

**SERMON. Parashat Sh'lach L'cha, Stonewall Shabbat
Rabbi David Edleson, Temple Sinai, June 28, 2019**

A MIGHTY REAL DIFFERENT SPIRIT

So I was driving home from work a couple of weeks ago, and I had listened to all my Torah study podcasts, and I had listened to the Daily and Hidden Brain, and so I pulled over to look for something and noticed there was a new season of *Making Gay History*, and excellent podcast series featuring interviews with a wide variety of people who were pivotal in some aspect of the LGBT rights movement.

This season is all about the Stonewall Riots, so I thought, “perfect,” clicked, started listening and kept driving. By the time I got to Starksboro, I was a gay mess. I was sobbing and my nose was running and I was doing that thing you do when you start saying how you feel while you sob. “*Why are they doing that to us...*”

So I had to pull over to finish the episode. Listening to voices of people who were there, and especially Marsha P. Johnson, a black woman who was there and was a leader of the early movement for transgender rights. Tim and I knew Marsha, used to hang out on Christopher Street stoops with her from time to time, or at the piers. We weren't friends, really, but we cracked each other up, so she would zoom up on her roller blades and catch up and then off she'd go. She was found dead in the river a few years ago, so I always howl a bit more loudly when it's her. Fortunately, I carry a pile of paper napkins in my car, and I used all of them. Then I put some Ru Paul and Sylvester on the iPad and drove home because as the song says, I was ***feeling mighty real***.

As I continued the drive home, I had this realization that now seems obvious, but hadn't quite hit me before. I almost always cry when I'm watching or listening to documentaries about Stonewall. There is something about a group of outcasts, of people who were crapped on by society, suddenly turning around and saying “enough” – that hits me as deep as I go.

And as I was driving, it occurred to me that beside Stonewall, the other times I almost always get like this is when watching documentaries about the Warsaw

ghetto uprising, and even more so, the creation of the State of Israel. The sight of survivors fighting for their right to live their lives as they chose despite all odds – it gets me every time. I can't listen to Ben Gurion's announcement of the State of Israel, or the UN roll call vote without losing it. On this drive it hit me – it is the exact same feeling for me. The two are emotionally inseparable for me.

So often, my gay identity and my Jewish and Zionist identity feel in tension, that they pull away from each other. Some of it was the resentment I have felt at the Jewish community for our past treatment of LGBT people. More recently, it is the anti-Zionism in much of the queer community.

But really my Zionist identity and my Gay identity are inseparable. They intersect and even interlock, because I've been bullied for both, I've been hurt and enraged by both, and because I have a rather defiant personality type, rage and hurt quickly turn to resistance and defiance.

So when at the Stonewall, they go from victims to fighters, I crack. And when Holocaust and Pogrom survivors go from victims to Zionist fighters and organizers, I crack. **And in that move from victim to resistance, I think there is something profoundly spiritual, religious even.**

When any of us moves from feeling afraid, feeling like "grasshoppers," feeling powerless to feeling agency, feeling that another reality is possible and inevitable, that is a **religious experience**.

It is the experience that frames many of the Psalms.

And I think it is at the heart of our Torah Portion this week. Moses sends twelve spies to scope out the land of Israel and report back. They all agree that the land is bountiful and flowing with milk and honey, but then things divide. Ten of the scouts say that there are giants and that they would devour us, "we are like grasshoppers to them." **What is it in us that craves but also fears freedom? That can come up with a thousand reasons we can't do the thing we know we should do.**

As Rumi wrote, *"Why do you stay in prison when the door is so wide open?"*

But one scout had a very different reaction: **Caleb** saw the same thing the others saw, but his reaction was that the Israelites should go and fight because they could win. Joshua agreed. The Torah tells us in Numbers 14:24 that Caleb had a “*ru’ach acheret*,” a “different spirit,” and so where others saw defeat and fear, he saw what could be if they united.

I think those gay men and lesbians, transgendered people and drag-queens, those street kids and streetwalkers at Stonewall that night 50 years ago tonight, had a “**different spirit**” come upon them. That is how they describe it. Where before they had felt they couldn’t, suddenly they knew they could.

Have you ever in your life gone from “I can’t to I must”?

What was it like for your spirit? What might it mean to think about that moment of transformation, that moment of going from fear to defiance and hope as a spiritual experience?

I think this experience of finding power and courage we didn’t know we had is one of the core religious moment in the Hebrew Bible. Over and over, the Bible relates the weak and powerless having a change in consciousness and know their power. “*The people who walked in darkness have seen a brilliant light. On those who dwelt in a land of gloom Light has dawned.*” (Is. 9) A group of people who are doomed and hopeless suddenly cry out, wake up and a new spirit inspires them to fight back.

Isn’t that what leaving Egypt was? Isn’t that what it means when the Torah says, “you shall not oppress they stranger, for you were slaves in Egypt and you know the heart of the oppressed.”

But the heart of the oppressed is not just sadness and injury; it can also be the heart of the oppressed when they finally experience liberation from the inside out, and from the outside in. When we say we have known “the heart of the oppressed,” let us remember that it is the same heart that also most fully knows the joy of finding freedom, the spiritual power of saying ‘no more.’ That sense of power is what the Bible often means by “the spirit of God came upon them.”

Thousands of years ago, our people stumbled out of Egypt, a ragtag bunch of former slaves and refugees, and on the other side of the sea, they suddenly

realized **that they had become a people that shared a sense of what was possible.**

That night at Stonewall, a ragtag group of people as unlikely those ancient Hebrews fought back, and they had a revelation: “Things can be different.” After the uprising was over, and the tear gas had settled, they too discovered **they had become a people that shared a sense of what was possible.**

We live in a time when we face challenges that seem impossible to solve. We will need a new spirit, the spirit of Stonewall, to address them. While to an Orthodox Jew, this might sound absurd, there is much we can learn about how best to face these challenges from those places where Jewish culture and Gay culture intersect.

1. The Stonewall Riot itself was a moment in time, a few days of uprising. It would be a footnote if not for what those people did after the riots. They **organized**. They worked. They sat through countless excruciating meetings, and did fundraisers, and argued and worked together to create the movement that has given LGBT people like me, and really given all of us lives that were only imagined on that hot summer night 50 years ago. If we want to change things, we can't just act up, we must then do the hard, frustrating and difficult work of organizing human beings to work together.
2. The gay community and the Jewish community had much to be outraged about, traumatized by, and yet both our communities place humor and laughter as central to who we are. Non-Jews were sometimes horrified by Jewish humor just after the Holocaust, and straight people sometimes didn't know whether to laugh or not when some outrageous comedian or drag-queen would make horrible jokes about people dying of AIDS. But both communities saw laughter, **the ability to laugh at our suffering, the joy of being irreverent**, as key to healing and survival. **Organize, but keep laughing at yourself.**
3. Both our communities know that while being peaceful is good, there are times when we must **rise up and act up and fight back if we are to survive.** When people ask me if I am a pacifist, I answer that the Holocaust and

Stonewall make that impossible for me.

4. And both communities share the value **of remembering the past and honoring those who made our lives possible** through their work and sacrifice. As Jews, almost all our holidays are about remembering. We find the act of remembering sacred. *YIZKOR*, we say. In the gay community, we also find the act of remembering sacred, remembering those who had to live in the closet, those who started fighting long before Stonewall, but the one event that is the gay version of leaving Egypt is Stonewall. Gay people make pilgrimages to the bar. We remember it every year and built a movement and an ethos around it. And it is that sacred act of building our future on the experience of our past that we honor with this service tonight.

Shabbat shalom.