

# Suffering in the Privacy of Our Tents— A D'var Torah on Parashat Balak By Beth Greenapple

*(This d'var Torah, literally "words of Torah" or sermon, was delivered at Congregation Beth Ahm in West Bloomfield, MI, on Saturday, July 9, 2011.)*

In Parashat Balak, we hear the story of a wizard, Bilaam, hired by a king, Balak, to curse the Israelites. When Bilaam opens his mouth to utter the curse, out comes a blessing:

*Ma tovu ohalecha Ya'akov, mishk'notecha Yisrael!*

How good are your tents, Jacob, your dwellings, Israel!

What accounts for this spontaneous outburst of beneficence?

The parasha itself explains that Bilaam could only say the words G-d put in his mouth. Midrash explains it differently, telling us Balak saw how our tents were positioned so that the opening to one tent faced an unbroken outer wall of another. No two tent openings faced each other, thereby preserving privacy, the sanctity of family, and modesty, really important Jewish and human societal values.

However, like any ideal, the preservation of privacy can be taken too far if we become oblivious to the suffering of our neighbors.

In Deut. 16:20, the Torah tells us, *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof.*—"Justice, justice you shall pursue."

These are mighty words. And, as the Torah never wastes words, when a word is repeated, there is meaning to be gleaned.

I believe the first "tzedek"—"justice"—is for ourselves. The second is for our neighbor.

As suggested by the announcement about oxygen masks on a plane, "Should there be a loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks will drop from the panel above you. Please secure your own mask before helping the person next to you," if we don't take care of ourselves first, we cannot be in a position to help another. As it is with airplane oxygen masks, so it is with justice. Oxygen. Justice.

Now for the phrase, "you shall pursue." "Shall" is a command. It expresses obligation, determination, and certainty. "To pursue" is to chase after. Not just to have an interest

in or stay abreast of, but to actively, aggressively go after and take actions to ensure justice.

We—the American Jewish community—understood this when Black Americans were fighting for equal civil rights under the law back in the 60s. Rabbis got involved. Other Jews got involved. We marched. We wrote letters. We argued. We lobbied. We voted. We helped change laws.

Now, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered—LGBT/GLBT—people are fighting for our civil rights. Not just the right to marry—to have equal, legal recognition for our relationships and families—also, for basic civil protections from discrimination.

Julia, Nadav, and I have felt welcome here at Beth Ahm since the moment we set foot in the door. In fact, for the most part, we have felt welcomed and embraced in the Detroit Jewish Community. We love your smiles and hugs, and we love being treated like any other Jew who walks into the building or any building in our community. We are greeted with warmth and concern. Now, it's time go beyond that. **Perhaps, though, you need more information about what exactly is going on in our tents that we experience as suffering.**

First, a story that underlines a few of the many basic civil rights heterosexual married people enjoy and probably take for granted:

Two Michigan women in a committed relationship choose to start a family. With the help of reproductive technology, one is impregnated with an embryo created from the other woman's egg and donor sperm. The baby has a gestational relationship to the carrier, a genetic relationship to her partner. Both adore him from the moment he is conceived.

Unfortunately, only one of them has a **legal** relationship to the baby when he is born. His birth certificate only bears the name of the carrier. Wherever they go, they have to bring with them documents drawn up by a lawyer so that, in case of an emergency, the unrecognized parent can make decisions on behalf of the child, or even be spoken to as a parent by doctors, caregivers, teachers, and others governed by privacy laws. Only by a stroke of luck and timing—one renegade Michigan judge, for a short time, was granting dual, same-sex-parent adoptions, because the laws then on the books did not specifically prohibit them—is the couple able to effect a legal adoption that names both as parents. Yet they still have to carry their adoption papers with them everywhere they go, because the state will still not issue a proper birth certificate. Then, Governor Jennifer Granholm takes office and orders Michigan's government to issue a birth certificate with both parents' names on it to the handful of couples fortunate enough to have received a dual, same-sex-parent adoption judgement. And here's a glimpse deep into the couple's tent: Because the judge wanted to make sure no one could challenge the adoption she granted, there were ten minutes during the proceeding when

both of women had to sign away all rights to their child, so that the baby was “available” for adoption. Both mothers experienced those ten minutes as the longest, most terrifying ten minutes of their lives. Take a moment to imagine signing away all rights to your baby.

