Love is Love
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
Temple Sholom, Vancouver BV
August 16, 2019

What do I as a straight, white male know about being gay and in love in 2019?

I would say that I know everything and nothing about it; which is generally the basis for most of my sermons, so we are on familiar ground.

On the one hand love is love, and I am truly, madly, deeply in love with my wife, and when we are not exhausted from parenting three children 13 and under we make every effort to express that affection and appreciation and love in all the conventional and unconventional ways. So if part of tonight on this Tu B'Av is about celebrating that great gift of human relationship, that we can be in relationship, that we can be in love with each other then I get it. I hope and pray that everyone if this room at some point in their life gets to experience such a profound and transformative love.

The Bal Shem Tov told a story, that is actually inscribed on my ketubah about how each human being is a ray of light and when those two lights find each other and embrace each other they combine to make an even brighter more holy light. I pray we all know and experience that kind of light and love.

On the other hand, I have no idea what it is like to love someone and have that love denied or attacked by society, by religion, by the government or by my own family or friends. I don't know what it is like to hide who I really am because of how people might react or how I myself might react to coming out as me.

I don't know what it is like to be non-binary in a predominant binary world. I can generally see examples of myself and my identity in the media, in entertainment, in the Torah, in the news – what must it be like to look to those sources for affirmation that you are not alone and feel very much alone, ignored or even villainized?

When I was a teenager nearly every social institution was constructed to support me or program me toward a heterosexual identity and life style, from boy scouts and gendered Jewish youth groups, to kings and queens at prom (not those kinds of queens, not in the 80's), my friends in fraternities and sororities, even the gender specific roles I saw in my synagogue where we never had a rabbi who happened to be female, or even a Temple President – let alone one who was openly gay. When I was a teenager they discovered AIDS and told us it was a gay disease, some said a divine punishment for social sins. I'm not that old, that was not that long ago.

We don't live in that world anymore, thank God; coming of age as you are coming to know yourself and perhaps coming out is a wholly different and exponentially more positive

experience in 2019 than it was in 30, 40 years ago and still we have much to learn and much to reconcile and much to do.

So as I thought about what words of Torah I could bring tonight that could celebrate this evening, celebrate and acknowledge the love, relationship and each and every human being in this room for who they are, as they are, the words that come to mind are words that begin with love and are at the core of what I think it means to be a Jew.

Vahavtah L'rayaecha kamocha – Love your neighbor as yourself. We can say that means many things in many different contexts, from immigrants and refugees, to people of different faiths or means but at the heart of it all the commandment is a commandment to practice empathy, to live and love from a place of empathy.

Austrian psychotherapist Alfred Adler described empathy as, "seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another."

Which reminds me – as an aside, of comedian Steve Martin's line about empathy: "Before you criticize a man, walk a mile in his shoes. That way, when you do criticize him, you'll be a mile away and you'll have his shoes."

Judaism demands, it commands not only in that one verse but throughout the narrative of Torah that I step outside of myself and make this assessment not sometimes, but EVERY time I'm about to interact with others.

That's not easy to do – there is the small issue of ego that often gets in the way.

Rav Yitzchak Meir of Gur observed that the greatest darkness exists when we can't see each other - when we can't appreciate the other's pain. He was commenting on the 9th plague, hoshech, darkness a plague that was second only to the death of first-born children.

We read in Torah, "And Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days: They could not see one another, neither did they rise anyone from his place..." (Exodus 10:22-23)

If we never see the need in the first place, we won't move, we won't lift a hand to help, not even a finger – we practice blind indifference.

Judaism commands – NOTICE, have empathy, for each other, judge with empathy, act with empathy, treat each other with empathy.

Empathy is the very meaning of God's name when we say on the High Holy Days, "Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum v chanun. / "The Eternal! The Eternal! A God compassionate and gracious." It too is a verse that comes from the book of Exodus, shortly after the plagues during the story of the Golden Calf. Moses is bereft and despondent over the betrayal by the Jewish people, he

feels as though he has been bullied and rejected by them at the moment, he needed them the most, God comforts him and empathizes with him. God stands in Moses' sandals and says, 'Its not about me, it about you, Moses you feel abandoned by the people you risked so much for.' It's an empathic moment for God. He comforts Moses as a true friend comforts another; you hurt and I weep God declares.

The name *Rachum*, or *Rachamim* is a lens into the importance of empathy in Judaism and to the very nature of God. Its root is the word *rechem*, which means womb. Empathy in Judaism is to feel for another as though they were your own child.

It is not enough to merely say, "that person is a fellow human being and I should help them," it is not even enough to say, "that person is my brother and I should help him." No, our tradition commands us to see every person as God sees them, as though they issued from our womb, to say, "that person is somebody's child," and they are perfect just as they are and they are worthy of love just as they are and their life has eternal value, and they are fragile and they are lonely and they are just like you, they are part of you.

What do I as a straight, white male know about being gay and in love in 2019, I know everything and I know nothing – both constructs demand that I act with empathy, vote with empathy, pray with empathy and love with empathy. *Baruch attah Adonai eloheynu melech haolam she asany yisrael*, thank you adoani my God for making me a Jew so that am commanded to related to the world with empathy.

Let me close with this, the mission statement of this synagogue has been, since long before my arrival six years ago to "honour and sanctify each and every person, integrating a deep sense of Jewish tradition with contemporary life." We are proud of our legacy of social justice and human dignity, I know that it has not always been without failings and errors, and no doubt we will make mistakes, hopefully different ones, in the future; but I know that I speak for our *klay kodesh*, our staff, our lay leadership and I believe the vast majority of our membership when I say that our mission statement is not just on our letterhead and our website, it is in our hearts with which we love and our arms and legs with which we work for justice. This is our Torah.