

Beha'ilotcha: How do we remake the silver trumpets when some refuse today's world?

Congregation Netivot Shalom

16 Sivan 5784 / 22 June 2024

What a blessing to rejoice in Shabbat and Pride together. Both times for joy and a break from the ordinary world.

My favorite Shabbat was in Jerusalem. I remember twirling in an alley in Nachlaot, at midnight, oversaturated with joy. My favorite Pride was in Jerusalem. Because it was my friend's first.

Esther was 'off the derech.' That means you've deviated from the path of Orthodoxy. My friend is a lesbian and knew that deviance was not going to be accepted. Certainly not celebrated with a parade. So as a teenager, she left the Haredi community and escaped fundamentalism.

First thing, she bought one of those absurd rainbow feather boas. Then, there was a huge rainbow flag laid out on the grass and she laid down in the middle of it so I could take a photo. A guy came over and I was worried we would get into trouble but he asked if we would help carry it.

So leading the March for Pride and Tolerance, holding a corner of that flag, I witnessed a teenager revel in her new freedom, and we sang *Salaam*: "Peace will come upon us and on everyone."

But Pride ended.

A few months later Esther told me she found a husband. He knew she was a lesbian and was fine with it. They didn't have to have children. What else was she going to do?

She was vulnerable. They raised her to be vulnerable to predators. They told her the predators were outside the community. If she left, she would be assaulted, trafficked, become a drug addict or homeless. She wouldn't survive. But we know it's not because the world outside was dangerous. It's because she wasn't prepared for it.

Her husband promised her he'd respect her sexuality. It'd be a marriage of convenience. He lied. It was just a different fundamentalism, a new predator, settler instead of black hat.

When Esther sent me a message saying she wanted to leave I started planning. But she had two kids by then. She decided to stay and we didn't talk about that anymore. The second message came a few years later. I had more resources. I thought it would work. But she stopped answering.

Last year for this parsha, I talked about silver trumpets. They directed the Israelites' attention to follow the Mishkan (Tabernacle). They needed something to follow. Life in Mitzrayim (Egypt) was not the same as life in the wilderness. The Judaism of their past did not meet the needs of their new lives.

We don't have a Mishkan, or a Temple with priests. In diaspora, we flourished with synagogues and rabbis, new languages, prayers and traditions. We built centers of learning. Political parties, labor bunds, federations, community centers, summer camps, and urban farms.

God told Moses that the trumpets must be remade each generation. Knowledge and traditions are passed down, but we have our own reasons and times requiring trumpets. The world changes; We remake our Judaism

Maimonides said "to sound alarm in times of catastrophe is a mitzvah" (a holy obligation). We are in a catastrophe. People like my friend suffer because being a lesbian does not fit in fundamentalism. So they say homosexuality is antithetical to Judaism, it is a contemporary, secular trend. A 'psychological sickness' to be cured with piety and conversion therapy.

A year ago, I asked for you to think of trumpets when you encounter injustice. I said it will be uncomfortable and uncertain. That we need to be patient and compassionate with ourselves and with others. I asked you to move through the world as a nation together because it is dangerous when we are separated. Because during this time of catastrophe people like me, like my friend, like your friends are harmed. That next week, two people told me they thought of trumpets and acted. The professor in me rejoices. The queer weeps for more.

What action could I have taken? To help her, her toddler and her infant away from that isolation to safety. While they live in a democratic state they are governed by a theocracy which persists because people outside of it preserve it. They have chosen to keep this system going and ignore its harm.

I say they, but it is we. There is a not insignificant part of us that believes it is okay to

live how we do because Jews somewhere are still doing it traditionally. They are deeply regressive but they are doing Judaism traditionally even though it means eschewing the divine directive-- the world changes, so God expects us to.

If she left, Esther feared that her children would be taken from her. The people who want to protect those children from their deviant lesbian mother are buttressed by institutional power and money.

What kind of lifestyle maintains itself through coercion and fear? Exclusion from social services, protection, and education? Justifying it to keep the children safe from harmful ideas. Like homosexuality. When a community does that, it's not just that harm can't get in. Those gates keep people in. Shouldn't they get to choose how to live, like we do?

Children do not consent to living as fundamentalists.

Esther wanted college, to wear a tank top, Google whatever she was curious about, walk in a Pride parade. Hold hands with a girl as they walk down a boulevard and share a kiss. Some will say that her life now is fine. Maybe she can't march in a parade, but she's a mother and has family and friends in her community. Who am I to say that's not enough? It's not that simple. She stayed because she could lose her children. In the last photo I saw of her she had six. Her husband could deny a divorce. The Rabbinate can decide her fate.

You are listening to a lesbian in a tallit on a bimah in a sanctuary without a mechitza (no barrier) in a city filled with queers and proud of its radicalism. In a country that prides itself on being free. Fundamentalists do not dictate my personhood: if I am a Jew, who I can marry, what I inherit, whose food I can eat, how I live, or where my wife buries my body. Not true for Esther.

This year, I have a question for you:

When a fundamentalist tells you they are "Just Jewish," do you ignore the uncomfortable part? "Just Jewish" really means "Just their version of Jewish."

It's a harmful version. My friend went back to fundamentalism because she did not think she would survive outside of it, not because she stopped being a lesbian.

Could you leave everything you know when your freedom comes with culture shock, loneliness, and guilt from leaving others behind? The consequences of that are no

secret: Depression; anxiety; self-harm; PTSD; addiction; and suicidal ideation. There are no statistics because while some deaths are well publicized, most die silently. They are anecdotal losses.

Our insistence on assigning charm to fundamentalists is killing people. The word for that is retzach (murder).

I did it. I spent so much time with fundamentalists, with “Just Jews”. Shabbat stays, learning in seminaries, listening attentively to explanations of modesty, sharing joyful moments babysitting their children. Making sure I didn’t slip up and mention the joys of the secular world. Like college. Or Pride parades.

God told Moses there are four reasons to blow his trumpets: assemble, move, defend, and celebrate. When it’s time to move, the Israelites hear nine blasts from the silver trumpets: Teruah. The sound of sorrow when we know we did something wrong. They depart camp spurred on by it and resolve to do better.

Assembled: Out of the closet. In the streets. On the bimah.

Move...

Defend: Challenge. Riot.

Celebrate: Pride. Rainbows.

Move...

How can I depart the wilderness leaving bodies behind me? Leaving her behind me? I ignored what was uncomfortable when I shared Shabbat tables with fundamentalists. I didn’t listen to the trumpets until it was too late. I failed Esther. We all did. We all are. Those words I joyfully sang with her from Od Yavo Shalom Aleinu: “Peace will come upon us.” We sang so loudly that day in Jerusalem. Proudly for peace.

I don’t hear peace.

I hear the trumpets now.

They sound in my soul.

Like screams echoing in a chamber, bouncing off tiled walls.