

Conversations Matter: Make Your Voice Heard

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Shir Tikvah Congregation

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It is Jewish tradition when teaching Torah to dedicate that teaching to one who has passed before us. Today I dedicate my words to my brother Jeff, of blessed memory, whose first *yahrzeit* our family will observe this coming November. Teaching Torah was core to my brother's life. The topic of my comments today were something my brother and I never spoke much about and I imagine if we had, an interesting discussion might have ensued. I regret not having that conversation with him, but I am grateful for the opportunity to have it today with all with you.

The Torah tells us the story of Sarah, who believes she will never become pregnant and bear a child with Abraham. Because of this, she gives to Abraham a concubine, Hagar, in order for Abraham to bear children, and Hagar bears a son, Ishmael.

Sarah is 90 years old when she finally becomes pregnant, and with the birth of Isaac, a challenge for Sarah emerges. Sarah grows concerned – anxious – that her son, Isaac, will not be Abraham's sole heir. To ensure that there is no competition between Abraham's two sons, Sarah instructs Abraham to expel Hagar and her son, Ishmael – Abraham's firstborn son – from the community and into the wild to fend for themselves, saying, "Cast out this bondswoman and her son, for the son of this bondswoman will not be competition for my son, Isaac."

The text teaches us that, "This aggrieved Abraham greatly, on account of his son." But, G-d tells Abraham to follow Sarah's direction to throw Hagar and her son out, and he does so. According to the text, Abraham, "...got up, took bread and a water skin and handed them to Hagar, placing them and the boy on her shoulder. Then he cast her out. Trudging away, she wandered aimlessly in the wilderness of Beersheva." The text here mirrors that of the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac – another example of Abraham following G-d's direction as it relates to the trajectory for his son. There is no indication in the *Akedah* that Abraham is concerned about G-d's instructions; however, in today's parasha we're told that Abraham is greatly aggrieved. And yet, he does not speak out.

Why not?

It is difficult to speak out sometimes, even when something is so important. Sometimes, perhaps much more difficult to speak out when something *is* so important.

For those who know me, it will not come as a surprise that my comments today relate, in part, to my personal and professional passion, that of equality and justice for our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community members. As the executive director of Project 515, an organization that strives for equal rights and considerations under the law for same-sex couples and their families in Minnesota by eliminating the 515 Minnesota statutes that discriminate against these families, I have the privilege to live that passion every day, and I am incredibly grateful that I have the opportunity to do so. And, as one of the founders of the Minnesotans United for All Families campaign, the campaign that WILL defeat the marriage amendment coming in front of the electorate in 50 short days, I feel that responsibility, and all of our responsibilities, every day even more heavily.

But, my comments today can just as easily be applied to issues such as the Voter ID amendment, or other issues that are deeply important to each of us. And I would be remiss if at some point during my comments, I didn't remind you to Vote No. So please consider yourself reminded. Vote No on November 6 – in fact, Vote No twice.

For those who don't know me, it might surprise you to find out that I'm straight. Or then again, these days, maybe not. When I started in this movement in 1996 as an intern for the Massachusetts Gay & Lesbian Political Caucus, there weren't a lot of "straight allies" around. In fact, I started down this road because I wanted to use my voice in a unique way. To make a difference with what I had to offer, and in part, for me that meant speaking out as an advocate for LGBT rights as a straight woman. And, I wanted to be a part of what I believe is the civil rights movement of our time – a movement that had an endgame in my lifetime, that I could see to its conclusion.

In 1996, I couldn't envision that 15 years later I'd be driving over the Canadian border with my family for a special wedding. The border crossing guard questioned us. "Where are you going?" "Toronto." "For what reason?" "A wedding." "Who is getting married?" "Our friends, Michael and Michael." There was no surprised look from the guard. No second glance. Nothing indicating that this was out of the ordinary, until she looked up and said, "Oh – they have the same name?"

Yes, change is coming. In some places, it has arrived already. And in those places, you know what they've discovered?

Love is love. It belongs to everyone. Relationships between same-sex couples and opposite-sex couples are not that different from each other. We get up in the

morning, we get ready for work, we shop for groceries, and we share the household chores. As couples, we raise our children, take care of our aging parents, and we grow old together. Our relationships are remarkably similar – and so are the reasons we want to get married – because we are committed to each other, love each other, and want to take responsibility for each other.

Voices matter. Speaking out matters. Conversations matter.

I've spent a lot of time coming out – that goes with the territory as a straight leader for LGBT rights. For a number of years, I sat on the board of directors of the Family Equality Council, a national organization dedicated to LGBT parents. At that time, I was the first and only straight board member. At my first board meeting, a new board colleague named Anthony turned to me and asked sweetly, "So, how did you create your family?" I will admit that I stumbled through that answer. And to be honest, Anthony stumbled through his response. I wasn't who he expected to be sitting next to him.

We all come out in different ways, at different times. It's an iterative process. You don't come out just once. I come out a lot as a straight woman leading an LGBT organization, with a husband and young kids.

But I also come out sometimes as a Jew. And as the sister of a brother with serious mental illness, and one who committed suicide last November. We all have things in our lives that aren't readily apparent. Some things are harder to talk about than others.

Abraham brought Hagar and her son, Ishmael, out to the desert and left them in the wilderness of Beersheva. When their supplies were depleted, Hagar leaves Ishmael behind a bush to die, crying to G-d, "Let me not see the child's death."

Finally, when hope is almost gone, an angel of G-d calls to Hagar and says, "Have no fear, for G-d has heard the child." Hagar opens her eyes, sees a well, and fills her water skin for Ishmael to drink from. Ishmael is saved.

The text shows that even though G-d promised Abraham to protect Hagar and her son that it took Hagar abandoning the boy to die of thirst before G-d responded.

