

# JEWISH JOURNEY

## Pride Shabbat 2016

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Shabbat shalom.

Shehecheyanu. Praise the source of life that has kept us in life, sustained us, made it possible for each of us to reach this moment in time and space.

Here. Now.

Shabbat is all about being in the here and now. On Shabbat, we stop creating in order to recognize creation and claim it as perfect and complete. One day a week, we encounter the world just as it is, in all its brokenness and beauty, and call it good.

For many of us, that's what Pride weekend feels like too. A moment in time where we step out into a world that is redeemed, that is whole, that is fabulous. A glimpse of the world yet to be.

Last Sunday morning, in our grief and shock at the massacre in Orlando, we mourned the assault on a place of respite and liberation.

In the Washington Post, Justin Torres writes "In Praise of Latin Night at the Queer Club":

*People talk about liberation as if it's some kind of permanent state, as if you get liberated and that's it, you get some rights and that's it, .... But you're going back down into the muck of it every day; this world **constricts**. You know what the opposite of Latin Night at the Queer Club is? Another Day in Straight White America. So when you walk into the club, if you're lucky, it feels **expansive**.*

*"Safe space" is a cliché, overused ... but the fact remains that a sense of safety transforms the body, transforms the spirit.*

If you're lucky, it feels expansive.

*Min hameitzar karati yah. Anani be-merchav yah.* From a narrow place, I cried out to G-d. G-d answered me with wide expanse.

Ten years ago, I read those words from the bima on Rosh Hashanah morning. That day, our community was still reeling from the attack at the Jewish Federation. One of our own members had survived that shooting. Many had lost a friend or colleague.

All of us felt the world constrict.

Our tradition teaches us that the narrow place is a place of distress, of oppression, of small mindedness and constricted spirit. A place of strict binaries and delineations. It is Mitzrayim, our place of enslavement. We are called to find holiness in expanse. Liberation means taking up space, and making space for one another.

If you have made the journey from a narrow place of any kind, you probably remember the way it felt to step into wide expanse. Your first Pride march. Maybe it was in a club like Pulse. A women's book store. Capitol Hill. The Castro. Northampton. Tel Aviv. Your "we're not in Kansas anymore" moment.

My first Pride march in Seattle was that kind of moment. 19 years ago this week Connie and I had just moved to Seattle from the literal state of Kansas. It was our first night in the city, and it was Pride. We had gay pride in Kansas, but as they say in Oz, this was a horse of a different color. I'll never forget watching the parade roll down Broadway and seeing, of all things, the Seattle Public Library Bookmobile. The Bookmobile. Wholesomeness on wheels. Was this subversive or cooptation, or what?

One of the ironies of queer liberation is that our places of expanse have so often been in the margins. We made them in the shadows and in the dark corners. What blew my mind in that moment was witnessing a world where gayness was knit into the fabric of the community. It was fully and visibly queer, yet also taking up space right there in the regular world. Transforming the world, in fact.

There's a difference between seeing yourself as a dot marking a point on the edge of a map, or looking out from that point with your own eyes. When I stand here in my own body, and look out with my own eyes, I'm never at the edge. I am always right here. Wherever you go, there you are. From that point of view, I am always at the center of wherever I am. Holding on to that perspective is a skill.

For a people in diaspora, this is a good skill to have. It's a useful adaptation. It is a gift.

Leticia Nieto calls this skill "re-centering". For people who are targets of oppression, it is a skill we can work to cultivate over time. When we are re-centered, our lives are for us and about us. We're not living our lives in opposition to, in spite of, in contrast with, whatever the "center" is doing. We're just simply doing our thing. We are free.

For people on the fringes, in the margins, that is the perspective that keeps us whole. More than anything else, I knew that's what I needed in a Jewish community.

My personal Jewish Journey begins thirteen years ago. That summer, as Kol HaNeshamah was being hatched, I was studying for conversion, and I was pregnant with my oldest son. My rabbi at the time advised me to go find a Jewish community, beyond the very small one I had created for myself. I was skeptical such a place existed. I didn't know if I could find it, or if I would have to build it.

I grew up in a tradition that I loved but could not stay in because I could not bring my full self to it. I was determined that my family, my children, would have a community and tradition that didn't require them to leave part of themselves behind. The whole point of converting was to be "all in." To be able to show up and be counted as a Jew. Obligated. Enfranchised. Fully present.

As a trans man and a convert, I felt a weird kind of contradiction – on the one hand, I saw the wisdom in the traditional practice that we don't mention a convert's status. And at the same time I know there is a power in being out – as a personal practice and a political strategy. In fully claiming my Jewishness, I'm not pretending I've always been Jewish, and I'm not obscuring how I got here. I know I am a different kind of Jew just as I know I'm a different kind of man. What I reject is the idea that someone else's experience is the authentic one and mine has to be always qualified. I know that my experience is one of many different, authentic experiences.

I knew I needed a Jewish community that set aside the impulse to rank or ration authenticity, and put in its place openness, transparency, and curiosity about each other. About our past, our paths, our parents and grandparents, how we name ourselves and what we mean to each other. One where we resist the temptation to build connection only on what we have in common.

So. Research studies have shown that gay people have better sex.

Dan Savage has a theory that this is because when two queers get to “yes” – that’s just the beginning of the conversation. When straight people agree to have (as Ellen put it) “the man-woman sex”, there is an assumption they already know what that is going to be.

When two men, or two women, or trans folks, or when three or more of anybody get together, there is no “default setting”. Everything has to be negotiated. Discovered. Everyone’s likes and dislikes, boundaries and desires, are up for consideration. There is communication. There is taking turns. There is surprise. And it’s this process, the self-knowledge and listening - that makes it better. It’s more likely, though not guaranteed, that everyone will go away happy.

Of course, there is no reason straight people can’t use this bit of queer magic. Many do, and Dan argues that everyone should.

I would argue, the same goes for kashrut.

The same goes for who can be on the bima. Who do we say kaddish for? Who can be buried in our cemetery? What is our relationship to Israel? How do we worship across denominations? What pronouns do we use for G-d? What tune will we use for the mi chamocho? How do we bring more justice into the world?

There is no default setting. We have to show up and make our whole selves visible. Once we have found each other, once we have said yes, we are just getting started. The real journey is the back and forth and delicious curiosity and brave truth telling and honest desire, through which we will remake the world.

I know the way I got here is not the way you got here. That each of our paths to this point in time and space are authentic. Blessed. And equally improbable. So in gratitude, for all of it, I say, shehecheyanu. Amen. Hallelujah. Shabbat shalom.