

By Josh Wayser
Leviticus, Parashat Achare Mot
4/28/00

When the e-mail went out first asking for volunteers to lead services tonight, I jumped at the chance. I had really enjoyed the service leader training, something I encourage all of you to do, and I was excited about the chance to lead services, particularly with my dear friend and our most treasured of chazans -- Fran.

But my excitement cooled somewhat when I asked Rabbi Edwards for the torah portion for the week. For I had forgotten that we are in Leviticus, and as luck would have it, my portion is Achare Mot, which includes the text "A man shall not lie with a man as he lies with a woman." What a sentence. What a bad idea.

Perhaps there are those amongst us who would grasp at the chance to take on such text. There is, of course, a joy in quoting back other portions of the torah that seem to conflict with this text or in hearing an explanation why that language is no longer relevant today. And I have heard and watched many learned scholars do both within and outside this temple.

But, for me, taking on the text is problematic. I feel defensive in doing so, as if I have to justify my existence or explain why I get to belong at the table. And I guess I don't feel like doing that anymore. Its just not a conversation I want to engage in.

Why the resistance? Because it undercuts who I am. So let me ask my straight friends who are here tonight, do you ever feel that you have to justify your existences as a heterosexual person, at least anywhere outside of BCC. Do you, my straight friends, ever worry or fear that God or your fellow mortals might condemn you for being straight? I suspect probably not.

To me, this isn't an abstract issue. I think it has resonance in our every day lives. I give an example to illustrate my point.

I was, and remain, deeply involved with, and committed to, the vision planning process that we are going through. And one of the topics that engendered a considerable amount of conversation amongst the committee, some of it quite spirited, was the issue of children. One of our members was older and she mentioned that in her generation, having children was just never an option for lesbians. It was something that wasn't even thought of, let alone dared.

The statement itself wasn't, of course, news. But what was so critical to me was that it forced me to look at this person in a whole new way. For I had never thought to think of her as a potential mother. Did she ever want to have children? Is it hard for her now to see younger members with children? Why hadn't I asked her these questions? Why had I cut off a part of her?

What really troubled me though was that I had seen this person through the glasses of the heterosexist world. In other words, even though I should have known enough to look at her from all angles, by not thinking about her as a potential mother, I had accepted in a way the straight view of her. I had let someone else define the way I looked at, and thought of, her.

And there my friends is the rub -- when you live in a world where you a disliked minority, the majority's view of you sinks into how you see yourself and even how your fellow minority members view you. Its brilliant in a way, its how the majority keep us down. By treating us as marginalized,

they perpetuate the marginalization by having us buy into it, even if we think we are resisting.

I know this to be the truth in my own life. I've been thinking about children a lot lately and whether I want to have my own. And in a way, I had to come out a second time, this time as a potential father to myself.

So much of my initial hesitancy about having a baby was caused by voices inside my head. Voices that weren't really mine but that had become mine over time. You know the voices, the ones that say "Oh gay male life isn't conducive to raising a family". Or "you're really not mature enough to do this". Whose voices were those. They weren't mine – I have an extremely family friendly, and all too mature of, a life. But somewhere inside of me, I had these voices of doubt. Voices that undercut my confidence in myself. Voices that were not my own but that I had bought into over time.

So that one sentence -- "A man shall not lie with a man as he lies with a woman" is really quite powerful. Because as we hear it, I fear a part of us can't help but allow ourselves to be defined by its limitations; defined by its hate. When you have to explain yourself; when you have to justify yourself; the majority has won. Because in forcing you to do so, they continue their hegemony; they continue their domination.

So for tonight, at least, I'll pass on the opportunity to explain that text. Instead, I'll reject it – plain and simple. I am not saying that's what all of us should do. Indeed, there is much to be said for explaining it away. But just for tonight – just once – I don't want to explain. Just for tonight – I'll listen to my own voice.

And as I close my drash, I can only ask you to look inward. To listen to the voices in your head. To hear the ones that are truly yours and to reject, to throw out, the ones that are not yours. See yourself my friends, hear yourself, in a way that is true to your hearts and souls.