close to that image...except I didn’t tip any cows, though there was a cow pasture across one of my schools! Life is fairly simple, people are often set in their ways. A small, traditional town.

In terms of a Jewish population, Cincinnati is home to Hebrew Union College, so there is a surprisingly sizeable one, just not in my area. I was one of a handful of Jewish kids in my grade level-I was often charged with going up to the front of the class and explaining the story of Hanukkah to my peers. By middle school, I was often called SuperJew as a nickname, which I think, partially indicates a certain degree of tokenism, though I wore it like a badge of pride. I mention all of this to highlight how salient my identity as a Jew was to me as a child. I had always been different. I had always known what it was like to feel excluded, in some respects, from the larger community, not necessarily in a hostile way, but in a way that a child can understand that one of these things is not like the other.

My synagogue was small, about a 20 minute drive away from my house, and part of the Conservative movement. The rabbi was very traditional and our Religious School Director was an ultra-Orthodox woman—very well meaning and committed to Jewish community and education, just not talking about LGBTQ issues. Our religious school stayed fairly consistent, so those I grew up with were peers from the ages of 5 up to 18 when I left for college. It was a group of about 10-15 in my age cohort, +/- 3 years on either side, however, only 1 other person who was Bat Mitzvah-ed the same year I was. So we were small. Insular. Tight knit. By the time I was 10, I was there 3 days a week-Sunday for religious school, Wednesday for Hebrew School and Bar Mitzvah prep, and every Saturday morning for the 2 years leading up to my Bar Mitzvah. After home and school, it really was like my second home. It was a safe space where I knew everyone, they knew me. With that framed, I’m going to leave my synagogue life to contrast it with my other educational and community environment-school.

I was a good student. Having teachers as parents I think has a way of doing that to you. I was the teacher’s pet, Hermione Granger, basically. What I also was, was an effeminate kid who did not conform to what my peers thought being a boy was. I was called the F-word, which is also the word for a bundle of sticks starting in elementary school (it’s a word that still holds a lot of emotional power for me, so I never use it)- before anyone else knew what it really meant. We just knew it was used against someone who did act the way they were “supposed to”. I carried my books close to my chest “like a girl” instead of by my side “like a boy”. I was awful at sports. I made friends with girls easily. I was also small and thin. My hips move side to side when I walk in a very distinctive way-my aunts and cousins used to call me chicky-butt. I liked to play dress up and play with Barbies, something I knew, straight from my parents’ mouths, at best undesirable, at worst unacceptable. It wasn’t until about 10-11 years old, when I learned what being gay was, did I realize that it was something applied to me. However, just because I learned that I used this word to describe me, I did not come out or acknowledge this. Instead, I knew that I was in an environment that I could not be myself, so I retreated into myself.

By age 12, I felt rejected from nearly all of the most important relationships in my life. My goal was to be invisible, to get by and to not stand out. Standing out meant people potentially recognizing who I was and all I wanted to do was get by with the least bit of resistance. These patterns of behavior and thinking morphed into depression, anxiety, and other confidence issues, battles I'm still waging to this day. To give you a window into my psyche as an example—in many ways, my first assumption into any social situation I find myself in is that I will be rejected for just being me, who could possibly love or want me around? I have to actively fight against those thoughts. Let me tell you it is exhausting. But how did I, a child, know that who I was, was not welcome, that it wasn't even an option?

I've already talked about the messages I was getting at school. Kids can be cruel, so I definitely wasn't feeling welcomed and included by them. My school wasn't open—in high school, the very small gay-straight alliance that existed was not allowed to announce their meeting time and location on the intercom like the other clubs—perhaps it was for their safety and anonymity, perhaps something more malicious, maybe both, but the fact that it was underground is evidence of the type of environment I was in and the messages I was getting.

