

Yom Kippur 5768

I probably wasn't more than ten years old the morning my mom took me with her to the beauty parlor so that she could have her hair done. I'd been there with her before but what happened during that particular visit still holds my memory. I enjoyed going with her because it meant that I would have the chance to listen to and watch John, her hairdresser. Anyone who knows me can easily tell that it wasn't because I was fascinated by the art of cutting hair (I can't remember the last time I had mine cut). It was the way John entertained and cared for my mother, and by extension, me. He was warm, extremely funny, a bit of a tease, but not in a nasty way. He was smart and seemed to really enjoy his work. He was an artist but more than that, he knew how to engage in conversation.

On that particular visit, I was sitting in a chair near my mom while John cut her hair. He asked me to hold his ring. It seemed to be getting in the way of managing my mother's bouffant. I of course agreed and he handed me what looked like a wedding band. I looked to see if there was an inscription

inside the ring. Much to my surprise, written in beautiful letters was "To John, love forever, Billy". Not wanting to be rude, I didn't say a word. But I couldn't wait to get to the car so that I could ask my mother a list of questions.

They went something like this:

* Is Billy a man or a woman? (I thought I knew the answer to that one)

* If Billy is a man, how can two men be together like that?

* Is this a secret, and if so, why did John ask me to hold the ring?

* Did he want me to know or did he not think about what was written inside the ring?

* Did he see me reading the inscription?

* Are there other people like John and Billy?

What my mother and I didn't understand at that time was that these kinds of questions would become very personal to our family. We would soon begin to understand what Billy and John faced as a gay couple.

My brother, Andrew, never actually had to tell me he is gay. I'm still not really even sure about how I knew. But he did come out to my mother. I was no longer living at home, but I was there when he broke the news. At the time and over the ensuing months, I remember how difficult it was for her to process the news. Entwined with this memory is the knowledge that she had a close friend (from the synagogue by the way) with a gay son. All the kids knew he was gay but my mom and her best friend never spoke about their sons being gay until many years later. They had a great laugh joking that if their two sons got together, they could be in-laws. Tragically, her friend's son later died of AIDS-the worst nightmare for all mothers of gay sons. During that time, my mother was a great support to her friend and recalls visiting him in the hospital just before he died.

So, my own personal experience is one of the reasons I am committed to full inclusion and embracing of our GLTBQ brothers and sisters. I made a promise to myself that any Jewish community I am part of will make a place for parents, sisters, brothers, and grandparents of gay children to be able to talk with each other and their friends about their kids' true

identities. Someone in my mother's place should never fear talking about her gay son, and gay Jews should always feel welcome in Jewish worship and in our Temple Beth El family. Someone in my mother's current position should be available to support parents who are just beginning to understand what their gay kids need from them. For these reasons, we formed our Twice Blessed group. Alice and George Sicular, may the memory of the righteous be a blessing, were the parents of a wonderful gay son and they felt the same way about the kind of Jewish community they wanted to be part of. They wanted to feel pride in their gay son in their synagogue.

Why am I talking about this on Yom Kippur? The most obvious answer is that I've got a room full of Jews and a microphone. Another reason has to do with the Torah portion selected by tradition for reading on the afternoon of Yom Kippur during the mincha service. We don't gather for mincha in Temple Beth so we haven't been faced with the portion's content. The reading chosen is chapter 18 of Leviticus. It discusses various forbidden sexual relationships: adultery, incest, and laws of family purity, homosexuality and bestiality.

Why was this section chosen for Yom Kippur afternoon? The traditional answer comes from the Talmud. Mishna Ta'anit 4.8 says that Yom Kippur was one of the happiest days of the year. Yom Kippur afternoon was a time when young women would go into the vineyards, seeking a potential partner. From this perspective we can understand Leviticus 18 as a reminder of ethical sexual behavior, tying in the sanctity of proper vs improper relationships, sexual prohibitions and Yom Kippur. This traditional answer doesn't completely work for us anymore since Yom Kippur afternoon is no longer a Jewish Sadie Hawkins experience. However, at this time, we still can stand a reminder to behave morally in our sexual relationships. But that's not the problem.

So let's get to this text, which explains the reason why even some Conservative synagogues where mincha is observed on YK have chosen to replace it with another text. After quite a few verses delineating sexual relations that are outside the bounds of Jewish Law we find this verse:

18:22. Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is abhorrence.

Traditionally, 18:22 has been read both by conservative Christians and Jews as a clear condemnation of male

homosexual acts. And this reading has caused severe damage to individuals and our communities. It is this damage that we must face. We can't ignore that this section of Torah is part of our sacred book and pretend that it doesn't exist. We have to deal with it. If we don't take an honest look at this verse we won't begin to understand the scars carried by members of our families and communities. Once we see the source of this pain, we must be vigilant in working to heal these wounds.

There are debates as to the meaning of the verse itself: Some scholars state that this verse condemns "homosexuality" or "homosexual relations" without explaining what these words mean.

Alternatively, some sources, including the Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 54a and b; state that this verse condemns only males penetrating males. Sexual relations between women are not mentioned in this chapter or anywhere else in the Torah.

Generally speaking, when we find a law that tells us we shouldn't be acting in a particular way this is an indication that the behavior was taking place. While these attempts to make sense of this verse are one way of dealing with how difficult it is for us to face its existence, they are not satisfying answers.

The damage remains.

On Rosh Hashanah eve I spoke about the lessons we can find in the Torah when we commit to struggling with the multi-vocal nature of the text. In questioning Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac, I asked us to consider whether or not he made a mistake. I have been able to avoid Leviticus 18:22, but not completely. While in our synagogue we don't read it on Yom Kippur, it comes around every year in the natural cycle of weekly Torah portions. I am asking us to take responsibility for this verse and make teshuva with all the people who have been hurt as a result of it being part of our tradition. To heal the wounds these words have inflicted upon heart and soul.

