



Noah and the Pope

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In our fast and furious news cycle with so many historic moments of upheaval and anxiety covered every day, in the middle of this past week came a report that was different from all the rest. Instead of division and despair, it noted that the current Pope had said supportive words about the LGBTQ community. “They are children of God and have a right to a family,” Pope Francis said. “Nobody should be thrown out or be made miserable because of it.” He continued, “What we have to create is a civil union law. That way they are legally covered.”

This was instantly met with backlash both from conservatives who railed at what they saw as a betrayal of Church doctrine, like Father Gerald Murray of New York, who said, “Pope Francis has overstepped his bounds,” and from liberals – too little too late.

You may ask – why am I speaking about the Pope in shul on *Shabbes*? And why this particular issue? Haven’t we on this bimah long ago resolved that we stand with our LGBTQ family, colleagues, community members, and friends?

I am speaking about it now because the Pope’s position is, more often than we think, our position. He did not need to speak up. Nobody expected him to do it. He could have said nothing or equivocated and no one would have batted an eye. Moreover, he must have known that if he did say something, it would open him to criticism.

He could have stayed quiet, cloistered. He could have said that it too hard, it is not the right time, it is not worth it. That is an option for us too. We can, especially now, stay cloistered. We can stay quiet about the suffering of others – stay on the sidelines of the injustice that rages outside, focused just on what is in front of us day to day.

With his words, the Pope opens another possibility, another path. He does it by looking again at his sources.

All religious traditions with deep and ancient sources have texts that have both accepted long-standing interpretations, and a flexibility that lies in the relative weight that is put on one teaching versus another. It is particularly noteworthy that the Pope's comments made the news this week, because our *Parasha* this week is a great example of exactly this.

As heteronormative texts go, the story we read this morning of Noah is up near the top. In fact, conservative religious groups often point to the repeated assertion that pairs are “male and female” to make their case. If *B'reishit's* Adam and Eve are source #1 for the claim that God defines partnership as heterosexual partnership, all the “male and female, two by two”-ness of the ark is a close second.

Repeatedly, the ark is boarded *Ish v'Ishto*, Male and his (female) mate. And when God speaks to Noah, it is “*Atah v'Ishtecha u'Vanecha u'N'shei Vanecha*,” “You and your wife, your sons and their wives.” For generations this was accepted truth. Pairs mean male and female matched sets – God's plan is explicit.

Until our generation, when it became clear to many of us that this reading of the natural order of our world failed to take in the sacred souls of beloved LGBTQ members of our community, our extended family and children.

And so, more than a decade ago, we began a transformative process. Where the Biblical texts that spoke explicitly to LGBTQ issues were rigid, we would use the weight of the ethical teachings of our Torah to read a welcome and embrace. We would leverage the compassion of the whole tradition to outweigh the exclusion of particular pieces of troubling text. “We are all created *B'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God,” outweighs “Thou shall not.” Love is love is love is love.

For the most part, though, this expansive read has been a liberal move, often limited to the left, both politically and religiously. When the Pope “came out” with his affirmation, he claimed that move for conservatives too – compassion over canon.

That is particularly important now, when extremist hatred has become the rallying cry of so many across the globe. At a time when there are so-called “LGBTQ-free zones” where discriminatory laws and restrictions are rising up in Catholic countries like Poland, at a time when legal protections are being challenged in our own country, to that unchecked menace, the Pope’s words are a corrective. As the Wall Street Journal shares, Reverend James Martin wrote: “Pope Francis’s support for same-sex civil unions ...sends a strong signal to countries where the church has opposed such laws.”

The power of this move extends far beyond the immediate issue to the capacity to see and respect all those who not only love differently, but live differently. In an interesting coda to the story of Noah’s ark, after the world is destroyed, its rebuilders make a catastrophic mistake with their zealotry. Rabbi Daniel Gordis points out a strange detail in the story of the Tower of Babel. We would expect the fact that everyone was working together as one uniform community to be a good thing – an ideal. We read the dispersion at the end of the story as a punishment. But Rabbi Gordis argues that difference and variability in look, language, and living is not a flaw – it is the plan. God’s world and God’s word only flourish when the full rainbow of human experience is expressed in our communities and beyond. This is true for LGBTQ rights, and it is true for all human rights. To oppress another because you believe the world should be all one way is to create a Tower of Babel, a foundational breach in our world. The Pope’s words embody a different path.

Of course, the statement made international news because Catholic doctrine has been, for as long as anyone can remember, firmly against same-sex unions of any kind. What’s more, his words are a reversal not only of Church doctrine, but of his own public teachings from as recently as 2016 when, according to the Wall Street Journal, he wrote, “[T]here are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family.”

While there were clues that Pope Francis was perhaps open to a softer stance, his public position and his community was clear: that conversation is closed. At a time when not only

LGBTQ marriage but adoption is rejected by conservative communities around the world, Pope Francis' words affirming family model a willingness to see others, even if doing so challenges you. The ability to examine and re-examine your own strongly held convictions, and the courage to challenge yourself with each new day, is an attribute we are desperately in need of in our world today. Seeing that, each of us is obliged to ask: what are the issues we need to revisit and re-examine?

Which led me back to my own previously held idea. I posited that Noah is an aggressively heteronormative text. But then I read again.

It is true people and animals go on the ark male and female, two by two. But God's original call to the ark is "*Kol beitecha*," "ALL of your household." They go out of the ark as a family, "Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him." Noah is not about ideal partnerships. It is about family – family whose strength is not who they exclude but who they embrace. Family who weathers trauma together and comes out charged with building a different kind of world.

We are not Noah. But there are traumas to travail and a world that continues to need our hands.

We are not the Pope. But there are truths we must speak and people we must stand for.

That is our task, today, and every day. What kind of world will we build?

Shabbat Shalom.