

COMING OUT DAY SHABBAT

for Shabbat Bereshit (Genesis 1:1 - 6:8)

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I speak of beginnings tonight. A scary moment for some . . . as we embark on a new project, as we face a blank computer screen before writing a drash, as we grapple with the life-changing prospect of beginning the coming-out process. There are no guide-books, no inkling of how it will turn out; it is a blank slate. How perfect that we open the Torah to tonight's Torah portion, Verse 1 of Chapter 1 of the Book of Bereshit, and find God confronting God's blank slate: "In the beginning -- when God began to create the heaven and the earth -- the earth was an unformed void, with darkness over the surface of the deep." What could be more blank than that!

And it's interesting that the Jewish People chose this as the beginning of our story; chose this to be the first lines of the Torah. After all, they could have started with Abraham, for wasn't he our first ancestor? Or they could have even started with Noah, for wasn't he our first ancestor's ancestor? But rather, they chose to go back to the very beginning, to place our people and the people of the entire world in a context, in a setting that would give us all a chance to see where we had come from. Perhaps if we know where we come from, we can more clearly chart a course for where we are headed.

But there is a problem with this beginning. Rabbi Levi Meier, in his book, ANCIENT SECRETS (a book which the BCC Book Group read and discussed) points out that right after the opening image of desolation and despair, we read: "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." Light, as the answer to darkness, but that doesn't make much sense, says Rabbi Meier, since it's not until some thirteen sentences later, on the fourth day, that we are told that God created the sun, the moon and the stars. But here we are only on the first day, and already there is light. Where is this light coming from? Maybe this is not simple illumination.

Rabbi Meier points out that the Hebrew word for light used here in this context, "ohr," is the clue. As he considers how this word is used in other places in the Torah, he begins to understand that this word doesn't necessarily refer to ordinary light, but to a "supernatural" light which Rabbi Meier calls a "life force," specifically, a divine life force.

This life doesn't take on the character of any being at first -- not an insect, not an animal, not a human. It is a metaphysical, divine, life energy that permeates the world. The first act of creation brings into being this life force. This passage is telling us from its very opening lines that this is the way of the world. There will always be darkness and chaos and confusion. We will feel the void all around us. But if we want to help ourselves and others, we must -- like God -- bring the light of our life force out against the darkness.

And don't we as Jews know the image of darkness very well. Wasn't darkness one of the plagues sent to Egypt by God? And Egypt; the Hebrew word is "Mitzrayim," but literally it means "narrow places." And narrow places can suggest confining places, and confining places could suggest dark

places. A dark, confining, narrow place. Why look! We have defined a place that some of us as gays and lesbians know very well -- "the closet." And by defining the closet, perhaps we have defined the gay and lesbian Egypt.

As Jews, we are inundated with stories of Egypt; and as we know about Egypt, so we know about "liberation from Egypt." We are constantly reminded that we were strangers and slaves in Egypt, and we celebrate yearly our freedom and our liberation from slavery.

How much more so as gay men, lesbians and bisexuals are we inundated with stories of the closet, and as we know about the closet, so we should know about our "coming out of the closet." We are constantly reminded that we can be strangers in a heterosexual world, but we now acknowledge yearly our freedom and our liberation.

And we do this with "National Coming Out Day," an event occurring every year on October 11; and we celebrate where we have come from and where we are headed. Each of us may have struggled with our own private Egypt, however we define it; and each of us must work at the next step of liberation from Egypt, however we define that. This is our task; this is our work that needs to be done; this is what we celebrate tonight.

I had the honor this Rosh Hashanah of being one of the congregants giving the High Holiday "pitch." That gave me one chance to tell some of my coming-out story. And we all have them. It is part of our history. And as, coincidentally, I am also speaking tonight on Coming Out Day Shabbat, I can take the luxury of adding another piece to that story I began on Rosh Hashanah, another facet to the coming-out stories from Egypt that we all have

For me it was after my graduation from UCLA, still not out of the closet, and beginning my first course of psychotherapy. I was referred to a lovely older woman, elegant and quiet, with compassion and understanding that were easily discernible -- a perfect match for me at that stage in my life. We spoke for several weeks, I don't remember exactly how many, as I filled her in on my story, and she finally stopped me one week, saying, "Michael, you haven't mentioned love. Who do you love?" And the story came pouring out . . . the uncertainty of who I was, the insecurity, the walls, the absence of intimacy. "It's so difficult to find anyone," I finally said. "I don't know anyone. I spent five years at UCLA and never met a gay person there." This elegant and reserved lady could stay composed no longer, and she guffawed out loud. "You really had to work at that one, my dear." It was the beginning of my realization of just how deeply closeted I was. I began the long process of finding out more about myself and what I wanted which led to my finally thinking that the cute male unit-assistant who worked in my unit at Childrens Hospital had to be gay . . . and he was!

It is all about taking risks where we can, and this Coming Out Day Shabbat reminds us to take those risks, to take our first (or our next) steps into the unknown. In just a few weeks, we will be reading about Abraham and realize that the story of the Jews could not even have begun had Abraham not taken his first steps into the unknown. Abraham had to risk and move away from the safety of where he had been. "Lekh lekha -- go forth," says God. Step away from the safety; step away toward the unknown. And aren't we a collection of people who know that very well?

Some years ago, I participated in a “National Coming Out Day” Interfaith Service held at Wilshire Blvd. Temple. As part of that service, Father Malcolm Boyd presented a “Coming Out Liturgy,” where a participant in his coming-out was asked: “What do you now seek to do with your life?” and the answer came: “I seek freedom. I want to be myself and find acceptance and love, and I am ready to set out on this path to liberation. I realize that there are many closets within my life, and I wish to come out of all of them. I see that all of life needs to be a coming-out process of growth and ever-new openness. I want to participate in it and be a part of it all.”

Let us wish for all of us that we participate wherever we are in this coming-out process of growth and ever-new openness and that we do, in fact, become a part of it all.

. . . *SHABBAT SHALOM*