

Parashat Shimini
Friday, April 1, 2005

By Jeff Bernhardt

Dvar Torah Men's Havurah Shabbat Parshat Shmini April 1, 2005 Recently I was reflecting on the first time I walked through these doors---you know the doors I mean. The ones that should be so wide as to receive all who long for friendship and narrow enough to shut out pettiness and enmity. The ones that we pray will be the doorway to a richer and more meaningful life. When I think about walking through those doors for the first time I recall my trepidation, though that word "trepidation" feels a bit too poetic to describe the experience. I was plain old scared. Of what was I scared though? I mean, yes, the unknown. And seeing as I tend toward at least the middle of the anxiety disorder continuum, that would only multiply the normal fear of the unknown. I was surely afraid of what was on the other side. Afraid of who might know me from some other part of my life, a fear that seems less rational to me now, these some 15 years later. I think I may have on an unconscious level been afraid of meeting the part of myself that I didn't know, the yet undiscovered part of myself.

In the interest of full disclosure, the first time I entered those doors was with a friend. Well, maybe friend isn't the right word. We had met on a chat line and after meeting in person discovered that we were both friends of Abraham. Entering through those doors with him was a bit surreal...actually very surreal, but not as scary. Being introduced to the lesbian rabbi at the time also was a bit surreal, especially the part where I said my name aloud within these walls as I introduced myself.

It was a while before I came back again. That time was after a weekend in the early 90s at Hilltop Camp in Malibu where I participated in the regional conference of the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations. (There was no BT at the end of GL). I have completely repressed all the fears and anxiety that encompassed the decision to participate in that event except to say that I met some dear people on that weekend including our friend, now Rabbi, Amy Sapowith.

This visit to BCC was alone. I entered those doors alone hoping it would welcome one with cares to unburden and yet undetermined hopes to nurture. It was a tall order to fill though for how could my hopes be nurtured if I still was unclear on what those hopes were. My first 13 years in LA I was living in walking distance of BCC so clearly it was bshert, meant to be, that I should find myself walking through those doors just a few years into my LA experience. This second visit, I knew better what to expect on the other side of the doors and was pretty sure I would be met by some now familiar faces from that recent Shabbat conference.

And, as it says in Genesis, at the beginning of the Torah, And there was light. That was the beginning. It was the beginning of my discovery of community. It is likely safe to say that some people go their whole lives without finding community. And it may be for some that

they search and search and are never able to find it. Perhaps they have an ideal in their minds and are unwilling to make compromises. Or perhaps it does not exist where they search. I think it's difficult to find the ideal community that is 100 % what you look for and 100% mirrors your values and ideals. And perhaps a community that does that is in fact not the ideal community. Perhaps a community that is 100 % who we are does us a disservice by always giving us the thumbs up sign when we look at ourselves in the mirror.

Others, though, I think never find community for they never look for it. In thinking about community I understand it begins with the realization of the need to feel connected and belong and allowing for the belief that this connectedness and belonging is okay, that it does not take away from our sense of independence but has the ability to help us grow into ourselves in more complete and sometimes unimaginable ways. It allows us to become the person we never knew or imagined we were. Alice had her looking glass we have our doors.

Taking the first step into community may be difficult but supplementing those steps with the efforts to get to know the community, putting one's hand out and accepting another's hand can be life altering. The risks we sometimes take for the reward is great. Today we celebrate the seventh anniversary of the Men's Havurah a community within our community. I want to say that there would be no seventh anniversary were it not for Jerry Nodiff's steadfast commitment to maintaining the Men's havurah. Yes, others most decidedly deserve credit as well for the work they do hosting potlucks, sending emails, planning programs. But Jerry most certainly has seen that the Men's Havurah has continued to exist and grow. It is not always an easy road but one hopes that the bumps along the way make a community stronger. It is significant that the Men's Havurah is celebrating it's seventh anniversary and is simultaneously re-examining itself and looking at ways to be stronger. It is our seventh-our sabbatical- year, our seventh day of creation. Just as G-d stepped back from creation and evaluated it on the seventh day, just as we are encouraged to step back from our weekly creation on the seventh day and evaluate the works of our week, now too the Men's Havurah steps back and examines where it is and what it would like to become. This is a healthy and invigorating process encouraged from the earliest days of creation.

In this week's Torah portion, Shmini, we have the strange episode of the death of two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Abihu. We are told that they offered a strange fire before G-d which G-d had not commanded them. Because it is followed with a prohibition regarding priests not drinking, some believe they had entered the sanctuary under the influence. Others suggest that it is because they did what they did without consulting Moses or Aaron.

In reading this portion with the idea of community in mind, I wondered whether they were punished for not acting as part of the community, but instead going it on their own without recognizing that taking such actions might impact the larger community. Later in the portion we read about the animals that are to be considered kosher. Again, perhaps this informs us about community. We often struggle with why we are commanded regarding eating some things and not others. Perhaps we learn from this that part of the definition of community is creating common norms. Perhaps just as laws of kashrut (however one observes or chooses not to observe them) are an identifiable tie that binds,

when we join community we become connected through common values and experiences. Perhaps through repairing a Holocaust Torah or through praying together or through creating stained glass windows or through marching together as gay Jews through the streets of Los Angeles on a Sunday in June or through celebrating a potluck dinner or through a purple pushke that sits in our living rooms or through a town hall meeting after a November election.

In Chapter 2, verse 5 of Pirkei Avot (Ethics of our Ancestors), Hillel cautions: Al tifrosh min haTsibur (do not separate yourself from the community). In the commentary I read on this verse it said: Identify your individual life with that of the community and do not stay apart from it. With all due respect to Hillel I prefer that way of saying it: Identify with your community. Become part of your community. Take part in your community. Take responsibility within your community.

It is nice to know that the doors are there but it is by becoming part of a community with all the action that the verb becoming implies, that those doors truly will lead to a richer and more meaningful life. Shabbat Shalom.