

Pride Shabbat 2019/5779

Almost 10 years ago to the day,

I was at Caffe Fiore in Seattle perched at a window counter seat.

In front of me was a Tanakh, a book of Hebrew scripture, open to the story of Jonah.

Sitting next to me, on my left side, was a woman. ☺

Our heads bent over the ancient words, late afternoon sunlight casting lazy shadows across our faces, and my stomach in knots.

A small part of my jitters related to making our way through venerable words, Hebrew was never my forte.

But most of the butterflies were the pulse I felt between us, a sense that there was something more happening than 2 friends getting together for a little text study.

It was quite Yentl-tastic, for Barbara Streisand fans among us.

I was nervous! And felt exposed, and I remember leaving that coffee shop thinking “huh...that felt different.”

The following day we saw each other again, walking up and down the beach, the sky shifting from twilight to inky blue.

I looked sideways at her, the darkness offering freedom to open myself to the power of this moment.

All I knew was that it felt big.

At 29 my life was about to change, my identity was about to change.

I got in my car that night, knowing I was not ready to go home yet.

Pulling onto a major highway in Seattle heading north,

I blasted Peter Gabriel, as one does in these moments.

And when I finally made it home, way past midnight, my body buzzing with the cadence of a ferocious crush, I called my mom.

And I said, "I think I'm having feelings for a woman."

And my mom, who gets SUCH credit for this, said, "Well yeah, women are hot."

And that is how I became a lesbian. ☺

And I am so aware, as I share my story, how good I had it.

Parents who just wanted me to be happy,

a grandma who volunteered at the Gay Men's Health Alliance in the 80's

at the height of the AIDS crisis--her spirit is SO present here tonight.

I also think a lot about coming out in 2009

with so, so many LGBTQI individuals before me who paved the way.

Those who lost jobs, those who were beaten, estranged, and killed.

Today, as we mark the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots,

we hold close to our hearts each activist who risked their life to protect places

for the most marginalized in New York city to gather without fear of being arrested.

And now, 50 years later, when our political climate feels equally scary and tenuous,
I turn to the words in this week's Torah portion, *Birkat Cohenim*, the Priestly Blessing.

יברכך יי וישמרך

May the Eternal bless you and keep you.

יאר יי פניו אליך ויחנך

May the Eternal's face shine upon you and grant grace to you.

ישא יי פניו אליך וישם לך שלום

May the Divine lift up the Transcendant's face to you and give you peace

The custom when we recite this blessing, is that in between each line of the blessing,
the community utters, "*Ken y'hi ratzon*," so may it be the Eternal's will,
a giant communal "Amen."

My colleague, Rabbi Evette Lutman, pointedly asks, "Why?"

Why isn't it enough for the *Cohenim*, the priests,

to simply utter the blessing to the individual?

Why does the community have to be involved with the blessing?

And why don't we just do one communal "*Ken y'hi ratzon*," at the end of the 3 verses?

Why this affirmation between each line?

The actual words of the blessing are in the singular, but we interject as a community with our approval.

Thus, when one is blessed, all benefit.

When a minority is blessed by the community,
the collective solidifies and becomes stronger.

As we continue to feel the assault of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity,

we are called to raise our voices, and our activism, in passionate protest.

And we thank our Allies, our community, as they join us in advocacy.

The reason we respond as a community to the blessing of the individual,
is not for the benefit of the person blessed,
but instead, for the benefit of the community.

Nine years ago, I was invited to speak at Seattle Pride's Dyke March.

And I declined.

I was scared. I was not ready.

It was frightening to be so public about who I was; who I loved;
even though being with women was more honest, and true, and deep, and sexy than
anything I'd ever experienced.

And now I stand before you, on this Pride Shabbat.

Fortified and empowered by those Stonewall rioters,

by the drag queens and transgender people who risked their lives,

by colleagues and friends who faced virulent discrimination and hardship.

Buttressed by Allies and those from PFLAG who sit with us tonight to affirm the blessing each of us is.

At this Jewish celebration of PRIDE,

may we continue to build on a legacy of righteousness, of *tzedek*,

and of confirming the blessing that *each* of us is to our community and world.

Together, may we each bless and be blessed in wholeness, in love, and in light.

יברכך יי וישמרך

Y'varechach adonai veyishmeracha

May your way be blessed.

יאר יי פניו אליך ויחנך

Yaar adonai panav aleyeyich veyechoo-ne-cha

May wisdom's light shine upon you.

ישא יי פניו אליך וישם לך שלום

Yesah adonai panav aleyech veyasem lach shalom.

May your journey bring you peace.