

Rabbi Lisa Edwards
Beth Chayim Chadashim
Parashat Re'eh
Rosh Chodesh Elul is Thurs. night
25 Av 5760 August 25, 2000

A reporter from the LA Times called me this afternoon to ask me about the break up of Ellen Degeneres and Anne Heche. Ask me? To tell you the truth I hadn't even heard about it (I didn't realize that was what Melanie meant in her BCC bytes comment). So here I was at the moment of surprise and sadness, talking to a total stranger on the phone for what purpose? Why was she calling me? "Why is it an important story to the gay and lesbian community?" she asked. "Because they are heroes," I said. "What was heroic about them?" "For one, they were willing to let their lives be lived under a microscope because living openly and honestly feels better than hiding, because living openly and honestly just might help countless other people live their lives. It did help countless other people" I went on for a while saying stuff like, "Imagine what it would be like to be in a relationship that lots of people are watching all the time, counting on, really." "You're so nice," the reporter said, "a friend of mine just kept saying they were publicity hounds trying to get as much attention as possible just to be in the newspaper." Sigh

It's not easy to make a relationship work forever. Lots of us in this sanctuary tonight know that. We also know that it's no longer a shameful thing to end a marriage or a relationship (Judaism has always believed that divorce is sometimes the right choice to make.) It's not a shameful thing, but it's a sad thing, when shared visions shift to separate visions, when promises lead to disappointments, when love ends.

Nice beginning I've got going here for blessing a couple about to get married, eh? But I'm sure Ari and Christina aren't worried - they know I don't even know them!! - Besides, they've got that happy couple thing going. Couples about to get married mostly aren't thinking about their marriage ending in divorce. (And if they are, maybe they should be giving some thought to this wedding plan). So Christina and Ari, I'm not talking about you....

Except in what I'm going to say next. And here I'm talking to all of us. Fran and I once officiated at a ceremony where the families of each partner came, but where 3 of the 4 parents were clearly ambivalent about their feelings. On the one hand, it was great that they were all there. It meant a lot to the couple. On the other hand, it was painful to watch - as Fran and I did out of the corners of our eyes - those ambivalent parents shifting in their seats, looking down a lot instead of at that handsome couple under the chupah, remaining silent when others in the congregation vowed to help support the couple in their commitment to one another. It's hard for anyone, including a couple, to live a happy life if they are isolated from others they love. It's also hard to live a happy life if you live under a microscope, your every move watched by others. In the Torah portion this week, Re'eh, there is a famous passage about giving to the poor. Moses says this to the assembled Israelites:

"If there is a needy person among you, one of your kinspeople in any of your settlements in the land that God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinfolk. Rather, you must open your hand and lend your kin sufficient for their needs. Give to your kin readily and have no regrets when you do, for in return God your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsperson in your land." [Deut. 15:7-11]

Now this passage is usually taken to be about tzedakah, about helping the poor who need financial or

material help. And certainly that is the obvious reading, and something I and the Tzedakah Council hope you take to heart. It's not as easy a commandment to follow as one might at first think – as the BCC Board discovered at our meeting Wednesday night - when we tried to take this instruction to heart while also figuring out exactly how as a group we could help provide for the needs of the needy among our community. We will be continuing to discuss these matters and invite input from any of you on how to be a caring community.

But tonight I want to invite us to read this passage in a different way. "For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land," says Moses [v.11]. Let's imagine that the term *ev-yon* "needy" refers to emotional needs. "Do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinfolk. Rather, you must open your hand and lend your kin sufficient for their needs." How often do we turn away from our relatives or friends or other? BCC members when they need our support? How often do we offer criticism when they need acceptance? How often do we offer silence when they need a kind word? How quick are we to make judgments - about how they're living their lives, or spending their money, or interacting with others? And how often do we do the same to ourselves - how often are we self-critical, harsh, and judgmental of ourselves? How often are we hardhearted and critical to others and to ourselves when we ought to be softhearted and accepting? "Do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinfolk. Rather, you must open your hand and lend your kin sufficient for their needs." This is not to say that we shouldn't ever criticize or that we should be too soft or too forgiving. "Lend your kin sufficient for their needs." Sometimes we need honest feedback, we need to hear another point of view."

A few minutes ago we blessed the month of Elul, the last month of the year, the month that immediately precedes the Days of Awe. Elul begins this coming week, and in Jewish tradition we have a special assignment during the month of Elul. An assignment that is a gift really. We'll be talking more about it at our study session this Monday night and again at services next Friday but for now consider this: consider that long ago in Jewish tradition Elul became a time in which the whole community engages -- at the same time -- in trying to be better people. It is a time to reflect on our values and improve them; a time to re-center ourselves, refocus our lives, a time not only to decide we want to be better, but actually to take steps to become better, actually to begin the journey of repair and of growth that will make each of us more the person we want to be, more the person God wants us to be (of course, we hope that who we want to be and who God wants us to be are one and the same!). As Elul begins Thursday night, and for the next forty days - right up through Yom Kippur -- such should be our focus both individually and communally.

"This isn't what I ever imagined for my son," said a mother to Fran recently about the fact that her son is gay. "No," said Fran, "I'm sure it isn't, but how great that you're here for him. He sure looked happy under that chupah, didn't he?" "It took me 10 years of a lot of therapy and hard work to get here," said the mother. "It paid off," said Fran, "it means so much to him to have you here."

"Do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinfolk. Rather, you must open your hand and lend your kin sufficient for their needs." [Deut. 15:8]

Can we do it, do you suppose? As this month of introspection and turning begin, can we learn to open our hearts and our hands to lend support where it is needed? --Rejoicing in the joy of others, offering a shoulder for others to cry upon, giving freely of our prayers and our blessings to our kinfolks and allowing them to offer us prayers and blessings also as we journey together into this New Year? Can we do it, do you suppose? Shabbat Shalom

Christina and Ari,

I want to invite you to the bima now.

The Torah study group last night picked a verse of the week especially for you. Although technically the verse is about the holiday of Sukkot, they took the fact that by tradition, a Jewish wedding celebration lasts 7 days, to say to you: celebrate for seven daysŠfor God blesses you in all you have done and in all the work of your hands, ve'hayita ach sameach! And may you know only joy!

Ari,

you're the third sibling in your family to have an aufruf with us. So we want to offer you and Christina the same blessing we offer all our couples, words based on a prayer by liturgist Sidney Greenberg:

Ari and Christina,

May you be modest in your demands of one another, and generous in your giving to each other. May you never measure how much love or encouragement you offer; may you never count the times you forgive. Rather, may you always be grateful that you have one another and that you are able to express your love in acts of kindness. May you waste no opportunity to speak words of sympathy, of appreciation, of praise, and when you offer words of criticism, may they be chosen with care, and spoken softly.

Holy Blessed One, Creator of love, Bless Christina and Ari with health, happiness and contentment. Grant them the wisdom to keep a joyous and peaceful home. Keep them safe that they may enjoy a long life together, committed to each other and to love. [Based on a prayer by Sidney Greenberg]

Since all your parents and a few of your grandparents are here to offer you blessing and support tonight, I want to invite them all to the bima now, to wrap you in a tallit, a prayer shawl, and offer you the biblical words of blessing that Aaron offered the people Israel:

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's presence shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May God's presence be with you
and give you peace.

Num. 6:24

May God bless you and keep you.

Num. 6:25

May God's presence shine upon you and be gracious to you.

Num. 6:26

May God's presence be with you and give you peace.

[Fran: chant the Hebrew, then mazel tov and siman tov while candy is thrown]