

Parasha Ki Teitzei

(Deuteronomy 21:10 – 25:19)

(with Haftarah Isaiah 54:1 – 54:10)

by Steve Lieder 9/16/05

Before I begin, I would like to thank you, the congregation of Beth Chayim Chadashim for your love and support over the all too short 5 years I have been a member of this synagogue. Since my arrival here I have been enfolded in and lifted on the wings of love of this congregation. As I prepare to leave Los Angeles and move to Corvallis, Oregon to accept the position of Coordinator of LGBT Outreach and Services at the Pride Center of Oregon State University, I will carry the fondest and most cherished of memories of my time here at BCC with me:

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- <>The two Steves trying to teach me how to pronounce the name of King Ahasuerus at my first Purim megillah reading;
- Arlan and David's assistance with my *hatafat dam brit*
- The beit din and mikvah at University of Judaism
- <>Torah study with Rabbi Lisa, my friend and mighty woman of valor, Davi, and countless others,

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- <>Talmud study with Rabbi Benay and Sabina Fried... who's your chevrotah, baby?
- <>The shared and collective grief born by all on September 11th
- The joy of so many weddings and babies
- the delicate beauty of Fran's angelic voice, the BCC Choir, and musical stylings the Gay Gezunt Band
- the Hanukiot bonfires with hook and ladder companies standing by just in case
- the controlled chaos and high drama of the High Holy Days
- the Bridges of Understanding trip to Germany and standing on the soil of my ancestors while surrounded by the men and women I love
- all the potlucks... especially the potlucks
- and AARON KATZ...

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To borrow a line from this week's Special Haftarah, "For the mountains may move / and the hills be shaken, / But my loyalty shall never move from you, / nor My covenant of friendship be shaken/ - said God, who takes you back in love. (Isaiah 54:10). I love you and will miss you all, but my heart (and my membership dollars) will continue to dwell with you here in L.A.!

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This week's parasha, Ki Teitzei, which begins with the words, "When you take the field against your enemies," doesn't deal with the laws of warfare as the opening lines might lead one to believe. Instead, the portion discusses a wide ranging variety of laws on a seemingly unrelated series of topics, among which are treatment of female war captives (let her mourn her family before forcing one's self on her), treatment of women who are no longer loved by their husbands (polygamy is okay), treatment of defiant sons (stone them to death), burial of executed criminals (do it before sunset), consideration for the property of others (we are the keepers of our neighbor's ass); unnatural mixtures of people, animals, crops and textiles (bad, bad, bad); consideration for your neighbor's animals (if you neighbor's ass falls, do not hide yourself from it...pick it up!), **parapets on rooftops to prevent accidental falls (build them!)**; hiding one's self from a neighbor in need (ahahah...don't you do that); wearing the opposite gender's clothes (not even on Purim??); fringes on garments (wear 'em proudly!); oh, and it concludes with the commandment to blot out Amalek, for they attacked the weakest members of the Israelite community when we were fleeing from Egypt.

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In addition to the lesson that it probably isn't such a good idea to study Torah without the Rabbi present to point out that the Talmud negates some of the harsher stuff I just mentioned, most people would look at this list and ask themselves, what

was God thinking when dictating this hodge podge to poor Moshe? None of these 72 mitzvot (or commandments - aren't you glad I gave you only a partial list?) seems to be related to any of the others. Well, Rabbi Plaut, my favorite biblical scholar (besides our own Rebbe Lisa), says that these commandments "aim at impressing moral values on the social structure so that Israel may...be worthy of being God's people."

Another biblical scholar, Birgit Sacher, a Jewish educator in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, carries Rabbi Plaut's analysis further, observing that it is the process of watching out for our neighbor's property and well being that forms the basis of our civilized society. It is this consideration for others and their belongings that establishes the mutual trust necessary for the formation of a community.

