

BAT MITZVAH DRASH

by Sandy Rubenstein
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Beth Chayim Chadashim

When I first approached Lisa about doing the drash tonight, I knew only that it was the Friday night before I was to become Bat Mitzvah. I had no idea it was Pride Shabbat. When I heard, my first response was, "Oh no, what am I thinking?" Then as is often my way, I thought about it and realized it was just right, that tonight, Pride Shabbat, would provide a perfect opportunity to bring together important aspects of who I am: as a Jew, a woman in a loving relationship with another woman, a member of the BCC community, a member of my family of origin and my family of friends.

Tonight I am going to share a more personal experience of Pride Shabbat. Some of you know that I belong to two synagogues, BCC where I have been a member for over 20 years and which I am proud to call my shul and Kehillat Israel, the Reconstructionist Congregation in Pacific Palisades. My work for the Reconstructionist movement led me to become a member of KI. Tomorrow, I along with 9 women 3 men and a 15 year old teenager will become B'nai Mitzvah at KI.

It was very important to me as part of my Bat Mitzvah experience to find a way to celebrate it at BCC. Preparing and giving my first drash here tonight with you is that way. And it is so who we are that I knew I could approach Lisa with this request and be certain I would be encouraged and supported and celebrated in this important step.

Tonight marks the end of the first day of Shavuot, The Feast of Weeks. Some of us spent all night studying, some of us didn't. Some of us find tremendous meaning in this holiday, some of us don't. Shavuot never meant a lot to me, certainly not as a child or adult. It was an obscure Jewish holiday that I came to learn was the festival of the first fruits (hmm) and the anniversary of the giving of the Torah. Most important to me, on erev Shavuot, 17 years ago, my 6 month friendship with Marie-Jeanne took a most fruitful, significant turn. I won't bore you with the details, suffice it to say we have a wonderful life together. But it has only been this past year as I learned my bat mitzvah portion would be from Exodus, 20, from the ten commandments, the portion traditionally read on Shavuot that I decided I wanted to understand what this holiday was about.

I came to understand that Shavuot is an event crucial in our Jewish history and in the history of civilization, that the giving of the 10 commandments sets up a system of how to measure justice, it provides the guidelines of how to build a society based on certain now accepted values. It represents the partnership between God and human beings, the communal experience of receiving the Torah.

Now, I knew Shavuot celebrated the giving of the Torah at Sinai but what did that have to do with me? I did not believe in God, I did not study Torah, although I had had a long and secret

desire to do so. I always had a respect for and perhaps felt a bit intimidated by people who studied torah, read and discussed the weekly portion, people who got all excited and impassioned about some obscure portion of text, trying to discern if a Hebrew word meant this or that. Part of me thought, Why are they wasting their time on this?

This has no meaning. And another part of me was envious. I yearned to understand the meanings, to feel the excitement in reading and dissecting a text. Somehow through the 2 year process of preparing to become Bat Mitzvah, I have come to taste that excitement. I still often wonder about the relevance of some of these texts to our lives today but I have come to understand that figuring out what does and does not have relevance is all part of our search for meaning. During this time, I gained some insight, some knowledge and a hunger and desire to learn more about our tradition. It became unacceptable to me to just say the Hebrew words of our prayers. I want to know what they mean as I say them. What are we saying when we say the Shma or the Veahavta or the Kaddish? My heart and mind have opened during this time to allow another part of me to emerge. It is very exciting and at the same time confusing and somewhat scary.

So what you might ask does this have to do with Pride Shabbat? Everything if pride means expressing all of who you are, if it means embracing more of yourself as a Jew, a lesbian, gay man, bisexual, heterosexual or transgendered person. Did I leave anyone out? It means expressing pride in being a whole person. When we can find ways to express all parts of ourselves we can be proud of who we are. Some people wonder why we would seek out a synagogue that has as a central part of its founding mission, the outreach to gay and lesbian Jews. We seek out such a shul because it encourages us to be part of community, to explore and express our Jewish and our queer identities in an accepting and supportive environment. It encourages pride in all aspects of who we are.

I am proud to be a member of BCC and have gained pride in myself as a member of BCC. BCC promotes pride through the opportunity of unlimited possibilities. Possibilities for growth, experimentation and self expression. Possibilities for Harriet Perl and Jesse Jacobs to create non sexist inclusive language in our prayer book more than 25 years ago. Possibilities for members such as Jerry Hanson, Davi Cheng, Haim Ainsworth, Shari Fern Katz and Victoria Delgadillo to create beautiful stained glass windows for our shul. Possibilities to study torah for the first time, to give a drash or to lead a service. Possibilities to explore issues related to sexuality and literature.

