

Rosh Hashanah 5765
Drash by Rabbi Aaron Katz
September 16, 2004

Beth Chayim Chadashim
Los Angeles

L'Shanah Tova. Thank you, Lisa, for the kind introduction. Last year, on Yom Kippur, I ended my drash with these four words: "I am not afraid!" This was a powerful and true statement about my feelings and my future in coming out to you and to the larger community.

From last Yom Kippur until today has been for me a year of listening and learning. And I have come to realize that my feelings about not being afraid, it's not quite so easy. BCC, the community, my family - all of them - they have so many different rules. And I need to learn so many new things so that I will know what to say, what to do, how to behave - as well as what not to say, what not to do, and how not to behave.

Especially with my English! Like sometime I was saying "passion" and people were thinking "patience," and sometimes the other way around. I know that I have a lot of Passion, but not so much patience, and I need to learn more patience in my passion!

Believe me, it is a difficult thing for me to listen and learn - to understand the new "me", or to understand "me and BCC" or "me and the community", and - Oy vey - "me and my family!" But I know I need to change my behavior; I cannot live here the same way I was doing for the past 35 years.

Listening is one of my biggest difficulties, yet to listen is one of the most important features in Judaism. We say Shema Israel, Hear O Israel. And when we listen carefully, we close our eyes, we use our imagination, we put ourselves in the position of hearing our inner voice. Still, it depends on us to make sure that we are truly listening.

On Rosh Hashanah, the mitzvah, the most important action on this day, is to listen to the shofar! But why do we need to do this? And why a shofar? Why not a trumpet or other instrument? To answer these questions we need to ask another question - what IS a shofar? The obvious answer is that it's a ram's horn, but that's just the beginning of the answer. The instrument we blow on Rosh Hashanah actually has two names: Keren and Shofar. Keren means the outside of the ram's horn, the material that it is made from. Shofar is the horn's second name. And this name refers to the inside of the horn, the place where the shofar's voice is coming from.

The ram uses the keren for protection, but also to show his power to others. He cannot use the inside of the horn, the shofar, only the outside. But we Jews need both a keren and a shofar. They are two different things, two totally different things, but in one instrument. Keren - the outside, the strong material, and shofar - the inside, the strong voice. On Rosh Hashanah - we use the shofar, the inside of the horn, we listen to the deep voice from the inside. Here in LA we need our keren, our material life - our outer protection. Our cars, our nice homes, our clothes. But too many of us are running after these material things, the keren, that we forget to listen to our shofar, the voice of our imagination, our inner place of peace and calm. Maybe we don't have the time, or maybe we are afraid of hearing what our inner voice is telling us. Hey! What are we doing? What are we doing with ourselves, with our community, with our family and friends? Which type of tikkun olam are we doing?

Today we are living in a time of big controversies, not only because of the US presidential election, but also the debate in our society, even in our community, about the right of gays to marry. We see a time of greater acceptance, and the possibility of equality. And so, we come to a complicated and difficult question. Why do we need BCC? Why must we have an LGBT synagogue at all? If we want acceptance, then every synagogue, without discrimination, must accept LGBT members! Then why BCC?

Because BCC is BCC! Like the ram's horn, it is both our keren - the place we can feel comfortable and protected, and our shofar - the place to listen to our voice and learn about our tradition. Just as important, and for some of us, perhaps more important, it is the place of "dating," the place where we can meet others like ourselves! We are BCC and BCC is us. Members, the leadership, the clergy - each of us has the responsibility to do our best, so that BCC will continue to become a strong ram's horn. The executive committee, the board of directors, the many BCC committees - all must also understand the needs of our community. They must make it possible to create a fantastic place for the members! And the members, we need you to be more active, to not only come once per year or three hour per year or something like that. We need you to come some Fridays, some Saturdays, attend some cultural, social action, or fun event. And we need you to help plan the classes and parties, the social action programs, the holiday observances and interfaith exchanges.

Look today how many we are! Think what a strong voice we have today!

