

Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles
Friday - June 6, 2003
Shavout
Elissa Barrett and Zsa Zsa Gershick aufruf

Elissa Barrett and Zsa Zsa Gershick were married by Rabbi Lisa Edwards in Houston, Texas, on 15 Sivan 5763 (Sunday, June 15, 2003). They delivered this Shabbat drash June 6, as part of their BCC aufruf.

Hag Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks is given this name because it is the climax of the counting of the days and weeks of the Omer. The Omer is the seven-week period of time that connects Passover and Shavuot, representing physical redemption and spiritual redemption. Physical redemption in that we were freed by God from slavery in Egypt. But physical freedom leaves us without purpose. Free, yes. But free to do what? How we got free is the story of Pesach. Learning our purpose is the story of Shavuot.

Let's go back to the story of Pesach. We all know it. We're slaves. We're second-class citizens. It sucks. Moses says, "Hey, Adonai! Wake up! We're suffering here. We're your people. You're not going to help us? And God says, "Ach! Hold on a second! I'll help you. But some of it you got to do by yourself. I'll part the Red Sea, but you've got to walk outta here on your own two feet." You know the rest. The 10 plagues. Red Sea. Miriam dancing on the shore on the other side. Physical freedom. What next? Seven weeks. The beginning of the story of Shavuot.

There they are, in the wilderness. Maybe the journey actually took seven weeks. Or maybe they made a few pit stops, pausing to get comfortable with the idea of their freedom and shaking off their subjugation. After traveling, they reach the foot of Mount Sinai. God acknowledges the miracle of the exodus and then gets to the really good stuff. God says: "If ye will harken unto my voice in deed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be mine own treasure from among all peoples." Which means that God's gonna lay the Torah on us. But wait! There's more!

God says to Moses, "Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and may also believe thee forever Go then unto the people, and sanctify them and let them wash their garments and be ready."

In other words, we are going to do something holy together. We are going to enter into a spiritual covenant, to commit ourselves to each other, God and the people Israel. And we're going to do it consciously and publicly for everyone to see.

Which brings us to the story of our engagement and impending marriage. Because, really, it's all about us.

We've had our own seven weeks. And we're about to enter into that spiritual

covenant, to commit ourselves to each other for everyone to see.

In Texas.

“Houston. Is there gonna be a problem?”

Yes.

Our first hurdle was Rabbi B., junior rabbi at Temple X, the Barrett family shul and one of the largest, wealthiest Reform congregations in all of Texas. Mamela Barrett wanted him to co-officiate with Rabbi Lisa. The backstory: Temple Beth Israel has not yet allowed a same-sex couple to be married on temple grounds. They HAVE allowed their rabbis to officiate OFF temple grounds.

So, no problem, we thought, we’ll have the wedding in a hotel.

Except that the words “wedding” and “marriage” “concerned” Rabbi B. He preferred “commitment ceremony.”

In an email on the matter, he wrote: “In truth, I feel that same-sex relationships are equal to heterosexual relationships in sanctity and validity. I feel that our state and national governments should recognize same sex unions as full marriages and not discriminate. However, that is not is not currently the case. In the meantime, I am a representative of the state on matters of weddings and marriage, and I have been counseled that referring to a same-sex ceremony as a wedding/marriage would be fraudulent. I would like to call it a wedding, but I feel that I cannot.” To us, the term “commitment ceremony” is inherently a second-class Jim Crow term, and we reject it. “I would like you to sit at the front of the bus, but... .”

So, in our reply email, we said, “We would like you to co-officiate, but we feel we cannot.”

When Elissa and I were first going out - the result of shidduch made by our own rebbetzin Tracy Moore, I should mention - the two of us had discussed this. Elissa had a list of what she was looking for in the woman of her dreams. One item read: “Want a woman who wants to have a big commitment ceremony.” “Commitment ceremony?” I said. “If it’s a marriage, call it a wedding.” She was overjoyed. Since we were gay, she had felt that that’s all we could call our union. All we had the right to call it.

But it says about marriage in Avot D’Rabbi Natan, “Get yourself a companion, to eat with, to drink with, to study Torah with, to study Mishnah with, to sleep with, to confide all one’s secrets, secrets of Torah and secrets of worldly things.” Since that’s what we were planning to do, that’s what we should call it. A marriage.

Interestingly, most heterosexual people don’t know that we don’t have the right to be married legally, anywhere in the United States. In fact, we don’t have the right anywhere in the world, except in Holland and Belgium - and now, Canada.

“What about Vermont?” people say.

No. That’s civil union, not marriage, and not valid anywhere else.

Why? Because the sacred institution of matrimony would be rendered trayf by the inclusion of gays and lesbians.

But what's so blessed about the Little White Wedding Chapel in Las Vegas, a drive-thru establishment where any straight couple can get hitched in the time - and effort - it takes to order a Happy Meal? You think we're kidding? That is exactly what Zsa Zsa's colleague, Dietmar, did. Dietmar and his wife didn't have to stand up for their rights. Hell, they didn't have to get out of the car. "It was the easiest thing I ever did," Dietmar told her.

And with time, it's been easier and easier for us.

But back to Rabbi B.

After we kicked him out from under the chuppah, he was contrite. In consolation, we suggested that he bless us at Shabbat services, the Friday night before our wedding. After a heated battle among the temple board members, the blessing was approved and Houston prepared for a splash-down.

But Rabbi B. was worried. In a letter to Rabbi Lisa, he wrote:

Lisa:

As you may have heard from Elissa already, this will be a historic first at Temple X. ... That being the case, it is especially important to me that this blessing be like all of the others. ... I would like to be especially careful that we not make the blessing exceptional in any other way... . Welcome to Houston!"

Ever the diplomat, Lisa said nothing.

We, however, thought, "What does he think we're going to do?" So we wrote back:

Dear Rabbi B.:

We were planning the following extravaganza to coincide with our blessing:

Trixie the gay pachyderm (whose owners, Bill and Ted Goldfarb, have agreed to dye her lavender for the occasion) will ascend the bimah to trumpet her special rendition of "We Are Family," while a crack team of Lesbian Avengers storms the building to stage a mass kiss-a-thon. Last but not least, our President, George W. Bush, will deliver a short speech titled, "I underestimated my Queerness."

However, in light of your email, we have asked them all to stay home.

But on the serious side: Please don't worry. We shall be perfect emissaries. Even so, some people may be offended. This we must accept as the price of progress and correct action.

We know this is a big step for you and for the congregation. Bless you and thank you for your courage.

Yours Truly,

E & Z

This brings us back to the story of Shavuot. Accepting the Torah from God was a big step for the people Israel. To do it, they had to stand on their own two feet, have courage, see themselves as deserving and commit to walk the full path, regardless of the obstacles. But why would they and we start down that path? Because of the

promise the covenant represents. As it is said in Hosea: “I will espouse you forever. I will espouse you with righteousness and justice and lovingkindness and compassion. I will espouse you in faithfulness and you shall know God.”
Shabbat shalom.