

What Now? After the Exodus, the Wilderness

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, 2006

Sharon Kleinbaum leads Congregation Beth Simchat Torah in New York, the world's largest lesbian and gay synagogue. The national Jewish weekly, The Forward, named her one of the country's 50 top Jewish leaders.

It is only when the Israelites come out of Egypt, when they abandon the comfort and security of their familiar--though oppressive--lives, that they begin to experience the abiding presence of God. Upon leaving Egypt, they become the sacred community which is God's dominion.ⁱ *Pesach*, the night of their liberation, marks the beginning, not the end, of their journey. It is a long journey, a journey of unremitting crisis, a journey that often seems to be nothing more than an aimless wandering, a new exile without end--no better and maybe even worse than their lives in Egypt. But it is also a spiritual journey, a journey of insight and understanding, of growth and revelation. The way of the Lord is through the wilderness. A scant ten weeks after leaving Egypt the former slaves are at Sinai, and a new identity as a free people is born.

This experience of finding revelation in exile is a profoundly Jewish one. It is not in the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey,ⁱⁱ that the Torah is given to the people. It is in exile, in *galut*, that our identity as individuals and as a people is formed. The escape from physical persecution and oppression is ultimately not enough to form a spiritual identity; the physical liberation must be coupled with a struggle for genuine identity that is not defined by the fight against an oppressor. It is a journey of cosmic significance for the Israelites--leaving the familiarity of slavery, they risk the desolation of the *midbar* (wilderness) for the promise of physical freedom, only to discover that it is Sinai that awaits them.

For Jewish gays and lesbians today, coming out is also a spiritual journey, not unlike the coming out of our ancestors that we celebrate at *Pesach*. The closet is indeed a narrow place.ⁱⁱⁱ It is in the open, in the wilderness--sometimes welcoming, sometimes indifferent, sometimes hostile--of family, friendship, work, community, religion--that we, individually and collectively, discover ourselves and our relationship to God.

In every generation, the haggadah tells us, we are bound to regard ourselves as if we personally had gone forth out of Egypt. The generation of the Exodus was not the first to experience the sequence of oppression, liberation, crisis, revelation, and growth; nor were they the last. We retell their story on *Pesach* not only to honor them with our remembrance but also because all of us--Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist; learned, ignorant, observant, secular; women, men; lesbians, gays--have gone forth ourselves from so many Egypts and because so many more still wait for us in the wilderness.

As a Jew, a woman, a lesbian, and of course as a rabbi, I love the Jewish holidays and find them deeply meaningful. As an activist in Jewish, feminist, lesbian/gay, and other causes, I find *Pesach* particularly special. I have known or witnessed many Egypts and celebrated many moments of liberation. But I have learned that what at first seems to be the culminating act of liberation is always, in fact, just the beginning.

1985 was one such beginning. In 1985, not one rabbinical student anywhere in the world was officially out to the faculty or administration of her or his seminary. Out rabbis

were few and far between, and none of them were in pulpits. Then, in the spring of 1985, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College adopted an admissions policy that stated simply, "RRC does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation."

The sense of relief was palpable. Faculty member Rabbi Linda Holtzman remembers it as "jubilation."^{iv} Only one problem remained: what now? What would this new freedom really mean in practice? Would lesbian and gay rabbis get jobs? Would donors to the RRC still donate? Would the college become a pariah, would the movement itself suffer? What would we have to do now? Since no one knew, I formed a committee called "What Now?" to find out--and to help make sure that the liberation implicit in the new admissions policy did not remain on paper only.^v

It did not. Lesbian and gay Jews have taken huge strides toward finding their place in Judaism. This didn't happen overnight, and it didn't happen in isolation. The gay synagogue movement--itself a product of the post-Stonewall^{vi} gay liberation movement--was crucial, as was the support of prominent members of the wider Jewish community^{vii} Lesbian and gay synagogues have sprung up all over the world. Mainstream synagogues have outreach programs to lesbian and gay congregants, and strive to be "welcoming." Even the Orthodox community has an important--if necessarily still low-profile--lesbian and gay movement. The RRC is thriving. The Reform Movement has voted to recognize lesbian and gay marriages. The Conservative Movement's Jewish Theological Seminary now admits out lesbian and gay students into its academic programs. Out lesbian and gay rabbis do get pulpit jobs.

And yet we have a long way to go. At Congregation Beth Simchat Torah (CBST) we get a steady stream of telephone calls and emails pleading for help of all kinds: help with how to reconcile homosexuality with traditional Jewish law, help with coming out, help with how to find support in dealing with AIDS. The Jewish Theological Seminary still rejects out lesbians and gays as candidates for ordination as rabbis. Progressive congregations who don't mind having one out lesbian or gay assistant rabbi balk at having two or at having an out senior rabbi. And, of course, not all congregations are progressive. Gay and lesbian marriage is still not recognized legally (this is, of course, not only a Jewish problem). And hate crimes against gays and lesbians are still a tragic reality. Only last spring, the partner of a CBST member was brutally beaten on the street in a vicious "fag-bashing."

