

**Rabbi Lisa A. Edwards**  
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**BCC, LA**

At the end of the mourners' kaddish, many of us engage in the traditional practice of taking three steps back and turning to the right and left. One traditional reason given for this choreography is that when we leave God's presence we do so humbly, and reluctantly. We don't turn our back to God, but we do turn side to side in acknowledgment that God is everywhere. One rabbi, however, [Rabbi Joseph Braver in *The Orchard*, p 39, Fall 97, from Rabbinic Cabinet of UJA] ties this custom directly to the last line of Kaddish: "oseh shalom..." we ask God to "make peace." What we are doing in those gestures, he says, is physically demonstrating the meaning of those words. Instead of asking God to make peace, we are saying: "In order to promote peace, I will not be inflexible or stubborn. I am willing to go back, to retreat from my opinion and viewpoint. I am even willing to bend to the right or the left in order to achieve peace."

Some of us, except perhaps for the yoga practitioners among us, have noticed that the older we get the harder it is to bend right or left - or any direction at all these days. Fran's not here tonight in the congregation because she threw her back out Wednesday, due to no particular incident that she can recall.

Now that we're once again into our annual reading of the Book of Exodus, we get reminded on a weekly basis of what happens when people don't bend, when they lose flexibility (or never had in the first place). Even if you don't know the stories very well, you probably know the phrases that the Torah offers: The Pharaoh who won't let the Israelites leave Egypt is called by God, hard-hearted *kaveid-lev* (or heavy-hearted as in unchangeable, inflexible, stubborn); and later, the narrative voice describes him as strong-hearted (*ye'khezak lev*), again the implication being tough, stubborn, immovable, and that *lo shat-libo* [7:23] that he would not "set his heart" toward Moses, but rather turned away, literally he went inside his house, walked away from Moses and from the miracles, the plagues, that appeared before him. Tough guy, tough-hearted, rubbery, this Pharaoh, he won't bend. Of course the Israelites are not much better. Remember what we get called by God more than once in the Book of Exodus? *Am-k'she-OH-ref* [Ex 32:9], a "stiff-necked people."

I spent the early part of this week at the annual conference of Reform rabbis from the west coast. This is the group that's known as the least stiff-necked of all rabbis, the friendliest, most welcoming, often the most politically correct. It's to this group that gay and lesbian Jews have traditionally gone first with issues important to us. It's no coincidence that our congregation, BCC, the first synagogue for gay and lesbian Jews, was established here in LA, for, among other reasons, it was here that queer Jews found support from rabbis -- reform rabbis. And it's in part because we've been here all these years that Reform rabbis around here have remained friendly, open, politically correct - because they know us personally.

Indeed, since the moment I began rabbinical school, in 1988, I have found support from many Reform rabbis (especially west coast rabbis) for me as a lesbian rabbi, for our congregation and its sibling congregations, for many issues facing our community, dating back to 1990 when gay and lesbian people were first accepted to Hebrew Union College's rabbinic program and g/l rabbis as members of the CCAR (the national reform rabbis organization). The Pacific Area Reform Rabbis (or PARR as it is known, even though I don't think many of us play golf) has already passed a resolution condemning the Knight Initiative, and I would venture to guess that 80-90% of the PARR membership who attends the CCAR conference in March in Greensboro, NC will vote in favor of the resolution calling upon us to recognize same gender marriages as sacred (more on that another time). Most of this region's reform rabbis have said they would officiate at our weddings, many already have.

And although I know I have colleagues who still do not consider same gender weddings or

relationships as holy or deserving of rabbinic officiation, those against no longer have loud voices within our region's conference of rabbis. By the time we get to Greensboro in March, I hope we will have even more rabbis, from more parts of the country on our side.

Despite this good news that I am telling you, I don't think our vote in Greensboro is a certain win for us. And even if it does win, the resolution itself does not promise that every same gender Jewish couple will be able to find a willing Reform rabbi to officiate at their wedding. In Reform tradition, that decision will be left up to each individual rabbi. Even though I said I found supportive colleagues 12 years ago when I began, I must emphasize how many more there are now, and how much more supportive many of them are than they were 12 years ago. Times have really changed; hearts have really changed (I think about the meetings of g/l/b rabbis and students through the years - when I first came around we met furtively, in secret places; later we made announcements of our meetings but met in restaurants far away; then we met in the restaurant at the hotel; this year we didn't even meet as a group - I'm not sure why - maybe that's how mainstreamed - and complacent - we've become!).