Here are other real-life examples of injustice and suffering of which you may not be aware:

- A lesbian who, upon her spouse giving birth to a premature baby with health issues, is told by medical staff that **she is not the “real mother” and is not allowed to know details or even be in the room with the love of her life and their newborn**—not to mention the birth mother not having the presence and support of her spouse in a very personal, medical crisis. Ironically, the spouse is a pediatrician, but the staff won’t even talk to her as a fellow medical professional. The child is now nine. The mothers still feel enraged at this treatment.
- A gay male couple arrives at a local emergency room for one of them to receive treatment for asthma. The partner is kept completely out of the loop, unable even to give medical history, while the patient struggles just to breathe, never mind answer questions. **The staff will not inform him of his partner’s progress.** These two men have lived together as if married for 27 years. To this day, the partner chokes up when he tells the story of being legally demeaned and denied.
- Upon returning to work from a holiday weekend, a gay man participates in casual office conversations with co-workers. When the conversation turns to spouses’ incompatible tastes in food, he avoids or changes pronouns and names, because **he can be fired if his boss finds out he’s gay**—unlike Balak who actually had to do something in opposition to his job description to deserve to be fired!
- A girl in school who is perceived to be boyish is teased mercilessly by classmates that she is gay, until she begs her parents to move her to another school. **The school is not obligated by law to do anything about the vicious behavior.** This girl doesn’t even know what it means to be sexual, much less homosexual. The teasing began when she was nine-and-a-half.
- Two men, postgraduate fellows who have a two-year teaching contract, and who met at new-faculty orientation at a local university, fill out a rental application for an apartment near campus, though not in a traditional university housing neighborhood. **They are denied the apartment because the landlord assumes they are a gay couple and can legally discriminate against them.**

Their weeks-long search, and imposition on friends as hosts, is forced to continue as the semester begins.

Everyone knows someone who is gay: A member of your family, a co-worker, a friend or a friend's child or parent, a business owner whose store you frequent. It's time for all of us to come out, not just LGBT people themselves. I'm going to help you take the first step toward becoming active, out-of-the-closet allies.

Think for a moment and then hold up the number of fingers that represents the number of GLBT people you, personally, know. If everyone does not hold up one finger, I'll be surprised. After all, you know me. If you know ten or more, hold up both hands.

Look around, everyone... Thank you.

Now, I want to tell you what the next steps are:

Short-term: The Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act was written and passed in 1976. It "enumerated" several "classes" of people who were to be protected from discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations. It has since been amended to now prohibit such discrimination based on religion, race, color, national origin, age, sex, height, weight, and marital status. It must be amended further to enumerate sexual orientation, gender identity—how a person feels regardless of how he or she was born—and gender expression (think of the examples I just gave about people who were perceived to be different from the norm, whether or not they actually were). Learn about the proposal to amend the act and work toward its passage. Our legislators especially need to hear from faith communities in order to answer those who claim, against us, to know for certain G-d's personal opinion.

Long-term: This state, in 2004, passed an amendment to our constitution, a document originally intended to protect the rights of all citizens, and that now denies the rights of some citizens. The amendment defines marriage as "between one man and one woman for any purpose." That has got to go. It is being used not only to deny loving couples the right to marry (something I am proud to say my home state of New York just granted!), but to deny children and spouses in families headed by lesbians and gays working for state institutions and unions the right to health care and other benefits. It makes our state wildly unpopular for business and labor, does further damage to our already broken economy, and likely has a trickle-down effect on you and your business, believe it or not. Equal rights are good for everyone in a society.

A link to the Jewish Gay Network of Michigan, an organization educating and fighting for equal—not special—rights for LGBT people, will be posted on the Beth Ahm website, along with a glossary of terms and other resources that help allies—you—do their work. There will also be information on the tables in the lobby. Please, during the week, click

on those links. Begin to learn and contribute time, energy, ideas, and funds to our fight.  
Become an active ally!

Lo alecha ha'm'lacha ligmor, v'lo ata ben chorin l'hibateyl mimena.

Tzedek, tzedek tirdof.

It is not upon you to complete the work. And neither are you free to desist from starting and contributing to the active pursuit of justice for yourself and all people.

Eem eyn ani li, mi li? If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

Uch'sheh ani l'atzmi, ma ani? And if I am only for myself, what am I?

Your neighbors are suffering in their tents.

Hugs and smiles will always be wonderful—please, keep them coming!

**And these are no longer enough.**

V'eem lo achshav, eymatai?

And if not now, when?

*Shabbat shalom!* (Sabbath peace/completeness!)



## When A Student, Parent, Friend or Family Member Comes Out to You... and Tells You They Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender

When a student, parent, friend or family member comes out to you and tells you they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) your initial response is important. They have likely spent time in advance thinking about whether or not to tell you, and when and how to tell you. Here are some tips to help you support them.