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In her analysis, Sacher cites Rabbi Pinchas ben Hama in D'varim Rabbah, who explained that the connection between seemingly unrelated commandments involves an overall attitude to life, "Wherever you go and whatever your actions, holy deeds will accompany you," he said. It is possible to go through life like a robot, unaware and indifferent to our surroundings. Torah acknowledges this human possibility and asks us to transcend it. It may not be natural to return lost articles, but we are taught that it is right in the sight of God, and therefore should be our regular practice. For us Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people, it's especially important that we not only NOT walk through life in a trance, but that we actively guard against hiding ourselves – especially in the closet. It, too, must become our regular practice.

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In another scholarly analysis of this week's parasha, Rabbi Yohanna Kinberg, a congregational Rabbi in Olympia, Washington, observes that, with the Hurricane Katria disaster of last month, we failed to build the parapet mentioned in the Torah portion around the city of New Orleans, and as a result, many people died. News reports from numerous sources over the past three weeks have revealed that many government agencies knew that any hurricane bigger than a category 3 to hit the New Orleans area would probably produce a deadly disaster with far reaching national implications. Despite this widely disseminated knowledge, the Federal government reallocated the funds necessary for the re-enforcement of 40-year-old levies and flood walls along the Mississippi to other purposes... some say to fund ill-advised tax cuts, others say to fund the even more ill-advised war in Iraq. Regardless of where the funds went, they didn't go where they were needed most... the parapet around our metaphorical roof on the Gulf Coast. <>

We, all of us, let the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast down because we failed to keep an eye on those who do our bidding – our government. To paraphrase Rabbi Kinberg, we let slip through our fingers the mitzvah, the holy act, of preparing our family, our neighborhood and our nation for what it means to live in and with nature, in and with society. <>

G-d may have been singled Amalek out for undying contempt for attacking the weakest members of Jewish society, but what does this say about those Jews who left the weakest members of the community behind to fend for themselves instead of

carrying them when they needed help on the flight from Egeypt? What does this say about us as Americans in times of great calamity? Have we really become a nation of all-for-one-and-all-for-me? What about us as an LGBT community? What segments of our community – the poor, people of color, the disabled, children - are going unsupported and invisible because of our neglect? I don't know the answer to these questions, but in the wake of Katrina, I'm giving them great thought. I hope you will, too. <>

This week is one of the Seven Weeks of Consolation, the name given to the 7 weeks between Tisha B'Av when we mourn the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and all of the other terrible calamities that have befallen the Jewish People over history, and the beginning of the Days of Awe. This week, too, is a week of consolation for the people affected by Hurricane Katrina as they begin to take stock of all that they've lost and begin to gear up for the long and difficult road back to normalcy...if that's even possible. This week's Torah portion reminds us that, as a community, it is our duty to console them, to help them replace, to the extent possible, what they've lost. It's the least we can do for having collectively failed to demand that our government build that parapet which ultimately lead to the deaths and suffering of so many. <>

This week, too, is an opportunity for us as a community and as individuals to console those modern souls we left behind for Amalek to pick-off. This week I wrote a check to the United Negro College Fund, identifying myself as a gay white man who

wanted to help those historically Black colleges and universities damaged by Hurricane Katrina to rebuild their damaged campuses and provide scholarship money for students. I wrote another check to the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles for hurricane relief, and another to the Rainbow World Fund for the same purpose. I'm telling you this not to brag, but to remind you that there are hundreds of organizations who need our help as they help those ravaged by the storm, by passive racism, and by poverty. I expect to continue to support these organizations later in the year and on an ongoing basis, so that Amalek doesn't have the opportunity to retake the upper hand in our lives or the world. <>

To borrow one last thought from Brigit Sacher, Hurricane Katrina was a wake-up call akin to the shofar blast announcing the fast approaching Days of Awe. We should remember that the mitzvot of the Torah are meant to help us fight indifference and to infuse our human actions with a reflection of divine holiness. Things become valuable only when people become invaluable. <>

I urge you, in your giving of tzedakah for the coming Days of Awe, to be extra generous with the BCC Tzedakah Council, Mazon - the Jewish Response to Hunger, the American Red Cross, the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles, or any other organizations of your choosing, as they all work to relieve the suffering of the many who have lost so much to Amalek. <>

Shabbat Shalom.