

GAY PRIDE VERMONT 2018 SERMON

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We are ALL created in the image of God

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ: וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתָה תֵהוֹ
וּבְהוֹ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר
אֱלֹהִים יְהי אֹר וַיְהי־אֹר: וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was still unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. God saw that the light was good

Rosh HaShanah, which we will celebrate here in just two days, is in our tradition, the **Birthday of the World**. It is the original Earth Day. But is not just the earth that we honor, it is the innate goodness of all of creation, and particularly the innate goodness of human beings.

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצִלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר
וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

And God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And God created man in the Divine image; male and female He created them.

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה־טוֹב מְאֹד

*And God saw **all** that God had made, and behold, **it was very good**.*

One of Judaism’s central messages is that people are born good, that our nature is good, but that we have the free will to do bad. That is the entire basis of the High Holy Days.

But as many LGBT people will tell you, and many non LGBT people will also tell you, **somehow the message that we were created good, very good, that our nature is innately good – that message never quite made it to us.** Indeed, most of us were given the clear message that we were very bad, sick – that the light of goodness was not in us.

For me, being gay and being Jewish were always intertwined, since I was bullied pretty equally for both, and as a little kid, teasing those apart was just not possible.

Watching **home movies** of me as a kid, there is scene after scene of my father's attempts to butch me up. In one he is making me put on a **tiny little football uniform, pads** and all, and I am just tearing them off, throwing the helmet, and grabbing my sister's **majorette baton** and starting to twirl. Or my father making me put on a baseball uniform in the sweltering Georgia heat, then putting up my **trampoline** as a backstop and pitching **baseballs** to me, only to have me miss them because I was singing a song from the Sound of Music and the baseball bounces off the trampoline and hits me in the back of the head while my father Bert gets furious and my mouth howls with laughter, saying, "I told you, Bert".

In high school, I became a band geek - I played flute and piccolo. I was in 9th grade in 1976, and I was the special star of our band's **Bicentennial Extravaganza. At first hidden by flags, I was then lifted up by several solid young women in heavy wool skirts up on their crossed fiberglass rifles. The flags parted, and like a gay Venus emerging from the sea, I, resplendent with a bad perm and sequined vest, emerged just in time to play the big piccolo solo for "Stars and Stripes Forever," the grand finale.** I could see people under the bleachers pointing and laughing at me and shouting words I won't repeat here.

Being gay was cool in band, but Jewish? Not so much. It was a year or so later, after I had been elected by the band to be the drum major - and this was a big southern Marching band – that the "band boosters," called a special meeting while I was home sick with mono and decided that, as the band director charmingly told me, "**We just aren't comfortable with a Jew leading the band down Main Street.**"

It was a Friday, and after I made a very public rant about anti-Semitism at the pep rally, I quit the band, got in my **silver Camaro** that had been my sisters, and drove

the hour to the nearest synagogue – **Rodeph Shalom in Rome Georgia**. I spent the next year crushed out and studying with a handsome student rabbi, had a belated bar mitzvah, and decided that I was going to be a rabbi. I remember telling my best friend at the time, Tim.

So for me, the experience of being Jewish and gay are inextricably wound up.

However, when I finally got into rabbinical school, HUC, the Reform seminary, as an openly gay student, I found that I had to fight for my right to be ordained. I helped organize a LGBT rabbinical and cantorial student organization to fight for ordination, and worked with rabbis in the movement to get such a resolution passed.

