

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5769

September 29, 2008

Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC), LA

“What I did on my summer vacation by Rabbi Lisa Edwards”

Good yontif and Happy birthday! Oh? . . . thinking it's not your birthday? thinking silly [wabbi] rabbi, you meant to say happy new year!

Well, actually, according to midrash - Jewish legend - God began to create the world on the 25th of the Hebrew month of Elul, meaning that tonight and tomorrow – being the 1st of the next month, the 1st of Tishrei – is the anniversary of the creation of Adam and Eve, the anniversary of the 6th day of creation, which would make tonight and tomorrow Adam and Eve's birthday – and therefore the birthday of all human beings – hence – happy birthday! Oddly, and midrash is often odd, a different midrash says that Rosh Hashanah in that same year – the year of the creation of the world – was also Adam and Eve's wedding day, and that God prepared the Garden of Eden for them as a chupah, a wedding canopy. How can this be? asks the midrash, a birth day and a wedding day for the same people on the very same day? and think about it a moment, you already know the answer: Adam and Eve came into the world fully grown – says the midrash, they were created as 20 year olds.

Now, some of us might question whether 20 year olds can be called fully grown, but you get the point. Unlike the rest of us, those first human beings came into being already seeking or some might say, already wanting, a spouse.

You've heard arguments, I'm sure, against same sex marriage that bring Adam and Eve into the picture. “If God had intended two men to marry, God would have created Adam and Steve, not Adam and Eve.” And some of the opponents of same sex marriage will argue against it by reasoning that God's intention for marriage is procreation, and two men or two women can't procreate. The gayby boom right here at BCC puts the lie to that argument – just last year at Rosh Hashanah we blessed 4 new babies in our congregation (Sonya, Palmer, Nathan, Shaynah) and tomorrow morning we'll bless 5 more (Indie, born to Stacy-Colleen & Kris last year, and Benji - although he is in San Francisco with his moms Cate & Vanessa we still count him as one of our own, then there's Josh & Richard's 5th child – Isaac, and BCC's newest addition - twins girls – Evan & Rose - born just 11 days ago to Erik &Max).

BUT even if we weren't multiplying so quickly at BCC, a closer look at Torah, at the book of Genesis, at the creation story itself will show us that God didn't invent marriage for the sake of procreation.

“It is not good for the human to be alone,” says God watching Adam with the other animals and realizing that's not enough for him.

Company, but not just company, companionship, an ezer k'negdo – “a helper corresponding to him” [Stone edition trans], someone to stay by you – we could spend hours exploring that term, but we won't do that tonight. It is not good for a human to be alone, I shall create human companionship, says God. [Genesis 2:18]

There is a different legend about Rosh Hashanah - this one says that on Rosh Hashanah God first conceived of the world, yet others say “gave birth” – during our shofar service tomorrow we'll hear a prayer about that – Hayom harat olam – the day of the earth's

conception, or the birthday of the world.

And yet another new year legend – that generations after creation - our ancestors Sara, Rachel and Hannah – all of whom struggled to become parents – all conceived on Rosh Hashanah.

At the very least – or maybe best – from all of these legends comes the idea of Rosh Hashanah as a time of beginning, of possibility, of love, a good time for marriage or at least a time to celebrate marriage – as a concept, as an institution, as a possibility, as one of many ways for human beings to find companionship – not to be alone.

Another good way not to be alone is to come into community, like we do at Rosh Hashanah as at no other time of year.

We come into community at Rosh Hashanah and remind ourselves of the pleasures and challenges of living in society. We enter because of shared values, and while here we often also discover our differences from one another, and we explore how to appreciate those differences, how, if society is to work the way God intended it – if we are to be company to each other – we need to learn to appreciate our commonalities and our differences.

It is not good for the human to be alone, said God. Let them live in company with one another.

Speaking of marriage, I've been to a few weddings this summer – anyone else?

Anyone recognize these words?

where you go I will go

where you lodge I will lodge

your people are my people

and your God my God

OR THESE WORDS?:

With you I make this covenant,

For I love you as my soul.

Journey with me in peace

And the Holy One shall be

With you and with me

If your summer has been anything like mine, you heard these words (or words with similar sentiments) spoken as words of commitment by couples to each other all summer long, as we stood beneath chupahs – wedding canopies -- in the synagogue and in the wedding cabanas at West Hollywood Park, under sun umbrellas by the ocean, in forests and on the beach, in public gardens, in our own living rooms, at Bed & Breakfasts and restaurants, in our own backyards - with the crowds sometimes spilling over into the neighbor's backyard too!

