

Pride Havdalah Sermon - Rabbi Emerita Aviva Goldberg, June 12, 2021

A couple of days ago I read an opinion piece on CNN news by Michael Igel who, as well as being a lawyer, is the chair of the board of the Florida Holocaust Museum. The article is entitled “There’s a Cure for the Root Cause of Anti-Semitic Attacks.” He wrote in response to the rise of such attacks in the United States and the hate graffiti found on the outside entrance to this holocaust museum. In the article Igel used a word I have never heard before in that or any other context. He wrote that when the lessons of the holocaust are taught, social researchers often explain people’s behaviours and choices using four categories: perpetrators, victims, bystanders and here is the word I had never heard, “upstanders.” As he notes, the first three are self-explanatory: perpetrators, those who commit the crimes, victims, those whose who have suffered or died by the hands of said perpetrators, bystanders, those who saw, who heard, who knew, and did nothing to help these victims, often their neighbours, their friends, their comrades. But the fourth needs to be defined. “Upstanders” are people who take

action to make a positive difference even when it is not easy or popular, and even in some cases where it means they themselves will become the victims.

Upstanders do the right thing regardless of circumstance and it is to the upstanders in my life in my coming out as a lesbian over 30 years ago that I dedicate this sermon... To my father, Jack Burke, and my stepmother, Sophie, who when I told them I was a lesbian gave me immediate unqualified loving support... To my mother-in-law, Helen Rosen, who changed so quickly her initial denial and dismissal of who we were as a couple to unequivocal welcoming to the family... To my Vice-Principal when I taught in public school at the time, Ted Borovoy, who when I feared that I would be outed and lose my job and when with trepidation I came to him and told him, he assured me that he had my back, that he would never allow this to take place... To most, and admittedly not all, of my old friends and extended family who didn’t just stand by me and support me but took a stand and educated those who could not accept a Jewish lesbian in their midst 30 years ago, who urged, each in their own way, others to open their hearts and minds.

These were my allies, these upstanders, at a time when this was not the norm... upstanders who continued and continue to work quietly and sometimes loudly today for inclusivity for all in all areas of our society... their places of work, their families, their synagogues, their lives.

Our synagogue was built by LGBTQ+ individuals and by upstanders who joined with us at a time again when this was not the norm, when inclusivity was scoffed at. We have come a long way... not just here at Shir Libeynu, the little shul that could and did, but within Toronto’s Jewish community. If you had told me 25 years ago that Beth Tzedek, the largest conservative synagogue in Toronto, would be welcoming LGBTQ+ people, not merely giving lip service to inclusivity, not cavalierly saying “oh yes, we are queer friendly,” (a term, as many of you know, I detest), but doing nothing for their LGBTQ+ members... if you had told me that Beth Tzedek would one day be truly inclusive by listening and sharing our voices in ritual and ceremony, I would have laughed at the absurdity of such a thought, but that is the reality today.

Yet as Rabbi Tarfon said, the days are short and though we are not obligated to complete the task, neither are we free to desist from it. We have more to conquer, more equality to work

towards in this world... a world where in some places to be trans or lesbian or gay equals death... a world where the rates of suicide and murder, particularly of trans youth, is twice or three times as high as in the general population.

We must all come together to make our voices the voices of allies and queers heard and demonstrate that we will not be deterred. There is hope as long as individuals are willing to be as Igel wrote, "upstanders," allies... then justice will ultimately prevail.

And now it is my honour and my joy to welcome an upstander, our new spiritual leader. I wish and I hope that we will very soon have a special welcoming for you, Cantor Wunch, where we can all hug one another... but for now, please know that our congregation is here to support and welcome you as I am and we look forward to all that you will bring to our synagogue. And now I give you Cantor Cheryl Wunch, the new spiritual leader of Congregation Shir Libeynu.