I want to share with you how Rabbi Steve Greenberg, the first out Orthodox gay rabbi in the US describes his relationship with this text. In it we see damage but also redemption which he has found as an Orthodox gay man.

Rabbi Greenberg has always been part of an observant Jewish community. He hears this verse year after year. In his book, Wrestling with God & Men, he writes that from the time he first began to acknowledge to himself that he is gay he cringed to hear what he called "his shame read aloud" on Yom Kippur.

But his relationship with Leviticus 18:22 has changed over the years. In the beginning he felt guilt and sadness for “being caught up” in a sexual and emotional desire for other men. He beseeched God for understanding and compassion for his situation and sobbed in a corner devastated by the pain that this verse seared on his body and his soul. He writes “I have tried to connect myself with Jews of countless ages, listening in shul to their deepest feelings of desire turned abhorrent, ugly and sinful”.

But even during these early years, before Rabbi Greenberg was out of the closet, he never missed the mincha service during which this section of Torah was read. He never considered walking out of the room. To the contrary, he took upon himself the custom of standing during the reading. Dressed in his kittel, with his tallit over his head, he stood and cried, in mourning and in shame.

Then, inside of him, self-acceptance grew. The standing became a kind of protest. He writes, “The tears stopped and in their place was a stoic sense of rising to hear the unfair accusations of a heavenly court”.

Eleven years ago, Rabbi Greenberg took his protest one step further. He decided that he wanted the aliyah for this section

of Torah. He spoke with the person arranging each aliyah blessing and went up to the bimah. As you might imagine, his heart was pounding and his head was swirling. Greenberg has trouble finding the words to describe the feelings he had standing in front of the Torah scroll at that moment.

Remember, this is the same Torah he kissed each time it was paraded through the sanctuary, the same Torah he danced with every Simchat Torah.

He writes, "I say the blessing, the Santa scroll is rolled open, and I, too, feel as if my arms have been rolled aside and my heart is exposed. I hold the handles of the scroll for balance. I am surprised. The words are poetry: Thou shall not uncover the nakedness of thy father's wife, the nakedness of thy sister, the nakedness of thy daughter-in-law, the nakedness of thy aunt. I am aware of the power of this text on Yom Kippur for all those who have been sexually abused. On a day of healing, we cannot avoid confronting how the intimacy of families can be turned to violence.

And then it comes: Thou shall not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; it is an abomination. To my surprise, when it is read, I no longer feel pain or threat or accusation. I feel strangely empowered. In exposing myself to this verse it has

become exposed to me.” In the last section of this essay he writes, “I have come to understand that whatever those verses in Leviticus mean, they cannot be truly understood without the testimonies of those bodies and souls that have been ripped apart by them, who have suffered for years under their weight. Until our stories are told in the midst of the learned, until the scholars discover among their own flesh and blood, their own students and teachers, their friends and colleagues, are gay people whom they love; until the countless gay people pushed out of our communities come home and are able to stand up in integrity and claim their place-those verses will remain dark and indecipherable, or worse, an ongoing excuse for blind hatred.”

So my friends, I share Rabbi Greenberg’s story to inspire us towards continued work in this area of our community’s life. And I share my family’s story to help any of you find the courage to come out in our synagogue.

Our congregation continues our striving to become more inclusive, more embracing and more sensitive. Only a year or so ago, one of our board members called our attention to a graphic we were using that might have caused gay couples to feel invisible. Did we mean to send this message? Of course

not. We have done so much to work on issues of inclusion. We've changed our membership and Temple school forms to partner and parent. We've marched in Gay Pride parades for over 20 years. Rabbi Rick and I have officiated at kiddushin and get ceremonies for gay and lesbian couples. Over the last few years, our Pride Shabbat speakers have asked us to explore issues around gender, understanding that gender identity is not as fixed as we originally thought it was and that we must educate ourselves about the needs and struggles of our trans-gendered members. There is dignity in difference. Thanks, in no small part, to Kathy Goldenkranz our work continues. This year's Out in Our Faith program builds upon the interfaith work around GLTBQ inclusion in the larger Santa Cruz community. We have been leaders in this area and with the support of the Santa Cruz Community Foundation we are looking forward to building an interfaith clergy network to mentor other religious institutions in this work.

In closing, I want to share a story that helps us understand the healing we must do in this area. Rabbi Greenberg's story is not so far from Santa Cruz. A number of years ago I was talking with a lesbian couple in our congregation. One of the women had been raised in an observant family in New York. This

couple told me that they had heard about Temple Beth El years before but it took them two years to be able to walk into the building. In the beginning, they drove as far as the entrance to the driveway and then turned around. After a few of these trips they made it into the parking lot but couldn't get out of the car. That verse from Leviticus. must have been ringing in their ears. Finally, with encouragement from a Temple Beth El member, they came into the sanctuary and were relieved to find that their friend's assurances were true. That there is a home for them in this Jewish community that respects them for who they are in the fullest sense. And that they do not have to leave their love at the door.

I want to bless us all that we should have the strength, love and wisdom to help ensure that we as a community are a force for healing the wounds inflicted by the verses read on Yom Kippur afternoon. That in place of ignoring the pain, we like Rabbi Greenberg, confront the challenging parts of our tradition and work to transform them into blessings. That someone in my mother's place always knows that she can be proud of her gay son or daughter. That all of our gay parents and their children feel supported and included. And our

**synagogue continues our work in the larger Santa Cruz
community to help other religious institutions do the same.**