Possibilities for Robin Baltic to create an event like the great chefs or for me to form and chair nashim l'nashim. Possibilities to create a community where women and men are equal partners, gaining mutual respect for one another. Possibilities for skill building and gaining new knowledge, possibilities to be a leader, a member of community, to be valued equally for who you are whatever your financial means. BCC provides possibilities to learn and sing and pray and grieve and celebrate with a community led by our gifted clergy Lisa and Fran and our lay leadership. BCC encourages pride in who we are and provides the opportunity to "come out" in the best sense of the term.

In a sense Shavuot is another “coming out” story. It is about revelation, about encountering God, accepting a relationship as a people with God. It is about God saying, accept me, not those other gods, about building a society based on agreed upon values. Coming out as a lesbian, gay or bisexual person is also about revelation. It is about accepting your true self and the process of coming to live your life based upon certain truths. Both involve transformation and change. Both involve tremendous challenges, both can bring pain and great joy. Both are life changing . Both involve rejecting false gods.

The process of becoming Bat Mitzvah has also been a coming out process. The verses for my Bat Mitzvah portion Exodus, Chapter 20, verses 5 and 6, the second commandment, read Lo tish tachaveh lahem ve lo taavdaim lahem ki ani anochi adonai elohecha... You shall not bow down to them, you are not to serve them, For I, Adonai your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the 3rd and upon the 4th generations of those who reject me but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love and keep my commandments.

The verses are about accepting a belief in God, entering into a partnership with God, about conditional love and the impact of one generation on another. As I indicated earlier, this was a foreign concept to me. I was raised proud to be a Jew but a secular Jew. I was taught about Jewish history and Yiddish culture and literature. I was taught the values of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world, social justice and how people should treat one another. I have great pride in that Jewish education and upbringing and I thank my parents, my mother who is here tonight and my father who recently passed away, for giving me such a rich heritage and strong Jewish identity.

But it has only been as an adult, through my involvement here at BCC and most recently and significantly with my involvement with Reconstructionist Judaism that I can come out in another way. Over the last years I have found different meaning as a Jew. I have found meaning in prayer, in ritual, in Judaism. I can now say, I believe in God. Wow! What that means exactly I imagine I will be exploring for a long time. But like the Jews at Sinai, I have entered into a relationship with God. Arthur Waskow in Seasons of our Joy, talks about how for the pharisees and later the rabbis, the process of their own wrestling with Torah was the way for them to meet God. I think I understand now a bit of what they mean.

My friend, Michael Main, shared a midrash with me that I would like to share with you. It says, ”When God gave the commandments at Mt. Sinai, God spoke to the Children of Israel in a divine Voice so powerful that the Israelites were too terrified to hear anything beyond the very first word of the very first commandment. Since even that was too much to bear, God arranged it so they only heard the first letter of the first word. The first word is Anochi (‘I am’), and the first letter is an alef, which is silent. so the rabbis teach us that what the Jewish people heard when God spoke was the Divine Silence of the mitzvot. With that Divine Silence, each person experienced his or her own unique divine revelation”.

The people of Israel at Sinai became a holy people by accepting the Torah. The people of Israel had to learn what that meant and so do I. I believe Torah in its most expansive definition is a

living document, that it provides our search as Jews with meaning. It is full of richness and problems but I look forward to incorporating it into an essential part of my life.

In some way as I become Bat Mitzvah something holy is taking place in me. I am embracing the joys and obligations of living a Jewish life in a new way, of living a life of Torah.

To close, I would like to thank my family and friends for all the support and encouragement in preparing for this special event. I would like to thank my mother for bringing me into this world and for having the strength to hold onto her religious convictions and having imparted some of her values to me. My father, may he rest in peace, probably would not have understood the importance to me of my becoming Bat Mitzvah, but I thank him for giving me the knowledge that he would have loved me just the same. To my brother Danny, who could not be here tonight, for reminding me unbeknownst to him, of the importance of my standing up for my beliefs. To my step sister Andie who has been such a mensch in dealing with our parents and family situation and with whom I have shared so many arenas of my life . To my Aunt Rose who has been so encouraging despite our differences in belief. To my special BCC and KI friends and other friends and family from out of town, you know who you are and to my torah study buddies, Michael, Ahava and Ginger. And two special thank yous . One to my brother Peter, thank you for being such a source of support and strength during the time of dad's illness and death and for being such a special brother and friend. And finally to Marie-Jeanne, my life partner of 17 years who has been my rock, my friend, my lover and my companion in so much. I love living life with you. Shabbat Shalom.