☛ **Offer support but don't assume they need any help.** They may be completely comfortable with their sexual orientation or gender identity and may not need help dealing with it or be in need of any support. It may be that they just wanted to tell someone, or just simply to tell you so you might know them better. Offer and be available to support them as they come out to others.

☛ **Be a role model of acceptance.** Always model good behavior by using inclusive language and setting an accepting environment by not making assumptions about people's sexual orientation or gender identity, and by addressing other's (adults and youth) biased language and addressing stereotypes and myths about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. By demonstrating that you are respectful of LGBT people and intolerant of homophobia and transphobia, LGBT friends and family are more likely to see you as a supportive individual.

☛ **Appreciate the person's courage.** There is often a risk in telling someone something personal, especially sharing for the first time one's sexual orientation or gender identity, when it is generally not considered the norm. Consider someone's coming out a gift and thank them for giving that gift to you. Sharing this personal information with you means that this individual respects and trusts you.

☛ **Listen, listen, listen.** One of the best ways to support a friend or family member is to hear them out and let them know you are there to listen. Coming out is a long process, and chances are you'll be approached again to discuss this process, the challenges and the joys of being out.

☛ **Assure and respect confidentiality.** The fact that your friend or family member told you may or may not mean that they are ready to tell others. Let them

know that the conversation is confidential and that you won't share the information with anyone else, unless they ask for your help. If they want others to know, doing it in their own way with their own timing is important. Respect their privacy.

☛ **Ask questions that demonstrate understanding, acceptance and compassion.**

Some suggestions are:

- Have you been able to tell anyone else?
- Has this been a secret you have had to keep from others or have you told other people?
- Do you feel safe? In school? Supported by the adults in your life?
- Do you need any help of any kind? Resources or someone to listen?
- Have I ever offended you unknowingly?

☛ **Remember that the friend or family member has not changed.** They are still the same person you knew before the disclosure; you just have more information about them, which might improve your relationship. Let them know that you feel the same way about them as you always have and that they are still the same person. If you are shocked, try not to let the surprise lead you to view or treat them any differently.

☛ **Challenge traditional norms.** You may need to consider your own beliefs about sexual orientation, gender identity and gender roles. Do not expect people to conform to societal norms about gender or sexual orientation.

☛ **Be prepared to give a referral.** If there are questions you can't answer, or if your friend or family member does need some emotional support, be prepared to refer them to a sympathetic counselor, a hotline, or an LGBT group or community center. Contact JGN for information ([jlewis@iccdet.org](mailto:jlewis@iccdet.org))

## **SOME ADDITIONAL THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN A FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER COMES OUT TO YOU AS TRANSGENDER:**

- ☛ **Validate the person's gender identity and expression.** It is important to use the pronoun appropriate to the gender presented or that the person requests – this is showing respect. In other words, if someone identifies as female, then refer to the person as she; if they identify as male, refer to the person as he. Or use gender neutral language. Never use the word “it” when referring to a person, to do so is insulting and disrespectful.
- ☛ **Remember that gender identity is separate from sexual orientation.** Knowing someone is transgender does not provide you with any information about their sexual orientation.

## **WHAT NOT TO SAY WHEN SOMEONE COMES OUT TO YOU**

- ☛ **“I knew it!”** This makes the disclosure about you and not them, and you might have been making an assumption based on stereotypes.
- ☛ **“Are you sure?” “You’re just confused.” “It’s just a phase – it will pass.”** This suggests that they don't know who they are.
- ☛ **“You just haven’t found a good woman yet” said to a male or “a good man yet” said to a female.** This assumes that everyone is straight or should be.
- ☛ **“Shhh, don’t tell anyone.”** This implies that there is something wrong and that being LGBT must be kept hidden. If you have real reason to believe that disclosing this information will cause the individual harm, then make it clear that is your concern. Say, “Thanks for telling me. We should talk about how tolerant our community is. You may want to consider how this may affect your decision about who to come out to.”
- ☛ **“You can’t be gay – you’ve had relationships with people of the opposite sex.”** This refers only to behavior, while sexual orientation is about inner feelings.

## GLOSSARY OF COMMONLY USED TERMS

**ALLY** A person who actively supports and advocates for people who belong to marginalized, silenced, or less privileged groups without actually being a member of those groups. This person will often challenge or confront systems of oppression.

**BISEXUAL** An individual who is emotionally, spiritually, physically, and sexually attracted to more than one gender and/or sex.

**FTM (Female to Male)** A person who appeared to be – or was assigned at birth to be – female, was raised as a girl, who knows himself to be male, and who wishes to or does live as a male part or all of the time. Some people may also identify as “transmen” or “trans-masculine.”

