

Shabbat Shalom,

Thank you for inviting us to this magnificent congregation. New York is the last stop on the coast to coast trip of the Israeli Gay Youth delegation. We've been through San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington DC, and now we're delighted to finally be here, in NY, with you.

It has been a long journey, and throughout it all my eyes were set towards this Shabbat service, our final one in America, right here in NY together with this community. Luckily for us, our friends from Jerusalem Open House had such a great time during their last visit here, that they told us that Congregation Beit Simchat Torah is not something we can miss.

We came to the US in order to meet your community, learn from your experience, share our stories and challenges, and tell you about Israeli Gay Youth, the national organization of LGBT teens and youth in Israel. We have come to tell you about the days that followed the August 1st attack, and about the influences that those days had on us – As human beings, as an organization, as a community.

We didn't plan it to be this way, but our weekly Parasha is Chayey Sarah. Maybe you're all familiar with the general idea: Sarah dies, Abraham buys the Cave of Machpela and causes us troubles for years to come. Then Abraham instructs Eliezer to find a match for Yitzhak. Eliezer goes back to Abraham's family and there Rivka passes his test and is promised to Yitzhak. Abraham dies, the end.

This might not be the most traditional way to interpret the Parasha, but as I see it, this Parasha refers directly to us and to the last three months, those that have followed the attack.

Just like the Parasha, our story begins with death. The night in which a masked gunman entered to one of the gay youth venues in Tel Aviv and started shooting was the most horrific night we've ever experienced. We reached the venue immediately, hoping it was just a mistake, but we found out that the reality was worse than a nightmare.

Two beloved friends got killed that night – Nir Katz, a 26 year old counselor, and Liz Trobishi, a 15 year old girl who was visiting that venue for the first time. 15 more kids were wounded, and two of them are still in the hospital. They are supposed to leave before the end of the month, but they might stay paralyzed for a long time, even for a lifetime.

Back to the Parasha, we get to an interesting phenomenon. After all, we've learned during the last weeks, when we were reading Lech Lecha and VaYera, that if there's something that Abraham loves to do, it's to look forward. From the moment he left his home and went to Knaan, he didn't look back, and that was exactly his advice to Lot and his family.

But in this Parasha, Abraham decides to act differently and makes Eliezer take a vow that he'll return to Abraham's native land of Haran, in order to find the desired bride for Yitzhak. The question is: why does he do this. After all, neither the people of Haran nor those of Knaan were Jews, so lack of Judaism couldn't be the reason.

I think the reason is that Abraham understands that in his efforts to convert people to Judaism, and educate them on the idea of a monotheistic way of thinking, it would be better to start at home. He understands that it doesn't matter how liberal and progressive he is. Since his roots are still in a different place, and because he can't and shouldn't uproot them, he ought to tend them in his own way, slowly but firmly.

The coming out process perfectly parallels this. Sometimes we tend to want everything to happen instantly, and we forget that our families may need some time in order to learn how to accept us. We forget that we, too, must be patient and explain, time after time, even when it's a total pain.

After the attack, many of our kids decided to come out. They didn't want to die before telling their parents. Their slogan was "I don't want to come out from the closet in a coffin". But it wasn't the right time for them to come out. Neither they nor their families were ready for that move. In many of the cases, the results were tough, and we had to bring more than 20 of our youth to Beit Dror – the LGBT youth shelter in Tel Aviv. Only then could we start the mediation process with the kids and their families.

Returning back to our weekly Torah portion, the need to return to the family, and to live in peace with your family members even when your ways differ, wasn't the only reason for Abraham to pick Rivka as Yitzhak's wife.

The Midrash suggests that Eliezer had a daughter and that his dream was to wed her to Yitzhak, his master's son. Abraham, as we already know, refused. Again, the fact that she wasn't Jewish was not part of the considerations. Moreover, Eliezer was the head of Abraham's Yeshiva; he was the one who spread the Torah. And that was the problem. Eliezer spread the Torah as is, he didn't make any new interpretations, and he didn't move forward.

Rivka, on the contrary, passed the test. Not only did she let Eliezer drink, she put out water for his camels as well. That was exactly what Abraham was looking for. He didn't want to keep things as they were during Sara's life, as magnificent as they were; he wanted to move on, to renew, and to raise new ideas.

The Israeli Gay Youth organization operates more than 36 social and support groups for LGBT teens and youth between the ages of 15 and 23. That's what we do, that's what we are good at. We have groups for teens and for youth, for young men and young women, for bisexuals, and for transgender youth.

But just like Abraham, we can't allow ourselves to stand still, so we've opened new groups, for teens and youth coming from Orthodox families, and for youth living with HIV. That's why, in order to combat Homophobia from the core, and meanwhile let our kids be more active, we're busy now forming an Israeli Gay-Straight Alliance, that will operate within schools, progressive congregations and youth movements.

The death of Sarah was a turning point in the life of emerging Judaism. With a little less attention, Judaism could have stopped there, somewhere in the middle of the Book of Genesis. But Abraham took responsibility and made sure that his dynasty would go on,

grown and renewed. In many ways, progressive Judaism nowadays is the living proof of the wisdom of his legacy.

Just like the Parasha, our story begins with death, but finishes off with the promise of renewal and vitality. Our murderer was probably a Jewish man, a zealot. Violence is his bread and butter. He murdered two of our friends, wounded many others, and almost crushed the safe space that we've been building for years. He rocked our world, but one thing he didn't do – He didn't stop us. Just like progressive Judaism – we will win this battle.