

**Rabbi Lisa Edwards****UCLA Hillel panel "Trembling Before God"—Homosexuality and Judaism"****Sivan 9 5761/May 30, 2001****along with Rabbi Benay Lappe, Rabbi J.B. Sacks-Rosen, Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller, Rabbi David Rue**

Many Jews today are just coming down from the Jewish Holy Day of Shavuot, which began this past Sunday night. I deliberately said, "coming down" from that Holy Day, perhaps I should have said "coming out" from that holy day. Shavuot, among other things, commemorates the Jewish people's coming out from slavery in Egypt and moving to the next stage in our development as a people, to the moment described in the Book of Exodus when we received the law. This is the moment in which the Jewish people gathered together at the foot of Mt. Sinai, as witnesses to God's revelation there at the top of the mountain, witnesses to the thunder and the lightening and the smoke and the loud blasts of the shofar, and God's own voice declaring the words that have come to be known as the ten commandments.

It is a scene whose echo is heard in the title given to this panel discussion this evening, "Trembling Before God," a title taken from a wonderful, if sometimes depressing, new documentary about gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews by a dear friend and talented filmmaker named Sandi Dubowski. By the way, we in LA will have an opportunity to see this film at Outfest, LA's queer film festival in July. But let me read you a few verses of the scene in Exodus from which our title comes:

"On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the shofar; and"...here it comes: "all the people who were in the camp trembled." The Hebrew there reads, va-ye-kherad kol ha-am – "all the people trembled. And Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain." [Exodus 19:16-17]

On the holy day of Shavuot it is customary to read that scene. It is customary to imagine ourselves there, coming out of the camp, led by Moses, to stand together at the foot of Mt. Sinai to hear God declare the ten commandments. Imagine yourself, a trembler among hundreds of thousands of other tremblers, there at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

I think the documentary and this panel discussion are called, Trembling Before God, for a kind of sensationalist reason – we can talk more about this later, if you like – but I think the immediate implication of the title is that people who tremble before God are people who are afraid, afraid because they fear they are leading sinful lives, or at the very least because they are doing things God wouldn't approve of; and they also tremble before God because in fact they take the word of God, and the teachings of Judaism seriously. This is why the ultra-Orthodox in Israel are also called, kharedim, from this same word and scene va-khe-rad, those who trembled at the foot of Mt. Sinai, about to hear the words of God spoken in God's own voice.

But like the kharedim -- and any Jews who take Judaism seriously -- Jews don't just tremble before God because we are afraid, but also out of awe. Again, imagine yourself standing there at the foot of Mt. Sinai, witnessing thunder and lightning and smoke and noise and the words of God. We don't tremble only out of fear, but also out of awe and amazement that we are among the people invited to be witness to such an extraordinary moment, invited to receive such extraordinary gifts as the Torah, and as the whole tradition of Judaism.

In Jewish tradition we learn in many ways, and from many different texts and teachers. I know Rabbi Lappe, and probably others on this panel tonight are going to speak to you about that, but I want to point out a couple of ways and a couple of texts in particular that we learn from. One of these texts is of course the Torah, the five books of Moses, an excerpt of which I just read from. Another is midrash, a particular method our ancient teachers used, and we still use today, to further expound on the stories and verses of Torah. The word Midrash comes from the Hebrew root meaning "to seek out," and it does just that: it attempts to seek out further meaning in the stories we read and study, and midrash often does so in the form of adding more story to the stories told in Torah.

I want to tell you a couple of midrashim about this part of the story in Torah, the story we were just re-reading over the last couple of days, in our celebration of the holy day of Shavuot. The midrash tells us that every Jew who was ever born or ever will be born, even Jews who don't become Jews until they are adults, was present at Sinai. We all were witness to what happened there. But as at any other event to which there are many witnesses – despite the fact that we were all there, we didn't necessarily all see and hear and understand the same things. [By the way, I spent the last 6 days serving on a jury in a criminal trial in downtown Los Angeles, and believe me, I can testify to the fact that witnesses to the same events don't all see and hear and understand the same things!]