Again, think about the historical moment I was living in. As a child, I did my research and knew some of the painful history of the community I learned was my own. The 90s and early 2000s, my formative years, were the time of groundbreakers like Ellen, Will and Grace, Elton John—but there were few role models and LGBTQ rights weren't really a topic that was discussed. This was also the age of the murder of Matthew Shepard, Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and the Defense of Marriage Act. Without a national discussion going on, there wasn't much seeping down into life in suburban Ohio to break through. My parents also didn't know anything about what I was going through because I didn't feel comfortable coming to them with questions about it. When the birds and the bees talk happened, it was framed in a way that assumed I was heterosexual, because for them, it wasn't even a thought in their minds that I would be something other than that. I realize now, that what was actually the heart of the issue was my gender expression—I was too effeminate. My childhood best friend, whom I spent nearly every day with growing up, suddenly stopped being my friend in middle school. As a kid, I never knew why, but I also thought it had something to do with my tendency to want to play Barbies with his sister and me being a social liability in the “why are you friends with the gay kid” kind of way. I lived in low-key terror at the neighborhood bullies across the street; I have vague memories of running home, or seeking a safe space in my neighbor's house to wait until they got home before I walked home myself. I vividly remember a moment in middle school, when I was 13-14—I was on the track team, and we were sitting in the stands, on a windy day in April. If you know track, you know that the uniform is short shorts and a tank top, so I was cold. I put on my wind jacket and one of “tough guys” asked me point blank, “Are you gay?” I panicked and lied of course, as I always did when some out asked me point blank, and said “No, why” and his response, “because you are cold and wearing your jacket”. That is how all of this works, and how kids get the messages they do that being LGBTQ is not acceptable. Because I was a boy, and I showed weakness and femininity (my gender expression), I must therefore be gay (assumption that all men act a certain way and that include liking women). Both aren't how I should be in the eyes of others.

This all brings me back to my synagogue. As I said, my synagogue was effectively a 2nd home for me. Imagine how much different my experiences growing up could have been had that space been one that was inclusive and welcoming. Now, sure, there is an argument to be made that my synagogue not being inclusive and welcoming could be more towards the geographic area that I was in, or symptomatic of the times. However, the reason why I think that this space could have made the difference is precisely because it was the Jewish space. I say this, because, for me, I truly believe that my desire to do work surrounding inclusion and social justice work is deeply rooted in Jewish values. Values I learned studying with the walls of my synagogue.

When I look back on my Jewish education, a few things stick out. One of the first is the idea that “I am my Brother's Keeper”. In Sunday Religious School, during our Judaica studies classes, we would have these morality/ethics workbooks. I remember that one of the first lessons was this very one, connecting it to one of the first accounts in the Torah—that of Cain and Abel. To me it laid out the lesson very clearly—we have a responsibility to look out for each other and we have a vested interest in the well-being of others—it is our duty.

In these same classes, we were introduced to the many examples throughout the history of the Jewish people where we, as a community, were excluded or discriminated against: the stories of Passover, Purim, Chanukkah; Europe in the Middle Ages/Renaissance; The horror of the Holocaust; modern day examples of cemeteries being overturned and worse.

As a community, we are the inheritors of a history that calls upon us to do better. As a child learning about this communal history and trying to make sense of them, the lesson was clear to me: being Jewish was antithetical to the idea of discrimination and exclusion. It didn't make sense. The concepts of *Tzedakah* and *Mitzvot* are central tenets of our people. Later as I explored Judaism in a more academic context in College, I finally took a class on kabbalah and it was there that I learned about *Tikkun Olam*-lifting Up the pieces to Repair the World. It was our duty as Jews to make the world a better place.

Even in this week's Torah portion, we were once again reminded that we were strangers in the land of Egypt. Think about the number of times we are reminded of this fact? However, not only are we reminded of our history, but we are also reminded that it is BECAUSE of our history that we must act a certain way. We must be kind to the stranger, because we know what it is like to be a stranger. For me, a great deal of Jewish tradition is a call to empathy. Think about it. We are taught that Rabbi Hillel once said that, "What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man. That is the whole Torah; the rest is just commentary. Go and study it." We are a community that values *Pikuach Nefesh*, the principles that the preservation of human life overrides virtually any other religious consideration.

