

Yom Kippur 5767
Cousin Johnny
Rabbi David Lerner

Erev tov – good evening.

Many people have nicknames. In my own family, my aunt named her siblings and herself strange, secret names, which I am not at liberty to divulge. I was told as a toddler to call my uncle, Alvan Kaunfer, a rabbi in Providence whom some of you know, “*Dod Avraham*,” since the Hebrew word for uncle is *dod* and *Avraham* is his Hebrew name.

As a two-year old, I really couldn’t sound out the name *Avraham*, but I was good with my *hets*, and still am, and so I called him *Dod Ham*, which literally means “hot uncle,” which, of course, could have many other connotations in different settings, none of which I was aware of at the time.

The name stuck. All the other nieces and nephews also call him *Dod Ham* to this day. Some of the other relatives in my family had simpler names. One of my cousins, my mother’s first cousin, Jonathan Green, was always referred to as Cousin Johnny, or Nonathan. That name came into being because of similar pronunciation problems in an earlier generation. I usually called him Cousin Johnny.

Full disclaimer: I am not his only cousin in the congregation. Beth Levine is his first cousin on the other side of the family!

Cousin Johnny grew up in Brookline and moved with his family during high school to Philadelphia. He was an architect. Cousin Johnny was creative, smart and artistic; Beth has one of his paintings up in her house that she sees every day. Cousin Johnny was also quite personable. I got to know him during his father’s *shiva*, which was held at my grandparents’ home in Brookline. While it was a sad week, we found some time to get to know each other better.

Eventually, we realized that we both had an interest in board games, and we designed our own. It was actually a brilliant strategy game, which, unfortunately, instead of selling to Hasbro, I lost. It was a combination of Stratego and chess. Johnny cut out the cardboard, cut out the pieces, and designed the beautifully made board.

Cousin Johnny continued to be a positive influence on me long after that week. When I shared with him my interest in architecture: how I would scribble blueprints and floor plans of houses in my notebooks, he encouraged me. He sent me architecture books including a beautiful book about McKim, Meade, and White, a great architecture firm, and urged me to do a high school internship at

Conklin Rossant Architects in Manhattan. He was a supportive person - kind, gentle, thoughtful, intelligent and funny.

Tragically, his life was cut short. A few years later, Cousin Johnny died of AIDS.

At the time, I didn't really connect all the dots. Cousin Johnny was gay and had a partner. But this was not a part of his life that he shared with me. In fact, until he took ill, it was never shared with my mother or her siblings either.

Thankfully, in today's world, people are more open, less likely to feel that they have to hide.

This country and much of the Western world have moved forward in appreciating how important it is to have rights for gays and lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered individuals. We have made great forward strides in terms of civil rights in our own state. Those who are gay can marry and enjoy the same benefits of forming a union as do a man and a woman.

In the Jewish tradition, some of these issues are more complex. What does the Jewish tradition say about homosexuality?

The Torah is fairly clear, stating that a man should not lie with another man in the same fashion that he lies with a woman. That is repeated in two different places in the Torah explicitly. This is not considered appropriate behavior.

The rabbinic tradition expands this to create a whole category that deals with homosexuality. Jewish law prohibits sexual relations between women and expands the rules about men as well. Until fairly recently, this perspective was almost universally affirmed.

Within the last few decades, however, our understanding of sexual orientation has changed dramatically. Psychology has moved from trying to provide therapy to help people become heterosexual to appreciating that sexual orientation is innate, that there is a spectrum of sexual orientation, that people evolve in different ways, and that it is important to accept and support people wherever they are on the sexual orientation spectrum.

In college, I took a course entitled: *The Psychological Aspects of Human Sexuality*, where we studied the entire gamut of the human sexual experience, including many of these issues.

This course and others, combined with my experiences and my friendships with those who are gay, as well as my Torah learning have pushed me in two opposite directions. On the religious front, it is clear that the Torah and

thousands of years of Jewish tradition come down strongly in one direction. And given my love and pre-disposition toward the tradition, this has great influence on me.

But, on the other hand, I am also moved by people, very moved by people. Often the rabbis would say: "*Puk hazi* – go out and see what people are doing," meaning: we should utilize our own experience to understand a difficult issue. Thus, our halakhic thinking has to allow for the changes in our understanding of gays and lesbians.

I realize that as I have been struggling with this issue, many of you come at it from a different perspective. For most of you, it is clear that just as we pushed for civil rights for homosexuals, we should allow for full religious rights. The clarity of your perspective is compelling.

