

Parashat Lech L'cha

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim – East Cooper Service

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(With gratitude to my colleague, Rabbi Brigitte Rosenberg)

This past Monday, October 11th, was National Coming Out Day, a day that encourages gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people to publicly affirm their sexual orientation. In conjunction with this significant date, and in light of the suicides of at least five gay youth in the month of September alone, Reverend Debra Haffing, an ordained Unitarian minister, wrote an open letter in *The Washington Post* to all religious leaders stating:

It's time for us to come together as religious leaders and say, "Enough." I'm hoping that next weekend from your pulpits you will come out with your support for GLBT youth and adults.

Reverend Haffing's challenge was an important one—one which I hope my rabbinic colleagues have accepted and to which I wish to respond this evening.

This week's Torah portion, *Lech L'cha*, begins with God's command to Abram: "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you." Commentators have often noted the strange Hebrew formulation of *lech-lecha* – which consists of the command "go", an adverb, and the suffix "you." What is the precise instruction, these commentators ask. Is it "go by yourself," suggesting a journey one must take alone? Is it "go to yourself," suggesting a very personal journey of individual identity?

Reb Kaplan, in *Torah Queeries*—a LGBT Torah commentary—understands *lech-lecha* as both:

We must all continually pursue a journey toward our true selves. This journey can be challenging—which I honor—but it is a journey worth taking.

Abram is asked to leave not one, but three separate things. He is told to leave "*artzecha*"—your land, and "*molad'techa*" which most closely translates as "that which birthed you"—and also to leave "*beit avicha*"—the house of your father.

In order to start a new life, centered around a new belief system, there were three things Abram needed to release. In order to truly go forward, not just physically but also emotionally and spiritually, he would have to release three bonds from his past.

For many of us, and especially for LGBT people, our process of growing into ourselves and growing into having faith in ourselves requires that we release and free ourselves from forces from our past and from our upbringing, particularly if those ties came with

messages that we were required to be heterosexual. And, perhaps not surprisingly, many of us travel far from the places of our birth to find places where we can flourish.

For too many, this is the course they feel they must pursue—that a journey toward one’s “true self” is necessarily one that must take those who are GLBT away from their family, their home, their spiritual community. For all who feel this to be true, I want you to hear your rabbi say, loudly and clearly tonight—it need not be so; it is not so!

It’s true that Judaism has not always been tolerant, much less accepting, of homosexuality. Rashi, the 11th century sage, states that although the sin of theft was the straw that broke the camel’s back during the generation of Noah, homosexuality was one of the root causes of the flood in last week’s Torah portion. The story of Sodom and Gemorrah, in next week’s portion, is commonly interpreted as a condemnation of homosexuality, as well. And, of course, the verse in Leviticus 18 regarding a man lying with another man as he would with a woman, when taken out of context, is frequently cited as hard and fast proof that homosexuality is a sin. These interpretations are part of our textual tradition.

I believe we can be proud that the Reform movement has amassed over 40 years’ worth of documents—official movement statements, excerpts from articles and speeches, resolutions and Responsa—that reflect a willingness to struggle with this tradition and reach a place of greater openness and acceptance.

In 1977, we passed a resolution calling for equal human rights for all regardless of sexual orientation.

In 1987, the Union for Reform Judaism adopted a resolution supporting the inclusion of gay and lesbian Jews in our congregations, a decision reaffirmed in 1989 with a call to Hebrew Union College to discuss the inclusion of gay and lesbian Jews in the rabbinate. (To that point, there had essentially been a “don’t ask don’t tell” policy at the seminary and throughout the rabbinic placement process.)

In 1991, the American Conference of Cantors issued a statement affirming the inclusion of gay and lesbian investees in the cantorate.

And our teens in NFTY, the National Federation of Temple Youth, have adopted many resolutions welcoming LGBT teens into youth group, calling for study of the topic of sexual orientation, and even concerning Boy Scouts and their national policy of not allowing homosexual men and women to serve as den leaders and scout masters.

Each of these policy statements is significant and, again, as a movement we can and should feel proud. Yet, “at this moment in our social history,” as a congregant recently wrote to me, “against the backdrop of recent events in the news,” it’s not enough. “*Please* do something for ‘the gays,’” he wrote. Resolutions and official statements are not enough.

Reverend Haffing’s open letter cited the following statistics:

All of us have teens and young adults who are gay or lesbian in our congregations, many who are suffering in silence and are at risk. A study done by my colleague at the Christian Community, found that 14% of teens in religious communities identify as something other than heterosexual. Almost nine in ten of them have not been open about their sexuality with clergy or other adult leaders in their faith communities. Almost half have not disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents. And non heterosexual teens who regularly attend religious services were twice as likely as heterosexual teens to have seriously considered suicide. We have known for more than thirty years that at least one third of all teen suicides are committed by gay youth.