Today, Rosh Hashanah, is the day that everybody thinks of as the day of judgment, Yom Ha Din! The day when God will decide our future, our days, and our life! A day when everybody is afraid - what will the judge decide about me?! But wait - in the Torah, we don't find the idea of Rosh Hashanah as the day of din, of judgment, only as Yom ha Truah, the day to sound the shofar. It was our rabbis in the Talmud; they tell us that Rosh Hashanah is the day when the world is judged.

If so, then what is this legal case that the rabbis say will be judged? Are we the defendant, is God the prosecutor? Wait a moment ... Nobody asked us if we wanted to come here, to this place and this time, with this gender and this sexual orientation. It was God who decided to create us, to give us life. Like our parents, they decided to create us, for whatever reasons they had. They didn't ask us, they just created us! Because of this, parents have an obligation to their children. They must give them an education, and do what they can so their children have the tools for a good and productive life. This is the law!

I say that God also has the responsibility to give us what we need to be a good, productive person. We are coming on this day, on Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the creation of the world, to tell God - You created us, You created this world, You have also a responsibility. And God has done this - God has given us the Torah and the mitzvot, the tools we need in order to make for ourselves a good, creative and productive life. God has given to us the possibility to be a "mensch."

In one of the most important Tefillah of this day, the Unatona Tokef, we say "uve shofar gadol itaka, vekol demama daka ishama" "The great shofar is sounded, and a still small voice is heard." But if we are blowing the shofar gadol, how and why do we hear kol demama daka? Because on this day we are listening to our inner voice, the voice of our soul. When we hear via the shofar, our soul mishtachrer, becomes free, independent. So we can be who we are.

Nachmanides, he says in his book, "Shaar Hagmul - Gates of Compensation," that on Rosh Hashanah judgment is not how we will be judged after death, not about whether we will go to Gan Eden or Gehenon, but about how we will live our days here and now! And while we are here today, are we afraid? Are we listening to the voice of our inner shofar? From the last Yom Kippur until today, a lot of things have happened... things I need to confess... and now I am afraid!

(pause)

Last Purim was the first time that my children were able to visit me in LA. Before their arrival, I was in a panic. Bitya, my oldest daughter, with her son, and my two small children, Tehila and Dael, would be spending several weeks together with me in my new apartment. Oy vey! I was out at BCC, but not to my family. What would I tell them? How would I act with them? What would they think when they saw me in my new life in LA? Was I afraid? Use your imagination.

I decided to be me ... but in the way that I am now. So for the first Shabbat I invited a lot of my BCC friends for Friday night dinner. And I told my children that we would have a nice peaceful Shabbat at home with a lot of my friends, because I really wanted to introduce my "new friends" to them.

My youngest daughter, Tehila, she is 13 years old, and the day before Shabbat she asked me directly, very clearly, "Abba, are you gay???" I was in shock! How did she know to ask me this? I was suddenly very conscious of how I sat and how I used my hands. Was it my manicured nails and highlighted hair? Or was it my leather pants? I didn't dare question her. All I could do was ask her, "What did you say?"

And she answered to me, "Do you love men or women?"

Even if you don't believe that I am a very diplomatic person (pause), this is what I said to her, "Tehila, love is love, and I like to be in love. And I don't see what love has to do with gender, love is love." This was a nice answer, but of course not the correct one; I had run away again...

The next day, when so many of friends were in my home, in the middle of the dinner, Tehila whispers to me, "Abba, all these people, they are gay???"

And I say to her, "Not all of them, but a lot."

Why did she ask me this question? First - because, for her, like for a lot of people, she could only see the stereotype. And now, on Shabbat, she was seeing people like her, like her brothers and her sister - like her mother, but also like her father! Of course, she also asked me this question because she wanted to know the truth about me. But I couldn't tell her the truth. I was afraid.

Tehila wouldn't give up. The next day she told me this: "Abba, you remember my question?" I nodded.

"You know... I don't care, because you are my father and I love you because of that!"

She had given me the answer! My daughter, a 13 year old young lady, she gave me a lesson about life! if you are how you are, be you! Stand tall and be strong outside like a keren, and also listen to your inside voice, listen to your shofar! Be you! Respecting yourself is the most important thing; if we respect our identities, we will receive the respect of the society.

But that was not all. My older daughter, Bitya, on the last day, she told me, "Thank you for the invitation."

I said, "Bitya, I need to thank you!" and she asked me why?