We heard these words of love and commitment, faith in God and in each other, spoken by men to men, and by women to women, and between women and men, marrying now that their friends can too, and all with tears in their eyes.

A couple hundred of you heard these words come out of my mouth on July 13, when I spoke them again to Tracy just as I had 13 years ago under our chupah right here in this

very sanctuary, and we heard Tracy say them again to me. Thank you for coming to our civil wedding! Thank you, Tracy, for marrying me – AGAIN!

I suppose it should come as no surprise really that so many same sex couples choose these biblical words to say to one another, as the Bible says in the Book of Ecclesiastes - “there is nothing new under the sun” – and those words of love and devotion: “where you go I will go,” “For I love you as my own soul” are both from the Bible, the first being words spoken by Ruth to Naomi, the other based on the vivid description of the love between Jonathan and David.

In fact, what seems a bit odd – does it to you? - is that through the generations countless clergy gave voice to those same biblical words inviting couples “to repeat after me,” and obediently countless grooms did so, speaking tenderly to their brides and their brides gently back to them. For generations these words of devotion and commitment spoken first by Ruth to Naomi - a woman to a woman; or that tender expression of love between Jonathan and David, and their certainty that God blessed their relationship, have long been taken as words used to declare oneself married to another.

We’ve all heard about the California Supreme Court’s historic decision regarding marriage [May 16, 2008]. I want to read you one pivotal sentence from the eloquent majority decision written by Chief Justice Ronald George:

“In light of the fundamental nature of the substantive rights embodied in the right to marry – and their central importance to an individual’s opportunity to live a happy, meaningful, and satisfying life as a full member of society – the California Constitution properly must be interpreted to guarantee this basic civil right to all individuals and couples, without regard to their sexual orientation.” [Hon. Ronald M. George, Chief Justice, for the majority in *In re Marriage Cases*, May 15, 2008, p.66]

Those phrases: right to marry, basic civil right – that’s what’s transformative about this decision – it doesn’t matter whether any of us choose marriage or not, it’s the fact that now everyone is included as equals in this central narrative – and if you question the presence of marriage in the central narrative - recall the midrash marrying off Adam & Eve on the very day they were created. Or think a moment about the traditional blessing Jews offer at the baby namings and bris’s of our children – a blessing that each child grow into a life of Torah, of marriage, and of good deeds – l’Torah ul-chupah ul-ma-a-sim tovim .

So right now one of the fundamental institutions of society is now as much ours as anyone else’s whether any of us choose to use it or not. You may not be interested in marriage, you may never be interested in marriage for yourself, but regardless of our marital status and marital choices and views on marriage, everyone’s status is different now – everyone’s status changes when what was once a privilege offered to some is now a right guaranteed to all. It’s about civil rights, and access, and the differences in how people look at one another, and come to understand the relationships they see and are a part of.

Although it took 30 days for the Supreme Court’s ruling to take effect, the lives of many of us in this room changed significantly from the moment the Court released its decision.

And the immediate result? All summer long all up and down the state of California, same sex couples raised their hands to testify the truth of the information on their marriage license applications; all summer long they vowed to one another their mutual promises of commitment; all summer long I and Fran (our cantorial soloist emerita) and the Honorable Judge Donna Groman (BCC member), and other happy officiants like us, signed our names to one legal California marriage license after another. I'll have the privilege of signing at least 36 California marriage licenses before election day on November 4.

And of the many weddings I'll be part of or attending before November 4, not quite half of them are of couples who already had a wedding or commitment ceremony, and way more than half are couples who have been together for more than 20, some more than 30, one even 50 years. Weddings are moving in a different way when the couples saying vows have been together for decades. Powerful...

Many of you remember Judge Jerry Krieger, his memory is a blessing, a founding member of BCC, and one of the first openly gay judges to serve in the state of California. So often this summer I wished Jerry had lived to see the day he could have signed a California marriage license for a gay couple. He used to laugh and sigh with me at the irony that the state of California authorized the two of us to officiate and sign marriage licenses – could even do so for a couple who had been together one day—but that same state of California wouldn't let either of us marry our own partners of so many years.

