

Shabbat Shalom, everyone, and thank you Bobbi for the kind words of introduction. It is truly my honor and pleasure to be standing before you today on the bimah of the synagogue where I was named, attended preschool and Hebrew school, became Bat Mitzvah, participated in USY, led youth high holiday services, taught preschool, and where my mother became Bat Mitzvah.

This place has always meant so much to me, even when Hebrew school meant waking up “early” on Sunday mornings or missing out on Wednesday after school activities—I loved the people, the community, playing in the Klezmer band and listening to Hazzan Leubitz’s voice during services.

I haven’t always been sure that the Temple Beth El community would love me as much as I loved it, however. When I started to come out as lesbian at the end of college, I decided to keep that part of my identity private from the temple community. I still visited for Seder and Purim, still led youth discussions on High Holy Days, but I felt like there was a part of me that wasn’t appropriate to share with the people here. While I started giving talks in medical school on how to improve healthcare for LGBTQ patients, how to change forms and language and--yes--even bathrooms to be more inclusive, I hid the personal side of my activism from my Temple Beth El family. I didn’t know how my queer identity fit with my Jewish identity, and vice versa. Jews have a long history of being “othered” by the outside community, as do LGBTQ individuals, but many times queer Jews have felt othered by the LGBTQ community for being Jewish, and by the Jewish community for being queer.

Queerness and Judaism have gone together for a long time, of course, possibly since Biblical times depending on how you read the Bible. Scholars have interpreted the book of Samuel to express the love between David and Jonathan, as it reads in Chapter 18, Verses 1-3: “Jonathan’s soul became bound up with the soul of David; **Jonathan loved David as himself**. Jonathan and David made a pact, **because Jonathan loved him as himself**.” When Jonathan dies, David grieves, saying “Your love was more wonderful to me than the love of women.”

And in the book of Ruth, the story of King David’s great-grandmother, Ruth makes a speech to her mother-in-law Naomi that sounds more like marriage vows than a conversation between daughter-in-law and her deceased husband’s mother. “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; **wherever you sleep, I will sleep**; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the LORD do to me, **if anything but death parts me from you**.”

In pre-War Europe, queer Jews were often visible contributing members to science and culture.

Magnus Hirschfeld was a German Jewish physician and sexologist born in 1868 who practiced in Berlin. He was an outspoken advocate for sexual minorities and founded the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, which is considered the first advocacy organization for homosexual and transgender rights. His research has formed the basis for the flashback scenes in the popular TV series *Transparent*, and his work directly inspired the formation of the earliest gay rights organizations across the globe.

In WWII, queer Jews were doubly persecuted, for their religion and for their sexual identity. They were also leaders of the resistance, though many of their stories have been lost.

Gad Beck, who died in 2012, was considered the last publicly gay Jewish Holocaust survivor. He was born in Berlin and came of age during the Nazi period. As the son of an Austrian Jewish father and a German, Protestant-born mother who converted to Judaism, he used his connections in the gay underground to help other Jews hide and escape to Switzerland during the Holocaust. As an active Zionist, he helped many Jews emigrate to Palestine after the war, and later lived in Israel for many years. He died at the age of 88 at his home in Berlin.

Fast forward to 2006, when the Conservative Movement began allowing the ordination of openly LGBTQ rabbis, and to 2013 following the Supreme Court's ruling in favor of marriage equality, when the Rabbinical Assembly released a statement saying, "Judaism views marriage as a sacred responsibility, not only between the partners, but also between the couple and the larger community. Our Movement recognizes and celebrates marriages, whether between partners of the same sex or the opposite sex. We therefore celebrate today's decisions on gay marriage by the Supreme Court."

In December 2017, the youth group of the conservative movement, USY, elected its first openly transgender board member at its International Convention. And today, we celebrate Temple Beth El's first ever Pride Shabbat.

So you may be wondering at this point, why the history lesson? Well, today we read Parshat Dvarim, the first Torah portion in the book of Deuteronomy, the history retelling by Moses. For the Israelites to move forward into the Land of Canaan, they must understand where generations before them have been. So too must we understand how prior generations of Jews have treated the queer individuals in their community as we move forward into a new generation of pride and acceptance.

Summary of Dvarim

Moses' speech to the Israelites begins with recounting the journey in the wilderness, the incident of the spies, and the selection of judges. These are his last words to us before we enter the Land of Canaan without him. And they aren't such wonderful words. Moses gives us tough love in this parashah, reminding us of our transgressions and rebuking us for them. Essentially, this parashah is constructive criticism.

