

**Parashat Chaye Sarah
November 5, 2004
Post elections 2004**

**Drash by Rabbi Lisa Edwards
Beth Chayim Chadashim**

“I guess if you live long enough, you see everything,” my mother, may her memory be for a blessing, is famously said to have said at Tracy’s and my wedding, less about watching her daughter under the chupah with a woman, and more about all the same gender couples slow dancing at the party afterwards.

But hey, my mother not only lived long enough to see that, she lived more than long enough to be appreciative of what she saw - not only of the relationship that Tracy and I have, but also of the dancing at our wedding, and of the fact that two Reform rabbis officiated at our ceremony (appreciative both that my brother was one of the rabbis, and also appreciative that the other rabbi wasn’t related to us!).

Had my mother lived long enough to see the lines of couples lining up to marry in San Francisco last winter and/or the exit polls at last Tuesday’s election, I have no doubt which side she would have supported in the culture wars, though I also suspect she would have briefly, anyway, fallen for the scapegoating that is going on in the aftermath of Tuesday. She would have been - as a gut response - among those “supporters” who can be supportive and also say, maybe you shouldn’t push your agenda so hard or so blatantly, maybe this election devastation is partly your fault. Do you have to be so visible? Can’t you just quietly live your life the way you want to? In short, “Why ask for trouble?” was one of my mother’s mottoes.

My mother died 3 years ago this week - she got to see 9/11, but not all that much of its aftermath. She died the week we were reading this week’s Torah portion, Chaye Sarah, where we read of the deaths of Judaism’s 1st matriarch and 1st patriarch, for both Sarah and then Abraham die in this week’s portion, ironically titled, “The life of Sarah.”

So my mother might have been - at first - among those who bought the scapegoating argument - who might have been willing to say our fight for the freedom to marry was part of what lost Kerry the election. I wonder how many of us thought that too as we listened to the exit polls about moral values, and the analysis of them, as we stared disbelievingly at the map marking the 11 states that passed measures to ban same gender marriage. How many of us were willing - or still are willing - to think we made a mistake, that we shouldn’t have asked for marriage - not yet, or not so loudly anyway? That it cost not only us personally, but that it cost Kerry the election?

Fran and I attended a meeting this morning of glbt community leaders - about 40 of us sitting around thinking about what to do next (you’re all invited to come do that here, by the way, next Tuesday night at 7pm). Someone there handed out a quotation by Martin Luther King, Jr.: “There really is no white backlash,” said Dr. King, “because that gives

the impression that the nation had decided it was going to solve this problem.....The backlash is merely the surfacing of prejudices, of hostilities, of hatreds and fears that already existed. . .”

I like Dr. King’s point - that to call it ‘backlash’ “gives the impression that the nation had decided it was going to solve this problem.” It’s true in the case of same gender marriage too. The nation as a whole has certainly not yet decided “it was going to solve this problem.” It’s not new hatred or fear we’re seeing, it’s the expression of hatreds and fears that were there all along just below the surface. I know what my mother would have said to that: let them stay below the surface. Why give “them” reason to bring them out? But it’s hard to live quietly and also live the way we want and desire and have every right to live.

Next week is the anniversary of Kristallnacht, a term that while we were in Germany we learned was no longer politically correct, having been labeled that by the Nazis themselves, and too pretty a name -“Crystal night” -- for what it was: a night of destruction against Jewish businesses, looting, rioting, glass breaking, synagogue burning, and the removal of 20,000 Jews to concentration camps [see A History of the Jews by Paul Johnson, p.485]. The story promoted of that night was that the rioting happened spontaneously on the heels of the assassination in Paris of a German Diplomat by a 17-year-old Jew. One of the history books we were given in Germany calls the night Reichskristallnacht, to make certain we realize the government was behind it, contrary to Hitler’s denials at the time, his suggestions that it was all spontaneous and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Am I comparing what’s happening here to Nazi Germany? I’m just saying watch out when groups get singled out as the cause of something the way gays and lesbians this week have been singled out as the reason Bush got the votes he needed. Be careful when the group itself or the allies of the group begin to buy the explanation. It’s a short few steps from that to something much worse - to allies splitting up instead of joining together, to a willingness to let one group take the heat, or to sell one group’s needs in exchange for ...for what? My point exactly.

The results of this election are providing us with many mixed messages, as well as much sorting to do.

“I guess if you live long enough, you see everything,” said my mom. Good and bad. Amazing and unbelievable. Our ancestor Sarah, whose death we read of this week, lived to be 127 years old, old enough to see herself give birth to a son at age 90 -amazing. Old enough to see that son nearly sacrificed by his own father on an altar, at God’s request --unbelievable. In fact, though the Torah doesn’t explicitly say so, the midrash tells us that the near sacrifice of Isaac was what killed his mother. Not hard to believe really. How do parents survive the sacrifice of their children to God -- when they and their grateful nations send them off to war, supposedly to fight on God’s side, for example?

In the weeks and months and years to come, we’ll find out more about this election, and the very scary divisions in this country - the popular vote was 51% to 48%, don’t forget, decisive yes, probably decisive even given whatever voter fraud is discovered or goes undiscovered, decisive but hardly a mandate, no matter what the winners will tell us. The

weeks and months and years to come will tell us more - but without wasting a minute, we need to continue to do our work in order to get what is ours by right - by human right, by the rights still given us by the constitution. We are up against some difficult challenges - as Jews, as queers, we always have been. Let's not let difficulty stop us in our tracks.

Remember Dr. King's words? "The backlash is merely the surfacing of prejudices, of hostilities, of hatreds and fears that already existed..." Dr. King said those words 38 years ago to the day (11/6/1966), at Howard University: to call it backlash, said Dr. King, "gives the impression that the nation had decided it was going to solve this problem..."

This election wasn't won by Bush because of a backlash to our request to be legally married. Our civil rights may not be a problem that the nation has decided it is going to solve, but it is a problem we've decided we're going to solve, no matter the election results, no matter the setbacks, no matter the difficulties - that problem as well as many, many others that are on our plate as Jews, as queers, as Americans or as people living in America, as lovers of Israel, as lovers of God, as world citizens, as caring and concerned human beings living in the world and charged with the challenge to make it a better place.

Dr. King spoke his words while delivering a speech called "the 7th Annual Gandhi Memorial Lecture," which reminds me that Gandhi himself gave us some words of advice that would serve us well right now, as we regroup and recharge and review our priorities, our needs and our desires:

"Be the change you wish to see in the world," said Gandhi, and that, no matter who is in the White House or acting out anywhere else in the world, is something each one of us can do, and something that we, as a community, can do together.

On this Shabbat and on Tuesday night, and in each day in-between and ever after, let us embody the changes we wish to see in the world.

Shabbat shalom