And I wish too that Rabbi Erwin Herman, z'l, had lived even if only a few more months so that he could have seen this summer. It was Rabbi Herman who, 36 years ago, responded enthusiastically when Rev. Troy Perry – the founder of MCC – the first gay and lesbian Christian congregation - asked him to be supportive of a group of gay Jews. And thus began BCC. With the support of his wife Agnes, it was Rabbi Herman who two years later encouraged BCC's founders to apply for membership in the congregational organization of the Reform movement, and then helped see to it that BCC was accepted on the first vote. That was 1974.

And tonight is BCC's 37th Erev Rosh Hashanah service – is anyone here tonight who attended that first service? Could you have imagined what BCC would become? What changes we would help bring about in society?

Listen to these opening paragraphs from writer Amy Klein's Jewish Journal article about this summer's marriage celebrations:

It's almost 9 a.m. on Tuesday, June 17, and the line at the West Hollywood Park snakes around itself, as some 400 people wait to obtain marriage licenses on this first official day that the State of California is issuing licenses to gay and lesbian couples (aside from one wedding on Monday).

Some men wear tuxedos, some men wear suits, a few women are in white (a few women are in suits), but most of the couples are decked out in California casual on this momentous day. By far the most interesting - and photographed -- group is situated in the middle of the line, holding up a white chuppah on bamboo poles and the banner of their synagogue: Beth Chayim Chadashim.

BCC, the first gay and lesbian synagogue, [this year celebrating its 36th anniversary] . . . has brought 10 couples here to get marriage licenses.

<http://www.jewishjournal.com/>

[religion/article/gay_rabbis_getting_married_and_marrying_20080617/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/religion/article/gay_rabbis_getting_married_and_marrying_20080617/)

Makes you proud, doesn't it? Our congregation is – as Davi might say –splat! in the middle of one of the biggest civil rights moments in our nation's history. Close to 40 BCC couples will marry within this 5 month period between June 17 and Nov. 4, and many more after Nov. 4 we hope!

Of course, it hasn't been all just celebration since June 17. As the import of the Supreme Court's decision began to sink in, many of us worried that some couples would rush into marriage just because we could, and for fear that our new-found right wouldn't last long. Especially when, shortly after the Court's decision was announced, the hateful Proposition 8 made its way onto November's ballot. The fact that we don't know what might happen to the legality of our marriages should prop. 8 succeed has certainly added to the numbers of same-sex weddings happening between June 17 and election day.

Though happily there are promising signs sprouting up not just on lawns all around town, but also in conference rooms and on conference calls:

A few weeks ago the Pacific area Reform Rabbis Association voted overwhelmingly to oppose Proposition 8.

Last week, the Southern California Board of Rabbis took a similar stand. It was the largest group vote the Board of Rabbis had ever taken – [120 of the 290 members voted], and 93% of those who voted, voted to oppose Prop. 8, including some of the liberal Orthodox members of our organization.

The organization "Jews for Marriage Equality" and its founder, Steve Krantz, has close to half of ALL THE RABBIS in CALIFORNIA signed on to a letter in support of marriage equality.

That's a lot of RABBIS! all over the state in favor of marriage equality. The fact that Jews are so vocal and that so many are in favor has a lot to do with how Jews understand human nature and our role on God's earth, and it also has a lot to do with tireless and visionary Jewish leaders like Joel Kushner, director of HUC's Institute on Judaism and Sexual Orientation, and Rabbi Denise Eger, who has been working on this issue for close to 2 decades. I feel blessed to be working beside and learning from so many extraordinary leaders in the glbt and in the Jewish communities! I wish I could thank all the people and organizations or even just list all the tasks that have gone into this accomplishment. Give me a few more hours and I would...

And of course it's NOT just Jews & lgbt folks by any means!

For example, on September 10, 2008 six senior California Episcopal bishops issued a statement opposing Proposition 8.[47]

All this good news might almost make us believe the headline from Newsweek columnist Anna Quindlen's June essay about gay marriage. She wrote:

Scream, shout, jump up and down. No matter. The gay-marriage issue is over and done with. The upshot: love won.

From the magazine issue dated Jun 9, 2008

"From her mouth to God's ears," goes the expression, but clearly God has heard already –

and blesses our relationships. Instead we say “from her mouth to the ears of the ones who fear us.”

And fear us they do, and so we must not get complacent. Prop. 8 asks that a simple majority of California voters vote to change the state’s constitution such that it would now read: “Only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California,” and in so doing “would eliminate this civil right [to marry] and write discrimination into the constitution.”

Polls and optimists aside, the vote hasn’t happened yet – and in the last decade our side has lost more than 30 ballot initiatives across the country, and we’ve lost before in California – remember that this Court decision came out of the success of Prop. 22 a few years ago.