Our young people are dying because we are not speaking out for them. We must ask ourselves honestly, do the LGBT youth in our community know that we welcome and support them? How would they know? Would they come to me as their rabbi to talk about these issues? Would a LGBT youth feel welcome in our congregation's youth group? What have we done to make sure that these youth know they are loved and supported, that we understand that they too are God's children?

What if this weekend, Reverend Haffing continued, all of us told them from our pulpits how heartbroken we are by Tyler Clementi's suicide and that we want to make sure no young person in our community would ever feel such despair? What if we were to tell our teens and young adults that we love them, that God loves them and that we will stand with them in the face of bullying, victimization, and harassment? What if we were to not only invite them, but *beseech* them to come to us or other trusted adults if they are even remotely thinking about taking their own life.

This is the message I want all of our youth, all of our adults—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, straight or otherwise—to hear today. Yes, like Abraham, you may be embarking on a challenging, albeit important, journey. And there may be those along the way who will impede your progress, who mock and harass you for becoming who you are to become, being who you are to be. Please hear me say tonight, and share this message with all those who are not here tonight, but whom you feel need to hear it—we'll put it on the temple's website next week to help you do just that: Your temple community embraces you on your journey. We stand by your side in loving support. And we stand *against* all who would have it otherwise.

John R. Cepek, president of PFLAG wrote the following in an "Open Letter to Youth":

My wife and I have two sons. We think that they are the best kids in the whole world. They're very different, with very diverse personalities, talents, and interests. One of the other things that makes them different is that one is straight and one is gay.

But the important thing is this: we love them equally.

That's why it is so painful to us to read the reports of kids out there who have killed themselves because somehow they felt that their lives were not equal or worth living, either because they were mercilessly bullied and teased for being different, or tortured because they were gay.

That's why I'm writing to you today. There have been a lot of people out there sending some important messages your way. They've been telling you that there are people who can help. You should listen to them, because they're right.

But as a dad, I want to send you one more message. Here it is: there are people who love you and accept you for who you are right now. Whether you're gay or straight, it doesn't matter.

I hope that your parents are among these people. I hope that in the same way I'm proud of both of my sons, someone is proud of you just because you're there and because you're alive. You deserve that, no matter who you are or how different you feel.

But if for some reason you don't feel like you've got that support, I want you to know that there are parents and families who love you. Maybe they're people you already know. Or maybe they are people like me who you haven't met—but people who want to support you.

I can't imagine a world in which either of my kids felt like life wasn't worth living because people rejected them, and I have a hard time imagining what some of you might be going through right now. But please know that you're not alone. There are people to talk to, and families and friends nearby who will support you and your own family, too. You deserve to be happy, you deserve to be alive, and you deserve to be loved. Lots of people agree with me on that.

“Trust me,” he says—and I say, as well.

This coming Wednesday evening, at 7:00 pm, there will be a candlelight vigil organized by AFFA (the Alliance for Full Acceptance) and We Are Family. The hour-long event is to stand in remembrance of those who have committed suicide as a result of harassment and bullying, to stand in solidarity with those of all sexual orientations, and to stand against and decry bullying and intolerance of all kind. The event, which organizers believe will be the first time LGBT advocates, the Jewish community, the African-American community, and schools and educators have all come together in common cause—we are proud to announce—will be held at KKBE in our temple garden. Speakers will include Dr. Herman Blake, humanities scholar-in-residence at MUSC; Lisa Herring, student support services director for the Charleston County School District; parents of LGBT youth; and both high-school and college students representatives of the Gay Student Alliance. There will also be a music presentation by College of Charleston students. Please join us, so that we might all answer Reverend Haffing's call.

The opening words of *Lech Lecha*, have spoken to so many throughout the generations—to all of us who have journeyed in our lives and hoped our life's journeys would lead us to blessing. And they inspired the well-known song, *L'chi Lach*. Rabbi Lisa Edwards explains that the song is particularly treasured in the queer community: The lyrics were written by Jewish lesbian feminist historian Savina Teubal (OBM) and Debbie Friedman for the *Simchat Chochmah* (“Joy of Wisdom”) ceremony that Savina devised in celebration of her 60th birthday. That's a strong enough connection, but there's more—the ceremony took place, and this song sung by Debbie

Friedman premiered, at Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC) in Los Angeles, the world's first gay and lesbian synagogue, which was founded in 1972.

As we sing together this Shabbat, we affirm the strides we have made to be an inclusive, welcoming, loving community—and we commit ourselves to doing even more going forward. For only together, celebrating our full diversity, can we be the greatest blessing we can be. Amen.