

## Pride: A Curse or a Blessing?

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The concluding *parasha* of Leviticus features a series of blessings and curses – divine promises of reward or its opposite in return for obedience (or its opposite). The blessings for faithfulness to the covenant are broad and comprehensive: fertility, peace, victory, and God’s presence in your midst. The curses comprise a much longer list, intended to instill enough fear to induce *teshuvah*, and threatened in increasing levels of intensity – “if you do not obey Me,” followed by, “And if, for all that, you do not obey Me,,” and then, “And if you remain hostile to Me,” and then, “And if these things fail to discipline you,” eventually culminating in utter desolation.

In the midst of the long list of negative consequences, a particular phrase leapt off the scroll: “and I will break your proud glory” – *v’shavarti et-g’on uzchem* (Lev. 26:19). “Your proud glory,” or perhaps, “the pridefulness of your strength,” suggesting that the strength you claim for yourself is puffed up and hollow. Rashi tells us that it is a reference to the Temple, citing the same phrase in Ezekiel (24:21), where the prophet delivers this message from God (no doubt alluding to the phrase which he already knew from Leviticus): “Tell the House of Israel: Thus said the Lord God: ‘I am going to desecrate My Sanctuary, your pride and glory (*g’on uzchem*)...’”

The month of June is celebrated as Pride Month in the GLBTQQA [Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, and Allies] community. For the past eight years or so, I have been serving as Rabbi of Congregation Or Chadash in Chicago. Or Chadash is one of several congregations started back in the 70s by Jewish gay men and lesbians, who at the time felt quite marginalized by mainstream congregations. I have participated (proudly) in my share of Pride Parades, in Chicago and in Jerusalem. Some have asked, though, whether pride is ever an appropriate attitude.

The Hebrew root *gimel-aleph-heh* (pride) appears many times in the Tanakh. In Proverbs (8:13) God claims to hate pride and arrogance (*ge’ah v’ga’on*). Biblically speaking, pride seems to be appropriate for God: the Song at the Sea (Ex. 15:1) proclaims that God has triumphed gloriously (*ga’oh ga’ah*); but it is a dangerous attribute for humans – the psalmist

(94:2) asks that God deliver retribution on the “arrogant” (*ge'im*).

Yet, at a later time, Gaon (same root) became an honorific – the Gaonim (“Excellencies”) were the leaders of the Babylonian academies. The most famous bearer of the title in more recent centuries was Elijah, Gaon of Vilna. Apparently, it is not only God who is “*ge'ut* (same root again) *lavesh*” – robed in grandeur (Psalm 93:1); a few rabbis have been too. The noun form, *ga'avah*, is the way Hebrew-speaking GLBTQ organizations generally translate “pride” – as in *Keshet Ga'avah* – Rainbow Pride.

The Tel Aviv University historian Aviad Kleinberg published a provocative, learned, and entertaining little book a few years ago, called *7 Deadly Sins* (English version, Harvard University Press, 2008). Pride (*Superbia*), Kleinberg tells us, “is the mother of all the vices.” Nevertheless, some degree of pride seems as necessary to human existence as the *yetzer hara* (the rabbinic term for id, the life force), for human beings

want to believe that their actions and existence have value. ... The problem is that without pride there is no individuality—at least not in the deep sense that one must assume vis-à-vis God. ... Each of our desires participates in the sin of pride, for the “I” precedes desire, motivates it, and feeds it. (p. 138)

When we speak of pride in the GLBTQ(QA) community, it is not pride for pride’s sake, but as a necessary – and sometimes life-saving – antidote to shaming, and the ever-so-present bullying with which many youth today have to deal. So pride is situational: there are times when it is unjustified, obnoxious, and goeth before a fall. And there are times when its affirmation stiffens the backbone and helps stare down those who would diminish the divine image by attempting to shame another human being for being who they are.

An early morning prayer, which comes originally from the Yom Kippur liturgy, expresses (based on a passage in Ecclesiastes) a despairing view of human nature: our wisdom and strength amount to nothing, and we are hardly different from the beasts. And then it shifts (at least as concerns Jews): *but we are Your people, children of Your covenant...*

Am I “proud” to be a Jew? In general, no – no more than I am proud to be human. I am often amazed at what human beings have been able to accomplish technologically: skyscrapers, airplanes, and telephones still astonish me. Yet, given the general mess we have made of the world, it seems utterly misplaced to be proud of being human. Still, if someone tries to make me ashamed of who I am, then it is time to assert myself as a proud Jew. For all human beings – gay, straight, Jewish, non-Jewish, male, female, transgender – are created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in the divine image, a reality at once exalting and humbling.

Shabbat shalom.

Larry