Of course, all this was during the height of the AIDS crisis among gay men in New York, but at rabbinical school, that was invisible. When I walked out the doors of HUC each day having studied Talmud or Bible, I stepped through a portal into another world that was terrifying and, to me, much more real. At nights, I would leave class to go visit friends in the hospitals, or dying at home. I volunteered as a chaplain in hospitals in New York, but I had little to offer them. They were young, terrified, and angry; I was too. I joined **ACT UP** and went to long claustrophobic meetings and raucous protests all over New York City. **Afterward, when I would get home from school and chaplaincy and protests, I would go to the bathroom to check myself for lesions.**

Jewish ritual seemed incapable of addressing what I was experiencing as a gay man in the AIDS crisis. Or perhaps I was incapable of letting it. **The particularity of being with other gay men and lesbians offered something at the time that the particularity of Judaism could not.**

So I understand deeply how **being gay can alienate a person from their Judaism, and how Judaism can seem out of place in our gay lives.**

But tonight I want to say clearly that without both, I am not complete - I am not me, and so I am so proud of how far the Reform movement has come on this issue. Tonight, **we are here to celebrate LGBT Pride and to celebrate how Reform Judaism has grown and led the way on the inclusion of LGBT people and clergy.**

In **1990**, the year I was ordained, the Reform movement finally passed a strong resolution supporting the ordination of LGBT rabbis and cantors, and this brings me back to where I started.

That decision was rooted in the belief that people are created good, and ***b'tzelem Elohim***, in the image of God. It made clear that being gay, or lesbian, or transgendered was not a choice, not a matter of free will, but an integral part of who we are.

The resolution was also rooted in the idea that **a life without love is not a holy life**, that Judaism affirms that **“it is not good for a person to be alone,”** and that loving relationships should be celebrated fully.

And it was rooted in that line I read at the beginning, **“In the image of the Divine God created the man; male and female he created them.”** The rabbis long puzzled at this line. It shifts from the masculine singular “he created the man” to the plural, “he created them.” The **Midrash** on this includes an explanation from **Rabbi Jeremiah ben Elazar: “When God first created Adam, Adam was androgynous, neither male nor female.”** The Midrash used the term: **“Androginus”**. In the mythic primordial person, all genders were found, and it was only later that people were divided into male and female.

And this is not just about gay people. **No matter who you are, what gender you are, what religion you are - you are created in the image of God, you are created ‘very good’, and you have every right to have love in your life without shame, without apology.** Those are the values that we at Sinai want to teach in our school, in our homes, and in our sanctuary. That is what every child should hear from the community that raises them. **Can I have an Amen up in here?**

I want to sing you a song that is dear to me, and I need to tell you a little story about it. When Tim and I moved to Manhattan after two years in Jerusalem, we joined **Congregation Beth Simchat Torah**, one of the first and few LGBT synagogues in the world at that time. It met in the basement of the **Bethune Street Artists Complex**, and it was a collection of characters from **Chassidim on the down low to outrageous drag queens**. We loved that synagogue, and that mix of people taught us so much about Jewish ritual, Jewish music, and Jewish heart.

Every week, a new long list of people who had died was read before **Kaddish**, much like we do here, and instead of it taking 15-20 minutes, it would be an hour of tears and wailing and terror. **None of us knew if we had it; there was no test yet.**

One night at services, a small group of men got up to sing a song I had never heard. Two of the singers we knew: **Michael Callen and Elliot Pillshaw**. Elliot had been very active in **NFTY**, the Reform Youth movement, and Michael was already well-known as an AIDS activist, and today the LGBT community health center in Chelsea in Manhattan, is called the Callen-Lorde center, after Michael and Audre Lorde, a black lesbian poet and activist. At this service, the gay *a capella* group that they had started, “the Flirtations” started singing a song by Fred Small: ***“You can be anybody that you want to be, you can love whoever you will, you can travel any country where your heart leads, and know I will love you still.”***

It is difficult to explain what it is like for human to be in a crowded basement room full of people and have them all start sobbing at once. I’ve never experienced anything like it, even at a funeral. And while AIDS is not a gay disease, **the LGBT communities response to this plague was one of the most inspiring, loving, fierce, and righteous things I have been part of. It was in my mind holy - and so as we approach the High Holy Days, and we celebrate PRIDE weekend in Vermont, I wanted to share, if I can get through it, this song with young and old alike, as a blessing. “I will sing you a song no one sang to me; may it keep you good company.”**