How our colleagues and other Jews have changed is largely due, I think, to the fact that many in our community have helped them change over the years by coming out, by being honest and forthright with them about who we are and what we want and need -- by letting them get to know us, even insisting that they get to know us. Unlike Pharaoh when things weren't going well for him, we didn't turn on our heels and walk away. We didn't set our hearts against them (though we may have been tempted to do so more than once), but instead we opened our hearts to them. And lo and behold, by opening our hearts, we found many who responded similarly - who opened their hearts to us.

In some ways it was easy for me, even 12 years ago, even before the reform movement had taken a stand on gay and lesbian rabbis, for even then I was already following in the footsteps of brave and open-hearted people who had already been down the path. After all, 12 years ago, BCC had already been around for 16 years, and many rabbis and rabbinic students, including Rabbi Eger and Rabbi Blumenthal who served BCC before me, had helped (still help) pave the way. BCC has an important place in the history of encouraging and bringing about gay and lesbian inclusion in Reform Judaism and Reform Jewish communities (and I hope in the near future it will be helping to do the same for bi and trans Jews as well).

It's not just from this safe place, though, that hearts have been opened up.

Tonight we have some special visitors with us. The founder of Project 10, the first and only school-district-wide support program in the country for g/l/b/t teenagers. Virginia Uribe, founder of Project 10, is with us tonight (unfortunately her partner in life and in Project 10, Gail Rolf, was unable to join us). Virginia is here in company with another friend new to BCC - Noah Branman (and his parents, Larry and Susan, and sister Danielle). Noah is the recipient of the Project 10 college scholarship that BCC has helped to fund through our tzedakah project. [Would you all stand up so we can see and welcome you?]

Noah is now a freshman (freshperson) at Brandeis University, and after services you can ask him how that's going. Noah received the Project 10 scholarship because of his outstanding work while he was still a high school student here in LA in a Highly Gifted Magnet school. In his high school years, reported the Jewish Journal in an article last June about Jewish high school students "to keep an eye on," Noah "crusades tirelessly for the civil rights of those whose sexual orientations are out of the mainstream" [Jewish Journal June 11, 1999, p.12]. As a member of Temple Beth Hillel in North Hollywood, he also "helps in classrooms, leads youth services and participates in the Reform movement's teen organization, the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY)." I understand he was even thinking about becoming a rabbi.

Noah, even as a high school student, was among those who, in his openness and open-heartedness, helped soften the hearts of members of the Jewish community and society-at-large. He's one of the ones who has made a difference. And that he was able to make a difference, able to be open about

who he is, even as a teenager, is due in part to lots of people in this room. How many of us, when we were in high school, if we even knew we were queer when we were in high school, could have done what Noah did? Not many. But now think for a moment about our own lives and about how times have changed. And think for a moment about the ways we helped change them. The ways we helped make it possible for Noah to do what he is doing in the world . . . and for the world. We've all helped. Want to do more? There are many more Pharaohs and stiff-necked Israelites out there in the world waiting for us. Project 10 and other organizations as well, are out there too, working tirelessly, and needing our help. Think what a difference a program like Project 10 can make to high school students and teachers and administrators - don't you wish it had been around when you were in high school? A safe place to get support and to organize, to learn to negotiate and lobby for our civil rights, a place to go when it gets difficult with families and friends, a place to have fun (do you all know about Project 10's annual Prom - they need chaperones!). You can talk to Virginia after services to find out more. And know too that, in part due to their role-modeling, other programs for g/l/b/t youth are also coming into existence - here in LA at the Gay/Lesbian Center, and recently too in Haifa, Israel under the auspices of our movement's Leo Baeck center. I'll be talking to you about that another time

I can't help but wonder, as I do every year when I begin the Book of Exodus anew, what would have happened back in Egypt, if God and Moses had softened their own hearts in the face of Pharaoh's hard heart. If all those adversaries had thought to be flexible instead of stubborn, seekers of peace instead of show-offs, had been more like those of us who seek reconciliation through open-heartedness and openness, through being who we are and showing others who we are. Oseh shalom [bend left and right] May God do it differently now, no more hardening of hearts, but harmonizing of hearts -- May the One who makes peace above make peace for us and for all Israel, and for all who dwell on earth. Or perhaps we should not leave it up to God. May we, our own selves, make peace in our own communities and within our own families. May our own openness and open-heartedness bring about the freedoms we seek, the harmony and the love.

Shabbat Shalom.