

ENDA: A Jewish Perspective

By: Karen L. Erlichman

As a spiritual director, I have the privilege of supporting and witnessing the sacred unfolding of people's spiritual journeys, and of creating a sanctuary for them to discern the Divine Presence in their lives. In addition, as a psychotherapist, I am often sitting with people as they create healing and wholeness for the places in their lives and hearts in which they experience profound brokenness. Finally, as the Bay area director for Jewish Mosaic: the National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity, I facilitate dialogues, workshops and other programs designed to foster full LGBTQ inclusion in all aspects of the Jewish community.

Since text study has always been one of the cornerstones of Jewish practice, I often find tremendous refuge and guidance in sacred texts. One particularly powerful and favorite reading from Deuteronomy describes the fullness and diversity of sacred community:

"You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God, your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to waterdrawer, to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God, which the Lord your God is concluding with you this day, with its sanctions, to the end that God may establish you this day as God's people and be your God, as God promised you and swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord your God, and with those who are not with us here this day." --Deuteronomy 29:9-14

In my line of work, I witness far too many people searching for a place in which to discuss and heal from workplace abuse, discrimination and trauma. For queer folk in general, and in particular queers who may also be Jewish, people of color, transgender or genderqueer, being one's full self in the workplace may mean risking their jobs, their wellbeing, and/or their safety.

In studying and praying with a text like this, I am acutely aware of its emphatic and unequivocal inclusiveness; both in terms of the kinds of people (children, spouses, even the outsider), and the nature of their work (from woodchopper to waterdrawer). As a queer Jew, I strive to embody and practice this holy diversity in all aspects of my life.

There are many Jewish texts which honor the sacredness of diversity and the holiness of work. One of my favorites is of Shimon haTzadik, Simon the Righteous. He said, "Al Shlosha Devarim Ha Olam Omed al ha-Torah, v'al ha-Avodah, v'al Gemilut Hasidim-- 'The world stands on three things: Torah, avodah ("divine service", or work or worship), and acts of lovingkindness'" (Avot 1:2). This quote comes from the opening section of Pirke Avot -the book of wisdom from the Jewish sages. In Hebrew words often have multiple meanings. The word avodah means both work and worship. Why? There is an aspect of worship and prayer that requires us to work, to study, to stretch and to grow, and work or service can be done with a prayerful heart.

In his book *These are the Words*, Rabbi Arthur Green further explains avodah:

"Avodah, the term for "worship" in Hebrew, is derived from the root ayin-bet daled, meaning work, labor or service, as performed by a servant. We are to see ourselves as servants of Adonai, working at God's service...There, avodah refers to sacrifices ...[from the times when] the Temple was yet standing. After its destruction, the rabbis made the daring move of calling prayer "Avodah she'ba'lev," the avodah of the heart. This means that the same power of approaching God, whether to show one's love and gratitude or to seek atonement, that had previously lain in the offering of animals, was now transferred to the interior realm (the inner sanctuary within us)...the devotional attitude associated with the word avodah is not an easy one for us today. " p. 119

How do these core Jewish teachings help us to understand the critical importance of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act to protect every member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community? In our generation, many years after the destruction of the Jewish Temple, everywhere that we engage in avodah (work and worship) must be regarded as holy, and we are thus accountable to holy standards of relationships, laws and behavior.

The text from Deuteronomy is a powerful reminder of the covenantal aspect of being in community with one another, with the Holy One of Many Names, with those who are standing here and those who are not. As queer people of faith our activist work for a fully inclusive ENDA is reflected by this covenant.

May we be blessed with the courage, foresight and strength to live fully in the light of our covenant with God, and to honor the diversity and dignity of all queer creatures created in the Divine Image.