"Because," I said, "You accept me like I am!"

And then she said to me, "Abba, you are our father and that is the point! It's not a question of sexuality, it's a question of personality, of who you are."

You might think that with my children's acceptance, I had nothing more to fear. But there was still one big uncertainty in my life. You see, all this time I'd been living in LA, I was here on my Swedish visitor's visa, which only allowed me to stay in America for 90 days at a time. So every three months, I had to leave the US for a short while before returning. And each time I came through immigration, I became more and more afraid that they wouldn't let me back in, that they'd see how much time I'd already spent here and realize that I wasn't just a tourist

anymore. More than anything I wanted to make my new life in LA, but how? After Sept 11, immigration has become very difficult.

But I had emunah; I had faith. God had brought me to LA and BCC, had found me a community where it was possible to live both as a gay man and Jewish one. And it was my BCC community that came to my rescue. Friends and students here discovered that there was such a thing as an R-1 visa for religious workers. If I could find a religious institution to hire me, then I would qualify for this R-1 visa, which would allow me to live and work here for years.

The place I wanted to be was BCC, but how to do that was the question. First, there was no money in the budget for extra staff; second, even if some money was found, what job could I do at BCC? Thirdly, I know my English isn't perfect, and that I'm not the most patient person in the world, especially when I get excited about something. Maybe there would be people at BCC who wouldn't want me working here. Even though I've learned a lot in the years I've been in LA, I was still doing a lot of mistakes! Last and most important, unless Lisa and Fran approved, I could forget the whole thing.

Was I afraid - what do you think?

But my community came through for me. Lisa and Fran not only approved, they became some of my biggest supporters. Some BCC members made it financially possible for BCC to hire me and the BCC board was willing to take the risk. So together we designed a position for me. I am grateful for the board's and I am proud to have the title, and I love the title, of scholar-in-residence.

But I wasn't safe yet. Now came the truly scary part. I had to return to Sweden and apply for my R-1 visa in person at the American Embassy. There seemed to be 100 forms to fill out, 1000 questions to answer. Proof that I was a rabbi, proof that BCC was an IRS approved religious organization, proof that they were offering me a job that paid enough to support me, proof that I had been a religious worker for the last 2 years.

Oy veh - how was I ever going to explain what I had been doing with my life for the last two years? What would the embassy's reaction be when they read BCC's letter head - the first gay and lesbian synagogue in the world? Would the part-time position BCC offered me be enough to satisfy the INS? Many of my papers were from Israel, in Hebrew. Who would translate them?

If my visa wasn't approved ...To make matters worse, I made my plane reservations for Sweden before learning that I needed to make an appointment with the embassy in advance; and by then the earliest available interview was one day before I was scheduled to fly back to LA. Was I afraid? I don't know. But I was very, very nervous.

The first week in Sweden passed quickly. I got my papers translated by the current chief rabbi and caught up with old friends in the Jewish community. I even found the courage to come out to some of them, and was so happy when they welcomed me with open arms. All in all, my time back in Sweden was very nice.

The day of my appointment, I was awake at 5 AM. I had stopped highlighting my hair, and I dressed in my most rabbinical-looking dark suit. My very professional briefcase was full of papers, every kind of supporting document my immigration attorney thought I might need. You see, because hardly anyone qualifies for an R-1 visa, he had never had such a client before.

I arrived at the US Embassy one hour before my appointment, the first of the day at 9 AM. I told myself that this was it - if God truly wanted me to move to LA and live an openly gay and Jewish life, then my visa would be approved. If not ... well, then I'd go back to Germany, back to my old professor's job in Berlin. I'd forget about ever working as a rabbi again.

My heart was pounding when the receptionist called my name and I stood up to go meet my fate. That's when the miracle happened. The person waiting to interview me was someone who knew me, a woman who had worked at the US Embassy for so long that she remembered me from the many embassy functions I had attended during my 14 years as Chief Rabbi of Sweden. She was so happy to see me again, and so excited that I was going to be working for a synagogue in America. She hardly asked me any questions.

I tried to give her my documents, but she insisted that she didn't need them. All she wanted was my application, and of course, the application fee. Then she asked me when my flight to LA was, and when I said it was the next morning, she told me to come back at 2 PM. My visa would be ready then.