But these are not just modern interpretations of Jewish values. One of the great joys of working at Keshet has been learning about examples within our own tradition where the rabbis of our past worked to expand the tent of the Jewish community to include individuals that did not neatly fit into a certain box of "man" or "woman". In the Midrash and the Talmud, the rabbis described the *tumtum* (a person whose sexual characteristics are indeterminate or obscured), the *androgynous* (a person with both male and female sex characteristics), the *saris* (a person who is identified as male at birth but develops female characteristics at puberty or later), the *alyonit* (a person identified as female at birth but develops male characteristics at puberty). Think about how powerful this knowledge, if more widespread, could be to the queer members in our community. As an example, when you think about the creation of human beings, I'm sure the first thought that comes to mind is Adam and Eve. However, this is not the first time the creation of humans is mentioned. Instead, in the first chapter of the Torah, it is written, "god created the first *adam*, the first human, in the image of God, god created him-male and female-god created them." In trying to understand the discrepancy of if there were one or two humans created at the very beginning, Rabbi Jeremiah ben Elazar said, "when the holy one, blessed be he, created the first *adam*, god created him androgynous." What would it mean if we centered this story in our tradition and the very idea of *b'tzelem Elohim*, being made in the image of God, is not a masculine image, but a more gender-fluid, non-binary divine image. We all have masculine, feminine, and everything in between, within all of us.

For me, it is all there, the Jewish tradition of empathy and inclusion. However, that isn't what I got. Were people openly hostile? No, but I wasn't openly out. Maybe everyone would have been affirming of my identity had I explored it had I just given them a chance to show it. However, for me, it is important to remember that silence can be just as harmful, if not more so at times, than outright hostility. For many, particular those with an identity that is hidden unless you disclose, you are constantly navigating spaces to determine if it is one that is safe for you to be open. I was constantly bombarded by the messages that who I was, was not normal, that I was wrong. My synagogue was just as complicit in its silence by not combating these issues and not stating exclusion goes against our values.

Because I know what it felt like to be excluded for part of my identity, I can try to imagine what it may feel like for others, with more marginalized identities than I. It is because of this empathy that I take my role as an ally so seriously. I don't want others to feel anything like what I felt. I often tell myself to "be the person that I needed as a child", which was a person who not only looked out for themselves, but also everyone in the community to make sure they feel included.

In the times in which we are living, allyship is so incredibly important, because the LGBTQ community, which can so easily feel isolated and under attack, needs to know that we are not alone in this fight for more inclusion in society. To be an ally is to support and work towards a more inclusive world for all individuals, regardless of their identity. While the LGBTQ community has come far, with a number of victorious, we continue to face discrimination and oppression. Here are only a few examples:

Here in Massachusetts, the statehouse last year passed a Transgender Public Accommodations bill that allowed transgender folks to use bathrooms aligning with their gender identity, however, now, this issue received enough signatures to be put on the next statewide ballot, threatening the lives of trans citizens of the Commonwealth.

Transgender women of color face enormous rates of violence. So far this year there have been 16 murders of transgender women reported, with countless others not. Transgender youth are at greater risk for suicide and depression. **Nearly half of all transgender youth think about or attempt suicide.** If we are a community that believes that if you save one life, you save the world, how can we turn our backs on our transgender and non-binary (that means folks who don't identify as either men or women) young people? Currently, transgender youth are facing discrimination in public schools, not guaranteed to use the bathroom affirming of their identity. Transgender military service members, who recently gained the right to serve openly, are once again facing a life of service in the closet or a potential dishonorable discharge.

LGBTQ individuals can still be fired from their job, denied housing, and services, just because of who they are. We, as a community are at higher risk of substance abuse, homelessness, and mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. There are no federal laws on the books protecting our community from discrimination on the federal level. I, as a sexual active gay man, am denied the option of giving blood. Think back to the Pulse Orlando massacre from a year ago---queer men could not even donate blood to save our own. Even now, we as a community are living under the Sword of Damocles, hoping that future directives under the guise of religious freedom aren't put forth to allow legal discrimination and living in a current reality where the legal arguments used in the past to include our protection in existing legislation, is no longer being applied as such, once again opening us up to legal discrimination.