**GAY** A person who is emotionally, spiritually, physically, and sexually attracted primarily to members of the same gender and/or sex. (Usually used by people who identify as men, though some women also use this term about themselves.)

**GENDER IDENTITY** A person’s inner understanding of what gender(s) they belong to or identify with. This is each person’s unique knowing or feeling, and is separate from a person’s physical body or appearance (although often related).

**GENDER EXPRESSION** External manifestation of one’s gender identity, usually expressed through “masculine,” “feminine,” or gender variant behavior, clothing, haircut, voice or body characteristics. Sometimes what is expressed externally matches a person’s gender identity, and sometimes what is expressed externally is perceived as incongruous with one’s personal sense of their gender.

**GENDER NONCONFORMING** An umbrella term that can include anyone whose gender identity, expression, or behavior is outside of social norms of women who are “feminine” and men who are “masculine,” such as butch women, effeminate men, drag queens/kings, fairies, bois, and others.

**GENDERQUEER / GENDER VARIANT** 1) A broad political and cultural identity that includes many (but not all) transgender, transsexual, and gender nonconforming people, as well as others who see their gender as falling outside of mainstream norms. 2) People who identify as neither male nor female, both male and female, or who claim an alternate gender identity of their own.

**GENDER TRANSITION** Everyone’s transition looks and feels different. Transition includes some or all of the following cultural, legal, and medical adjustments: telling one’s family, friends, and/or coworkers; changing one’s name and/or sex on legal documents; electrolysis or laser hair removal; hormone therapy; different forms of surgery, including but not limited to chest and genital surgery. Gender transition is not a linear process and is often influenced by one’s access to information, community, and financial resources.

**HETERONORMATIVE** The social, cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that privilege heterosexuality as the natural, normal sexual orientation.

**HOMOPHOBIA** The irrational fear of love, affection, or sexual behavior between people of the same gender. Expressed as negative feelings, attitudes, actions, and institutional discrimination against those perceived as non-heterosexuals.



**INTERSEX** A general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the normative definitions of female or male. Visit [www.isna.org](http://www.isna.org) for more information about intersex issues. Hermaphrodite is an older term used by the medical community to describe intersex people. It is considered a disrespectful term because it is stigmatizing and does not reflect modern scientific understanding of intersex conditions. If you hear someone use the word hermaphrodite, please let them know that the term 'intersex' is preferred.

**LESBIAN** A person who identifies as a woman, and who is emotionally, spiritually, physically, and sexually attracted primarily to members of the same gender and/or sex.

**MTF (Male to Female)** A person who appeared to be – or was assigned at birth to be – male, was raised as a boy, who knows herself to be female, and who wishes to or does live as a female part or all of the time. Some people may also identify as “transwomen” or “trans-feminine.”

**PRONOUNS** An important way to respect trans people, is to refer to them with the gender pronouns of their choosing. Some people want to be referred to as he / him / his, some as she / her / hers, some as a combination. Others want to be referred to with alternative/gender-neutral pronouns, such as ze or xie (“zee”) / hir (“heer”), or they / them / theirs (“Max is doing well. I saw hir yesterday, and ze said to say hi to you”). Some prefer not to use pronouns and all and only use their proper name (“I saw Max yesterday in class. I thought Max gave great answers to the professor’s questions, and I thought Max’s questions were great, too.”). It is always best to ask someone “Do you have a preferred gender pronoun?”

**QUEER** 1) An umbrella term used by some to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. 2) A term used to describe people who transgress social, cultural, and sexual norms. 3) Historically and currently used as a slur targeting those perceived to transgress “norms” of sexual orientation and/or gender expression.

**SEX** A person’s assignment at birth as biologically male, female, or intersex.

**SEXUAL ORIENTATION** A pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions. A sense of one’s personal and social identity based attractions and behaviors expressing them.

**TRANSGENDER or TRANS** An umbrella term for anyone who knows themselves to be a gender that is different than the gender they were assigned at birth. Some trans people may have an alternate gender identity that is neither male nor female, and for some people their gender identity may vary at different points in their lives. Some transgender people modify their bodies through medical means, and some do not.

**TRANSPHOBIA** Irrational fear or hatred of people who break or blur gender roles and sex characteristics, which exists in both the heterosexual and gay communities.

**TRANSSEXUAL** A person who feels that his or her gender identity does not match his or her assigned biological sex. Some transsexuals, though not all, have sex reassignment surgery and/or take hormones to make their bodies look more traditionally male or female.

*These are some of the most common English terms used in the local and national lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and ally communities – there are many others, and more are created every day. It is always best to ask each individual and community what terms they use, and what those terms mean to them.*