I couldn't believe it. I wandered around Stockholm in a daze, sure that when I returned to the embassy, someone would tell me that there had been a mistake. But there was no mistake. I took my R-1 visa in my trembling hands and went back to my room to pack. On the way I stopped to phone a couple of friends in LA, friends who had been almost as anxious about this interview as I was, friends who would be so happy to hear my news that they wouldn't care that I was calling them at 5 in the morning.

When the security people at the airport asked about my return flight to Sweden, I proudly showed them the visa that meant I didn't need a return ticket. And all the way home - yes, LA is my home now - I kept looking at my new passport, at the first official photo of me without a beard, at the page with my visa on it, the visa that says R-1 worker for Congregation Beth Chadishim. And when I arrived at LAX, dressed in shorts, a tee-shirt and flip-flops that I usually wear when travelling so I can easily pass through security, the guard smiled at me and said, "You're really a rabbi? You don't look like a rabbi."

So starting this month I am Scholar-in-Residence for BCC! But I am still afraid. I am afraid that I will not be good enough, that I won't meet your expectations! Our Rabbi Lisa, she is teaching me, and directing me in such a way that my work here will be successful. We are working very hard to create Ohr Chayim, a place of learning for us and for our new generation.

When God give us the blessing before we entered the land of Israel the torah says: "ki et asher yheshno po imanu omed hayom lifnei G' ve et asher einenu po imanu hayom" God makes the covenant "with both those who are standing here with us this day before God and with those who are not with us here this day." If this text sounds familiar it's because we read it on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, and here at BCC we will read it again on Yom Kippur. Those who are not standing with us this day are the next generation, our children, and those LGBT people who have not come yet and need our support. We need to work not only for us, but for them too, because we have a responsibility to them.

This Rosh Hashanah, some of my children they are here in the congregation - my older daughter Bitya, with her husband Tzvi and my grandson Ben, and my middle son David, who is in the Israeli Army. I am very proud of you! I am very lucky to have all of you! I know that the life was and is difficult, but that is life! My grandfather always told us, "Enjoy the life! Because this is the secret of life!" I am happy to have all of you with me here at BCC, and so proud that you accept me, accept my friends and accept my community.

When I asked my children if they had any questions for me, Bitya wanted to know if I was dating someone, if I'd found a potential partner yet, and how he is. I tell her that I'm still looking. My son-in-law asked me if BCC is a Reform synagogue, and when I answered him that it is, he says, "Then the rabbi must be a woman and a lesbian and also playing the guitar." So I tell him that he is correct, except that the one who plays the guitar is our Chazzan, Fran. And he says, "I knew it!"

And my son David, when I ask him if he will enjoy the Rosh Hashanah services with us, he tells me: "If the service is fun...of course!" Children, I love all of you and I hope that you will find BCC a home like I have found here!

Last year, when I stood here on BCC's bima, I knew that at the previous Rosh Hashanah, I never could have imagined what would happen to me that year. And from last Rosh Hashanah to this one, I never would have imagined that today I would be on staff at BCC, a legal immigrant living in a fabulous apartment, and that my own children would be sitting in the congregation in front of me.

I want to thank you, the community of BCC, with all my heart, for making this miracle happen, for choosing me to be your Scholar-in-Residence. And I want to invite you, encourage you, to come study with me this year. Let me open up new worlds of Judaism for you. Come on Yom Kippur to hear my introduction to Kabbalah, which, believe me, has nothing to do with red strings, magic amulets or Madonna - excuse me, Esther. Then join me and Rabbi Lisa on Thursday nights when we let the Kabbalah be our guide as we explore the weekly Torah portion. And if Thursdays don't work for you, or if you really want to study Kabbalah, we will be having a joint class with MCC on Wednesdays in November. And after we've finished with Kabbalah, come with me as, together, we learn to swim in the waters of Talmud and navigate our prayer book.

And when I talk too fast, don't be afraid to let me know so I can slow down. When you don't understand my English, don't be afraid to ask me to repeat what I said. When you have a question, don't be afraid to interrupt me with it. Don't be afraid - we will listen and learn together.

Shana Tova.