Many of my congregants at CBST are still not out at work or not out to their parents, or their children, or not out anywhere but at our synagogue. When one begins to take the risk of stepping outside the narrow place, the terror of the wilderness sinks in, and the pull to return to Egypt becomes almost irresistible. In the wilderness, the Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "if only we had died...in Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, at least we had our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into the wilderness to starve to death."^{viii}

This is not the only time the Israelites express their frustration. Later, they complain:

Did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock? If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat fresh in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!"^{ix}

When faced with the rigors of the wilderness and the uncertain promise of the Land, the people long to return to the comforts of familiar Egypt--even though it also means accepting oppression.

For gay people, the struggle to leave Egypt and enter the wilderness includes the perils of self-revelation and the consequent horrific risks. This journey comes with great pain and exacts an enormous personal toll. The invisibility offered by Egypt crushes the soul, but it does provide some measure of protection. At least in Egypt your job might be safe. Your children might not be taken from you. At least in Egypt you might be a board member of your synagogue. At least in Egypt you can teach the stories of our people in a religious school. At least in Egypt you might not get beaten on the street or told you deserve AIDS, unlike the innocent victims out there. At least in Egypt there are leeks and onions.

The great tension of the experience of the wilderness is the tension between the impulse to go forward toward the Land and the pull back to Egypt. There is both a willingness and an unwillingness to put Egypt firmly behind us. And so the bulk of our Torah deals not with slavery nor with the Promised Land but rather with that trek, full of ambivalence and anxiety, through the wilderness. It is better to be out of Egypt even if we are not yet in the Land. But while parts of each of us, individually and collectively, are out of Egypt, others remain. And we are--all of us--still far from the Land. But *'libi bamizrach,*" the heart yearns for the East, the heart yearns to be in the East. The heart yearns for the Land. Despair is antithetical to Judaism, which teaches us that to imagine the Land while living in the vast emptiness of the wilderness is no less than a divine commandment. Hope is not a luxury. That struggle to hold onto a vision and time to try to achieve it even while we wander in the wilderness has, for thousands of years, been the defining characteristic of an exiled people, homeless, always dreaming of coming home to the Land.

Moses' parting words to the Israelites 40 years after the first *Pesach* are words of vision and against despair. It is not an easy message to deliver from the edge of the wilderness. After all, as professor Arnold Eisen has pointed out:

What has never been cannot be remembered and neither can it be described. All Moses has available is his language, and his own words will inevitably fall far short of the task assigned them because it is impossible to talk convincingly about a state of affairs which no one has ever experienced. What do wholeness and meaning look like? What will it be like to be really completely at home?^x

The 16th century mystics, the Lurianic kabbalists, took this a step further, teaching that the exile would end only when a complete repair of the broken world was achieved. But ending exile and reaching the land is not enough. The vision that Moses imparts even while he is dying is clear. Access to and tenure on the Land is conditional. We must do more than reach the Land: we must do it with justice or else the "Land will spew forth its inhabitants."^{x1} We must construct a moral, ethical code that affirms, challenges and even inconveniences us. It will not be enough to cross the physical river Jordan. We must really leave Egypt and its soul death behind. We must individually and collectively have the courage to live with a vision of Torah that both teaches us how to

live in the wilderness and simultaneously pulls us further toward the Land. With such a vision we may even have the *zekhut*, the merit and privilege, to one day reach the Promised Land.

How do we get there? No matter where in the wilderness, no matter how close or how far we are from Egypt, we--all of us--must struggle to have a vision of the Land. If we don't have the Land to dream of, there is no hope, and the pull to return to Egypt will be overwhelming. That pull will suffocate the very breath of our souls that ache to be in the East. *Libi bamizrach*. The time in the wilderness must be one creating and living a vision of torah, not one consumed in hatred of the Egyptians. Such a focus will not ultimately form a living Judaism that will be spiritually sustaining for us, nor can it be our only bequest to the next generation. And not only the next generation of Jews, women, lesbians, and whoever else we count as "us." Pharaoh's last words to Moses and Aaron after telling them and the Israelites, finally, to be gone, are "And may you bring a blessing on me also!"^{xii}

Please God, may it be so.^{xiii}

ⁱ Psalm 114

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 11:9

ⁱⁱⁱ The Hebrew name for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, means "narrow places."

^{iv} Linda Holtzman, *Struggle, Change, and Celebration in Lesbian Rabbis: the First Generation*, (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 45.

^v The committee included Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, Rabbi Jacob Staub, Rabbi Linda Holtzman, Rabbi Sharon Cohen (then a student), Rabbi Dan Kamesar (then a student), and myself (also then a student).

^{vii} Most prominently, Rabbi Hershel Matt z"l, Rabbi Alexander Schindler z"l, and Rabbi Arthur Green.

^{ix} Exodus 16:2-3

^x Arnold Eisen, *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflections on Homelessness and Homecoming*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN, 1986), p. 21.

^{xi} Leviticus 18:5

^{xii} Exodus 12:32

^{xiii} This essay is an adaptation of the keynote sermon given at the 12th International Conference of Gay and Lesbian Jews in San Francisco, May 24, 1991. I could not have written this without the wisdom of Rabbis Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, Yoel Kahn, and Margaret Moers Wenig. Rabbi Wenig's reactions to early drafts were insightful and helpful. Sections of this piece were first worked through in an extraordinary seminar taught by Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in the spring of 1990. I would also like to thank Andrew Goldfarb and David Rosen, Religious Action Center legislative assistants, for their help.