Although we were all at Sinai, says this midrash, in fact, we each received only one little piece of the information that was distributed there. Some versions of this story say we each received one letter of the words latter written in the Torah, some say we each received one word, some say each received a piece of Torah, whatever "a piece" means, but, these versions agree, whatever piece of Torah we received, it was a different piece from the guy standing next to you, which means that it will take all of us, working together, to piece the Torah into a whole. Your piece of Torah is as important as any other person's piece of Torah, and it takes all of us --- which means it takes heterosexual Jews, gay Jews, lesbian Jews, bisexual Jews, transgender Jews, all Jews – to make a whole Torah, to make a whole Jewish people, no one is less important than another, no one's vision is less significant than another one's vision.

A second midrash. In the book of Exodus, a few chapters later, when Moses goes up that same mountain and then comes down with two tablets of the law in his hands, the Torah says, the tablets were "inscribed on both sides – they were written on one side and on the other" [32:15], and our teachers ask, what does this mean, "written on one side and on the other"? One midrash answers that God inscribed one side and Moses inscribed the other. And this, says the midrash, is in order to teach us that it takes God and humans together to tell the story. And another answers, God inscribed one side and Moses the other, in order to teach us that there are two sides to every story.

In 1972 (nearly 30 years ago), a group of gay, lesbian and bisexual Jews living in Los Angeles got together and began to organize a synagogue. A synagogue founded in the beliefs that every Jew should have equal access to the tradition, that each of us stood at Sinai – an equal member of the “tribe”—and that every human being ever born is created, as the Book of Genesis teaches us, *betzelem elohim*, in God’s image, and should be treated as such by every other human being. That congregation, founded almost 30 years ago, is the one I serve today as its rabbi (you’re all invited to visit, by the way; in fact Los Angeles is blessed to have two synagogues serving primarily the g/l/b/t Jewish communities, and you are all more than welcome at both congregations). My congregation, the one founded in 1972, is called Beth Chayim Chadashim, House of New Life, and it was also the first synagogue of its kind in the world, and the first, just 2 years after its founding, to be accepted as a fully participating member synagogue of a mainstream movement of Judaism – the Reform Movement. This is the same movement of Judaism that throughout the 1970s and ‘80s encouraged their congregations to develop policies of inclusion of gay and lesbian Jews, and that, in 1990, created a policy inviting gay and lesbian students into their rabbinical school and encouraging gay and lesbian rabbis to come out if they hadn’t already. It is the same movement whose rabbinical organization voted last year to invite their members to officiate at the wedding ceremonies of same gender Jewish couples. The Reconstructionist Movement of Judaism, by the way, developed these same policies, in fact they did so well before the Reform Movement did so officially.

There are of course many reasons why the Reform and Reconstructionist movements of Judaism have been so welcoming of gay, lesbian, bi, transgender Jews. Among them, though, I think, is that the Jews of these movements, as well as some others, understand what I alluded to earlier (and what some my colleagues will address more in their talks), these movements understand the ways in which all Jews have an equal share in our tradition.

In the documentary “Trembling Before God,” a reference is made to a traditional blessing that a Jew is supposed to say upon seeing a huge crowd of Jews gathered together. In fact, I only learned this blessing from seeing the documentary and then studying a bit more about with my colleague, Rabbi Sacks-Rosen. The blessing one is supposed to say upon seeing a huge gathering of Jews is this: “Blessed are You, Holy One, knower of secrets/the one who knows our secrets.”

I learned later that this blessing appears in the Talmud, the sacred collection of the teachings of our earliest sages, in the section called Berakhot [58a, near the beginning], “Blessings,” where it says: Our Rabbis taught: If one sees a crowd of Israelites, one says, Blessed is the One who discerns secrets, for the mind of each is different from that of the other, just as the face of each is different from that of the other. Ben Zoma once saw a crowd on one of the steps of the Temple Mount [in Jerusalem]. He said, Blessed is the One that discerns secrets, and blessed is the One who has created all these [people] to serve Me.

God knows who we are; God created us in God’s own image; and God helped us to create a tradition – Judaism – that understands that each of us is unique, and that each of us has an equal responsibility – if we should accept the challenge -- in shaping Judaism, which is an ever-growing, never static tradition; just as each of us has a responsibility and an

opportunity -- if we should accept the challenge -- in shaping and living a Jewish life.

Thank you for inviting me here today.