We as Jews have a history of similar experiences of oppression in this country, not very many generations removed. Maybe some of you have experienced some form of discrimination for being visibly Jewish more recently. If you know what that feels like, how can we make someone else feel like that?

So now you may be asking yourself—ok Daniel, I appreciate all this, but what does this mean? How can I become a better ally? Well, here are some questions for you. I'm not going to ask you to answer them, just think to yourself about your behavior and see if you can implement any of these ideas into your daily life. By doing so, you can help to make our community more LGBTQ inclusive.

Actively use peoples' pronouns both when they're around and not around. Begin to normalize it by sharing your own when you introduce yourself, put it in your email signature.

If you are met with an identity you don't understand, or someone comes out to you, thank them for the courage to do so and telling you. Prioritize making someone feel safe, loved, and valued, rather than question their identity.

Don't assume the gender or sex of someone's significant other. When you are talking to young people about sexual health, include multiple perspectives and experiences.

Be mindful of the times we use gender stereotypes and reinforce them, even when they seem harmless. "Gender Reveal" Parties and asking is it a boy or girl are fun ways to bond and are important life cycle moments, but even those types of behaviors start to send messages to child, who are sponges for information and patterns really, of how they are "supposed" to behave.

Correct other people when they misgender someone and use the wrong pronoun.

Only use the name someone tells you they want to be referred to as. Don't refer to their birth name if that is not what they have introduced themselves to you. Don't ask "what's your real name" or what someone's surgical status or genitals look like.

Expose yourself and take in the media of LGBTQ individuals—TV, Books, Articles, Art, Music

Don't laugh at jokes whose punch line is to make fun of men by equating them with femininity or women with masculinity.

Instead of saying "guys", "ladies and gentlemen", "boys and girls", you can say "folks", "friends", "everyone", "children. Avoid other gendered language when you don't need to.

Educate yourself on the issues facing LGBTQ individuals. Many of them we discussed earlier today.

Actively use your privilege as a cisgender and/or heterosexual person to make the world better for your LGBTQ friends and family?

Speak out in support of LGBTQ civil rights.

Support young people as they are navigating and learning about themselves, don't view it as a "phase".

These are only a few ways in which you can start to work to become a better ally. So much of the work of allyship is to take that extra moment to be a bit more mindful of the words we use, again, another Jewish value—*Shmirat Halashon*—guarding our use of language. But we are also imperfect beings. I'm not perfect, so when you mess up or make a mistake, apologize, correct yourself, move on, and commit to do better!

This is hard work. It takes a lot of unlearning prior ways of thinking and socialization. I also think that it is deeply Jewish work. In the United States, we have a long history of Jewish activism in struggles for economic, racial, gender, and queer Justice. Again, our tradition calls us to do this work—as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said during the civil rights era, he was "praying with his feet" by participating in civil rights marches and struggles—for in the Torah, in what has become my favorite passage, Adonai tells the Israelites in Deuteronomy, Parshat *Devarim*:

Yet it was to your ancestors that GOD was drawn in God's love for them, so that God chose you, their lineal descendants, from among all peoples—as is now the case.

Cut away, therefore, the thickening about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more.

For Adonai your God is God supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the orphan and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing them with food and clothing.—

You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

"Cut away therefore the thickening around your hearts and stiffen your necks no more". Our tradition knows this is hard work, it understands human nature to be insular, protective, to be with the familiar. But we are called to do better. We must do better. As we move into next week, and look ahead to the weeks and months to come, may we all have the strength and courage to do as we are commanded, and cut away the thickening of our hearts and stiffen our necks no more, and become the better allies we all need in our lives because, from time to time, we all know, what it feels like to be the Stranger. Shabbat Shalom.