As cheerful as Anna Quindlen and some clergy groups might make us, other religious groups are joining forces in support of Prop. 8 – some Orthodox Jews, Mormons, Catholics, and evangelical Christians – talk about strange bedfellows!!! -- And they are expending huge amounts of resources to support the passage of Prop.8.

But our team is now telling us that if we can win 3% of the undecided vote we can defeat Prop. 8. The other side is bringing 100,000 volunteers from out of state, and has exceeded our considerable fundraising by about \$5 or 6 million which is a lot of paid advertising. Those 100,000 are making phone calls, and going door to door to undecided and conservative households.

Even if you spend only one evening at a phone bank between now and the election, you could make the difference. It’s going to be that close.

And ask Tracy or Larry Nathenson or Barry Wendell – a phone bank evening is a fun evening. They train you, you meet people, you have amazing conversations. You’ll leave filled with enthusiasm. And they’re happening nearly every week night, and weekends too – some locations even have babysitting available!

There is literature on the tables in the lobby that offers opportunities to all of us to work on the No on 8 - the No on hate - campaign. And don’t forget too to talk in a cheerful and friendly way to every neighbor, co-worker, acquaintance, relative, friend you can to make sure everyone understands what’s at stake.

We’ve often said, “the personal is political,” but this summer the personal has never been more political. And this summer, the political has never been more personal either.

On June 16 Del Martin & Phyllis Lyon were the first couple allowed to legally marry in California. They had been the first couple to marry in San Francisco four years ago as well. Together for 55 years, on June 16, just minutes after 5pm, minutes after same sex marriage became legal in California, in front of dozens of witnesses at a touching civil ceremony officiated by their champion (our champion too) San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, Del & Phyllis, these pioneers of lesbian and gay liberation, leaders of our communities for decades, and already in their 80’s at their wedding, pledged their vows to each other saying yes to the question “as long as you both shall live?” Said Mayor Newsom at the reception immediately after the ceremony, “I think today marriage as an institution has been strengthened.” They knew at the time of their wedding that Del hadn’t much longer to live, and indeed, she died just 6 weeks after their wedding.

You can’t get much more personal, much more political, much more poignant than that.

Or maybe we can -- let's take a few minutes to see our BCC couples who are marrying this summer and fall . . . ever so many thanks to our own – AMAZING - Pam Postrel for putting this montage together.

(SHOW photo montage)

AFTER THE MONTAGE:

Thank you again so much, Pam – stand up.

What a blessing this summer has been for me and for our congregation in this - our 36th anniversary – double chai – twice blessed – for in Jewish numerology – called gematria – the number 36 connotes long life and good luck. What blessings have showered down upon us -- more than one wedding nearly every weekend and some week days; multiple aufrufs (blessings for the wedding couples) at so many Friday night Shabbat services, where smiling and tearful congregants link up to one another and to the brides & brides and/or the grooms & grooms and/or the bride & groom offering blessings on their heads and tossing sweetness at them in the form of candy. Such a blessing this summer has been – many are still dazed by the efforts that have gone into very fast wedding planning and amazed at the number of guests who say “YES! I’ll be there!” “I wouldn’t miss it!!!!” “What a blessing!” For me, what a busy blessing!!! What a tiring blessing!!! (a nap would be nice!) But more than that what an exhilarating blessing – I am filled with gratitude to be asked by so many of you to preside over these incredible moments in your lives. To be with you as you declare yourselves to be legally wed. Thank you all so much for the honor you have given me to stand with you at your weddings.

Would you stand please -- those of you who married this summer or will marry (whether or not I officiated), or whose marriages elsewhere – Canada or Massachusetts – finally became legal in California this summer?

[note at least a couple dozen couples stood, perhaps more]

And remain standing, if you would, and let people look at you - as though you were standing again under the chupah.

On this Rosh Hashanah – this anniversary of the creation of humankind, and anniversary of humankind’s first wedding – on this day in Jewish tradition of remembering the past and beginning anew, this day of infinite possibilities . . . may our love speak volumes, may our commitments at last be understood by all, may all who look upon us finally come to recognize the divine spirit – betzelem elohim – that dwells within each of us; and when we stand with our beloved – whether under a chupah or within our own homes or just out in the world -- may the veils finally fall from their eyes and may they behold not their own fears but our true feelings.

In this new year - at long last - may love indeed win.

Shana tova u'mtukha – a good year, a sweet year of love to us all.