

IDZ

AUGUST 17th, 2007 DRASH

A year and a half ago, I was out there with all of you when Eric addressed this congregation for the first time as President. I had just become Vice President, and was still enjoying my anonymity. I was sitting next to my partner Taryn, who has always been so understanding of the commitment that being a Board member of CBST entails. At some point in Eric's speech, he spoke of the great mentoring that Lisa Kartzman, our most recent past President, had provided him when he was Vice President. Taryn suddenly stiffened. I think that was the first time that she realized there may be a connection between being Vice President and becoming President. I'm going to reiterate to you now my promise to her then: "Don't Worry. I'm not considering it!"

With a three year-old, a full-time job, and a partner with more than a full-time job, it is relatively easy "not to consider" it. But someone better be considering becoming our next President, or Eric's partner, Pierre, will be very unhappy. And when that person serves, someone else will be "on deck," and sooner or later someone who happens to be straight will be standing here again, and I imagine not a few people will be secretly hoping that, for whatever reason, that person also says, "Don't Worry. I'm not considering it."

I hope that the number of people feeling that way diminishes each year. And I hope that those of you who still worry about it will find, over time, less to worry about. I firmly believe that CBST can expand the borders of its leadership community without losing its identity. There should even be room for a straight white male who hasn't had too much experience with discrimination.

I grew up in rural New York, in a place where it was a struggle to develop a progressive Jewish identity. I lived in Asia for five years. I worked at Planned Parenthood for seven. And I've been a CBST member for nine. I do know something about being in the minority. But I don't know much about a hostile environment. Society never questioned my "right" to pray. Or the legitimacy of my sexual orientation. Or how I spoke or dressed or walked. Or why I was attracted to who I was attracted to. Or even my grammar.

In fact, it is only as a member of CBST that I have been mistaken for something I'm not, and been told by some people that I don't belong. I've been asked several times how it was growing up gay in a straight rural community. And there are some people here who think that, as a straight person, I shouldn't even be allowed to be a member of CBST (not to mention be on the Board). Yet I feel more at home here than in any institution I have ever been part of. And I care more about the health of this synagogue, and the ideals it espouses, than I ever could have imagined I could care about any movement.

This week's parsha, Shoftim, has more than its share of anachronistic, discriminatory notions. Like the idea that if anyone in your town turns out not to be Jewish, they should be stoned to death. But it also holds the seeds of a jurisprudence that limited the Divine Right of Kings. And it raises some ideas that were not only radical in their day, but may have something to teach us even now.

Like the idea of Asylum Cities. This concept is discussed at several places in the Torah, but especially clearly here.

The idea is that there should be cities, easily accessible, in which purported criminals could seek refuge from swift communal justice. In the good old days, evidently, if you accidentally killed someone, you might be in as much trouble as if you had done so intentionally. This is because before you had time to prove it was an accident there was a decent chance that members of the victim's clan - the "blood avengers" -- would come after you and carry out a presumptively legal revenge killing. But the Asylum Cities were set up, and made easy to get to, so that these types of revenge killings would be thwarted.

These days, we hear about "asylum" in another context -- immigration. But one of the underlying principles survives, however tenuously, in our jurisprudence: judge people by the totality of the circumstances, not just the facts from the police blotter. "Justice justice thou shalt pursue." That's from Shoftim, too. I think about that every time someone calls into WNYC, the radio station where I work, and complains about "illegal aliens."

We admitted a kid into our Radio Rookies training program last year. He worked on a story about his life that aired nationally last month on NPR. His parents took him across the border at age four. He's fifteen now, and has to struggle in high school with the stigma of being "illegal." He is a hard-working, honest young man. He wants to join the Marines, but they won't take him because of his status. He faces deportation in 3 years to a country he never really knew. He is "illegal" for who he is.

It isn't his sexual orientation. Of course, if he were gay and trying to get into this country, or bring his partner with him, he would encounter all that other status-based discrimination. He's just poor, and dark-skinned, and Mexican, and now he is petrified that by even talking about his plight he may get his parents deported. The days after we aired his story, and he was interviewed by Brian Lehrer, we got a slew of the most hateful correspondence I've ever seen. It was worse in many ways than the invective that I saw at Planned Parenthood (where I first became acquainted with religious-based hate mail.) Laura Ingraham picked it up on her radio show, and we became the object of a nation-wide campaign.

The vehemence of the hate directed against us was startling. We were accused of scripting him -- some people couldn't accept that they were so moved by a 15 year old's story. We were accused of unfairly giving him a break not afforded a legal immigrant or citizen -- some people still have to rank human beings in this hideous way. We were accused of "sexual slavery" -- some people thought that we were holding him against his will or taking advantage of his youth.

And of course many of those accusations were part of a hate campaign from people who hadn't even heard the story. They were today's blood avengers. That they were after us as much as Christian (yes, that's his real name) didn't matter. We need modern day "Asylum Cities." We need everyone to say, "Don't judge me by a label -- I am not 'illegal' because of who I am." CBST's community gets this instinctively. We don't need any lessons on the dangers of blood vengeance. We don't need any lessons on the fallacy of branding someone "illegal" for who they are. We don't need any lessons on the need for compassion. We can teach.

In fact, a New Sanctuary Movement has sprung up in response to this hate. The Movement is centered in religious institutions. It finds its inspiration in the Sanctuary Movement of the early 1980's, which sheltered refugees from US sponsored wars in Central America. Refugees who our government refused to classify as refugees. Our government then felt that to admit these people as refugees would somehow be tantamount to the cardinal sin of acknowledging that our policies down there weren't working.

This New Sanctuary Movement wants to help immigrants today who are in legal limbo, who would otherwise be put in jail while their cases are being decided. Host congregations, and I hope CBST will one day be one, will sign onto a Sanctuary Pledge. Congregants will, as their mission statement puts it, “publicly provide hospitality and protection to a limited number of immigrant families whose legal cases clearly reveal the contradictions and moral injustice of our current immigration system while working to support legislation that would change their situation.”

We understand where this movement is coming from. Our government seems to have forgotten the principle of innocent until proven guilty. Like a blood avenger, it rushes in to imprison those, often just “out of status” – “illegal” – before the facts are known. I urge this congregation to get involved. Learn more at [New Sanctuary Movement dot org](http://NewSanctuaryMovement.org).

Justice Justice thou shalt pursue.

CBST has something in common with Asylum Cities. Asylum Cities were a radical idea in the Ancient Near East to get away from revenge killings. A radical idea – a Jewish idea -- in the name of justice. CBST also is a radical idea – a Jewish idea -- in the name of justice. We understand that every individual is unique, and that no one fits neatly into a single category. And we understand the need for asylum, in all its forms. May CBST go from success to success, in the name of justice, justice.

Shabbat Shalom.