Why did it take so long?

Is this how it is for all of us – that we need to be pushed to the brink, to the last possible moment, before we worry enough, care enough, are courageous enough –

to speak out? And if we don't – what are the consequences of silencing our inner voice?

I've spent a lot of time in circles where I was “the only one.” I had a lot of practice being “the only one” growing up as a Jew in Duluth. To be exact, there were two other Jews in my graduating class of over 400 and maybe 5 others out of a thousand students at East High School in the mid 1980s. I remember vividly coming to school every Hanukkah with my menorah to teach the class about the holiday. I bet there are a lot of you in this room who grew up Jewish in small towns who could say the same.

Speaking out, and having personal conversations, isn't always easy. It can be hard. It can make us feel uncomfortable. Vulnerable. Exposed.

I remember the first conversation I ever had related to LGBT issues – today it seems less than monumental but at the time it felt huge. In her kitchen in Duluth, my Grandma Rose, of blessed memory, whom I loved deeply, asked why I wasn't dating a certain boy anymore. I think she was about 83 years old at the time. She was in terrific shape, but she was – well, she was old and we'd never talked about gay issues before. I didn't know what she'd think. I took a deep breath and said, “Well, Grandma, it turns out that he's gay.” Grandma Rose was quiet for a moment, and then said, completely unfazed, “Well – there's lots of gay ones.”

And that was that. No judgment. Total acceptance. Whenever I prepare to come out, I always remember that moment. It taught me to never let my speculation of what someone will say stop me from saying what needs to be said. It was a critical life lesson.

The Torah tells us: “Abraham was greatly aggrieved.” And yet, who spoke out for Abraham, or for that matter, Hagar and Ishmael? No one spoke out on their behalf.

Why didn't Abraham speak out?

Maybe it was because he trusted that G-d would take care of Hagar and Ishmael.

Maybe it was because he wanted to respect Sarah's wishes.

Maybe it was because he was afraid.

Abraham lost his firstborn son, Ishmael. He would never see him again. He paid a dear price for his silence. I wonder what price we've all paid over our lifetimes for our own silence?

During this holiday season, when we review the year prior and think about the year ahead, the *Al Heit* confession is said ten times over the course of Yom Kippur

services. There are 44 confessions that we say repeatedly, and over half of them are related to speech. For example, we confess to the sin which we have committed with an utterance of the lips; the sin which we have committed by impurity of speech; the sin which we have committed by foolish talk.

What about the sin of words left unsaid?

I am incredibly proud of the campaign we've created together and of the leadership role that Shir Tikvah has played as an early and very active coalition member. The work that we are doing, together, right now is incredibly important.

And I know in this room today there are many, many of you who are doing the hardest work of all – having conversations about why you care so deeply about whether our state will treat all of our families with the respect they deserve. About why the institution of marriage matters, to all of us. About your belief that love is love and that love belongs to everyone.

The research is quite clear in showing the importance of these conversations. You may have heard this before, but it bears repeating. We know that of those people who have had a conversation with someone who cares about why marriage matters and why voting no is important to them, that 67% of those people will vote no on this amendment that would limit the freedom to marry. Sixty-seven percent.

As Jews we know the power of speaking out on behalf of others. Jews know well the nature of discrimination. In 1935, Kol Nidre came less than a month after the Nuremberg Laws were passed in Germany stripping Jews of their civil rights as German citizens. It was also eight days before the marriage laws changed which effectively ended legal marriage for Jews.

We must remember that, as the Nazis came for the Jews, so they also came for the homosexuals, forcing them to concentration camps where they brandished the pink triangle. The histories of these communities – our communities – are inextricably bound together.

Looking back at Jewish history, we remember the Righteous Gentiles who risked their lives to protect their Jewish neighbors and friends. Those Righteous Gentiles spoke out with their actions on our behalf, by hiding Jews in safe places, helping them to secure false identification, smuggling them to safety, rescuing Jewish children. They had nothing to gain, except, perhaps, the state of their souls. They had a lot to lose.

What do we have to lose in speaking out? What do we lose if we don't?

As a community, we think today about the year past and the year ahead. This community has been incredible – outstanding – in its advocacy on others' behalves. And in the days ahead, I ask us all to dig a little deeper.

At this time next year, each of us will look back and think about the year we'd planned for. And we'll think about the conversations we intended to have – whether those conversations were about the marriage amendment or Voter ID or something else deeply personal to each of us. At this time next year, will we know in our heart of hearts that we did everything we could have done, said everything we meant to, had every conversation that we intended to have? Or, will we feel regret for the words left unsaid, as perhaps Abraham felt for not speaking out on behalf of his son? There is a lot at stake.

One of my favorite movies as a child was *The Lorax*. Dr. Seuss' simplistic words resonated with me then and still do today. "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." It is a lesson I hope my children learn from seeing Mommy's work. Or, more aptly, not seeing a lot of Mommy because Mommy is so often at work. It is a sacrifice they make every day and one that increases my personal stake exponentially. We all have our gifts, our passions and our voices to bring to the table. Have we all used them to their full extent?

It is our time now to be the change we want to see in the world. I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks my regret of not having this conversation with my brother during his lifetime. Conversely, I am always grateful for that conversation I did have with my Grandma Rose, and it is a special memory for me. It is a living reminder of the power of people, and of conversations, to surprise us. There are times in all of our lives that we look back, with regret, at the road not taken. Conversations that should have happened and didn't. Words left unsaid.

As we continue our New Year reflection and celebration, we stand before our G-d. *Heneinee*, Moses said to the burning bush. *Here I Am*.

We are here. In the year ahead, be sure that your voice is heard.

L'shana tovah.

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