Rebuke

The sages discuss this idea of **rebuke** and criticism from three different perspectives. Rabbi Tarfon, a great sage of the Mishnah, read this passage from Dvarim and observed, "I doubt if there is anyone in this generation who *is fit to* rebuke others." He recognized that no one is so perfect that they are above criticism themselves or in a position to correct others.

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said, "I doubt if there is anyone in this generation who is able *to receive* rebuke." He noted that people often do not see rebuke as an act of love, and instead they become defensive and cannot learn from what the person is trying to tell them.

Lastly, Rabbi Akiva, added the third part, "I doubt if there is anyone in this generation who knows *how* to rebuke." This last piece emphasizes that criticism must be a message that is delivered with humility, with kindness, and it should be useful and specific.

So how does an imperfect person give constructive criticism with love? TBE hasn't always been a place where we can have Pride Shabbat, and the Jewish community hasn't always been accepting of its LGBTQ members (and vice versa).

Bringing my girlfriend, now fiancée, to TBE for High Holidays was a scary step. I've always dreamt about living in Rochester as an adult and following in my mom's footsteps to be President of TBE, sending my kids to Keshet and Hebrew School...but there aren't many models for that kind of lesbian family at Temple, and I was nervous about that.

Since our engagement was announced, however, there has been an outpouring of love and support from the TBE community. We are planning an aufruf at TBE for before the wedding, and this invitation to speak at Pride Shabbat is a huge milestone. Our acceptance here makes me proud of the life I have built for myself, and the incredible partner I have found to share that life with. The Pride Shabbat service is an incredible symbol of acceptance and welcome to the Jewish community.

As Temple Beth El celebrates Pride Shabbat, I feel renewed *pride* in this congregation. This generation of TBE members is taking us forward, and the next generation of congregants will

continue to grow and nourish this spirit of acceptance that is sweeping through the synagogue. While we look to the future, we remember the past, and I want to express my gratitude to the previous generations at Temple Beth El for what they created and built, and I want to honor all of the activists and changemakers who made this day possible in Conservative Judaism but are not able to see it come to fruition, just as Moses was not able to enter the Promised Land.

“Tradition and Change” is often considered the motto of Conservative Judaism, and our synagogue is no different. We honor our traditions but adapt as times change, as Supreme Court rulings are overturned, and as we come to understand identities and bodies and relationships differently.

This concept of tradition and change is addressed in Parshat Dvarim. Moshe describes the appointment of judges to help guide the people and explains the qualities of a good judge. He emphasizes the importance of patience in judgment, and being open to hearing the same case multiple times if new information emerges. Being a good judge means being open to having your mind changed, and treating everyone equally in judgment, whether they are from your community or from an outside community. He says, “Hear out your fellow men, and decide justly between any man and a fellow Israelite or a stranger. You shall not be partial in judgment: hear out low and high alike.”

This sort of open minded judgment is a cornerstone of Conservative Judaism, which has evolved with us while maintaining our sacred rituals and halachah. And as the world changes around us, we must all try to judge others fairly, whether they share our identity or come from a different group. Same sex marriage, something we now celebrate, used to be something we feared.

TISHA B’AV

As we celebrate this milestone today, and as the Rochester Pride celebrations kick off next door at Cobb’s Hill, we are also about to begin Tisha B’Av, the saddest day on the Hebrew calendar. We remember the destruction of the First and Second Temple and more recent massacres of the Jewish people. We reconcile this sadness with this day of celebration like so many things in Judaism which require us to be both sad and happy, to remember our troubled past and have hope for a bright future.

CONCLUSION

At Devarim Chapter 1, Verse 9, Moshe says to the people Israel “I cannot bear the burden of you by myself” and goes on to delegate the task of settling disputes and helping the community to grow and move forward. He knew when to ask for help and how to best select his helpers—

the two spies he had sent to the land of Israel who came back with positive and hopeful reports of the land, people who had faith in the dream and vision of Eretz Yisrael.

While I am immensely honored and joyful to speak to you today, and to be an activist for LGBTQ health and inclusion in my community, I cannot bear the burden by myself. I am so lucky to share the burden of this work with the incredible Temple Beth El LGBTQ Inclusion Committee, queer activists and incredible allies who have faith in where we are going as a movement.

Like the people standing before Moses, we stand on the other side of the Jordan, on the threshold of change. We will raise the children of our community to be wiser than we are, to know the history of our people, and they will continue our work of moving forward and creating an ever more loving and inclusive community. Grab hold of faith and in our ability to walk proudly into the Promised Land. Shabbat Shalom.