Many of you have asked me about this issue and have come to see me. You have shared with me stories about gay members in your own families. I cannot thank you enough for letting me into your lives and being so open with me. One family told me how their child grew up right here at Temple Emunah, and this child felt that one could not be gay and Jewish – that they were mutually exclusive.

This is terribly sad and we have worked hard to change that. In fact, a year and half ago, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, a leading Conservative rabbi and scholar, discussed his more liberal approach to this issue at a Shabbat lunch with our teens. This coming spring, we will host Rabbi Steve Greenberg, a gay Orthodox rabbi for Shabbat.

At the same time, I know that some of you feel differently. Some of you have told me that you feel the tradition is clear on this issue and does not allow for change or compromise. You, too, have come into my office to share your perspective, which is also powerful.

In many ways, our shul is a microcosm of the larger Jewish world. The Orthodox have responded to this issue by strongly maintaining the traditional prohibitions, and the Reform have gone in the opposite direction.

As has been the case in certain centrist Christian denominations, like the Episcopalians, over the past two decades the Conservative movement has studied and debated what has become the most divisive issue in the movement.

Since it pits a moral understanding against a Torah law, this issue is even more controversial than egalitarianism was a few decades ago, which dealt only with rabbinic law and custom.

In 1992, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement, made up of 25 leading rabbis who determine Jewish law for our time, did not change the law, though the movement supports civil rights and has encouraged congregations to be welcoming of gay and lesbian congregants.

To Temple Emunah's credit, this position was taken seriously. Our Keruv committee initiated a campaign to welcome gays and lesbians and has held a number of programs on this topic.

Over the last few years, these issues have returned to the Law Committee and there are now four different *teshuvot* (rabbinic responsa) about this issue that are to be voted on in December.

Two of them affirm the status quo, a third uproots the biblical prohibition entirely, and the fourth tries to negotiate a compromise. The fourth paper, written by three rabbis including Rabbi Dorff, limits the biblical prohibition to one specific act, while removing the wider rabbinic prohibitions on homosexuality. These last two *teshuvot* would allow for gay rabbis and commitment ceremonies.

The Dorff *teshuvah* is based on the thesis that those who are gay do not choose their identity. It also incorporates the rabbinic principle of *kvod habriyot* – respecting a human being. Our rabbis taught that this idea is so vital, that it can even overrule a rabbinic prohibition. So, if sexual orientation is determined at birth, then respecting a human being, *kvod habriyot*, would allow us to change these laws.

I have not read all of these papers nor have they been voted on by the Law Committee. But they will be, and just as the Law Committee and many rabbis, including myself, have struggled with this issue, we at Temple Emunah must do so as well. For some of you, this might be obvious and others might find even considering this quite objectionable.

Some might wonder why I am speaking about something that has not yet occurred. On this most sacred day, when so many of us are together, we must consider this most critical topic. While these decisions are still a few months away from the Law Committee, we must approach them with thoughtfulness. I hope that we will have a deliberate and deliberative process, one in which all positions will be listened to *bebhavod*, with the honor and respect we owe all human beings.

Given the wide variety of perspectives and that we value the wide diversity in our community, we must dedicate ourselves to this learning. When the papers become public, we will convene opportunities to study them together and to discuss how we as a shul will approach them.

While I know that many of you have made up your minds on these issues and that those opinions fall across a wide spectrum, I ask you to respect the process and participate in it, to listen with an open heart as our communal discussion moves forward. Even those with carefully nuanced and strongly held positions can come to better understand the reasoning of those with whom they disagree.

On the night of *Kol Nidrei*, when we focus the power of our words, I hope and pray that we will respectfully study these texts together and allow all the different voices to be heard, even as we try to move forward.

Cousin Johnny endured many hospitalizations in New York, where his partner lived. Once when he was at NYU Hospital he called my mother, elated to report that something truly amazing had happened to him that day. “What?” she asked eagerly, hoping for some miraculous improvement in his condition.

“The rabbi, the chaplain here, came in to see me.” My mother didn’t understand the import of what he was saying. After all, she works at JTS where rabbi-sightings are commonplace. “Yes,” she responded, waiting for the amazing. “The rabbi, an Orthodox rabbi, came into my room. He sat down and talked to me for two hours. He knew that I have AIDS, that I am gay, and he wanted to talk to me.” Only then did she realize how isolated, how rejected by Judaism, perhaps even by God, Cousin Johnny had felt for so many years.

The rabbi had validated his status as a *ben-adam*, a human being and as a Jew.

I will certainly feel Cousin Johnny’s presence as we go forward with our study and deliberations.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah – may we all be sealed for a good year.