

All You Need Is Love
January 24, 2014

Shabbat Shalom. I want to thank you for a gift you all gave me. You see, last week you afforded me the opportunity to be present for one of those moments in life that touch you so deeply, they remind you of what life is truly all about and why we are here.

A true story: Marty and I travelled to Harrisburg, PA this past Shabbat so that I could officiate the Bat Mitzvah of my best friend's daughter. A rabbi as well, Peter Kessler had asked me, probably five years ago, to take his place on his bema so that he could just be Peri's dad.

So first, just a word about Peter. Peter is the kind of friend, so precious and rare, that from the moment you meet there is connection so strong and deep that you feel like you have been friends forever. And so it was for Peter and me when we met 23 years ago in Jerusalem at the Hebrew Union College Dean of Students office on the very first day of Rabbinic School. For nearly 2 1/2 decades we have been inseparable, soul-mates, brother and sister in the best way siblings can love each other. We can tell each other anything, and we have, weathering all the stuff of life -- from finding, and then losing and then falling in love again; to getting through school, our first and then solo pulpits, and the pain and joy of the rabbinate; from the sickness and death of parents; to the reality of growing up and growing older. We became part of each other's families. We officiated each other's weddings. We even have special names for each other; we each call the other, "Dolly." We were fortunate enough to work together in our first pulpits in Baltimore, where our Senior Rabbi affectionately referred to us as "fric and frac." I couldn't imagine going through life without him.

Fourteen years ago, when he decided to become a father, I became Peri's Auntie Roz and couldn't have delighted more in her had she been my very own child. Peri is an amazing young woman, sweet, kind and caring; remarkably self-assured, smart and insightful; as funny and mischievous as her Poppa; who stands up for anyone who she perceives as being bullied or discriminated against in anyway. Case in point: she won't shop at Abercrombie and Fitch, popular with most teens, because they have a bias against, let's just say, larger sized people, several of whom are her good friends. She's a great daughter and friend and the kind of loving person who hugs everyone she meets. She is equally comfortable with boys and girls, with people who are Jewish or of other faiths, with black, white, pink and yellow skinned folks. You couldn't find a happier, more well-adjusted kid.

On Friday night, Peter spoke about all of the people who had helped Peri to reach her Bat Mitzvah weekend, those living and those no longer. There wasn't a dry eye in the sanctuary as he told of her grandfather Phil's many years as a religious school principal getting up early every Sunday morning to make sure all the children in their Chicago suburb were taught to love their heritage; and of her grandfather, Ronnie, a stalwart at the Temple in Atlanta, who could be found every Friday night walking the aisles as an usher. There were her late grandmothers Anita and Pauline, after whom she was named, who made Jewish homes and raised Jewish families for her parents, so warm and loving and true both of their children, her parents, would

want to devote their lives to Jewish communal service, one as a rabbi and the other as president of the local Federation, JCC and anywhere and everywhere else help was needed. *Morei Derech*, teachers of the way, all.

On Shabbat morning, as the service began, I introduced myself as not being Rabbi Kessler, but as close to a sister to him as one could be without being related by blood. I said that, aside from our different genders, there was little difference between us. And everyone in the packed sanctuary, family and friends, all of whom I had known for decades, nodded in agreement. With their soloist, I led them in worship, doing my best to bring the warmth and love that I felt for Peter and Peri to the service and helping to make an understandably nervous Bat Mitzvah feel as comfortable at the pulpit as I could. There were laughter and there were tears; it was magical. It was holy. God was absolutely present. In her speech, Peri thanked the most wonderful parents in the world, not only for her Bat Mitzvah and party planned for that evening, but for giving her the best life possible. And right there, in Central Pennsylvania, where kids are off from school on the first day of hunting season each year, she said, matter of factly, "there are many kinds of families. I have an untraditional family. Instead of a mother and a father, I have two dads," as if it were simple, uneventful, normative.

And later that night, during her "candle lighting ceremony," she invited the two middle-aged men with whom she lives, along with the village of friends and community members who make up her extended family, and all of us beamed with pride and joy. It was marvelous, as in wondrous. And all I could think of is the Beatles famous song, "All you need is love. Love is all you need."

In many ways, my true story resonates with all of us who are ourselves, or who love, or who have loved, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and questioning children, or other family members or friends. Love is love. As the Christian Bible teaches, "it is patient and kind. It isn't boastful or proud. It doesn't judge or dishonor. It protects, trusts, hopes and perseveres. Love never fails." And as you read in the Jewish News last month, our congregation marks its 12th anniversary of Gay and Lesbian inclusion, of which I am very proud. And it seems particularly appropriate since just yesterday, newly elected Virginia attorney general Mark Herring announced that he would join the fight to strike down our state's ban on same-sex marriage on the grounds that it is unconstitutional. "It's time," Herring said, "for the Commonwealth to be on the right side of history and the right side of the law, referring to Virginia's being on the wrong side when it fiercely resisted school integration and interracial marriage in the 1950s and '60s.

Since I am from California, and, therefore in possession of a "live and let live" attitude (believing whole-heartedly that all people are created in the image of God and born with inherent worth), it is hard for me to understand bigotry, racism and homophobia. But as a rabbi, I did feel obligated to look into the word used in the Torah to describe relations between two men, "Toeva." Not surprisingly, the translation in most bibles is "abomination," a word that conveys moral exceptionalism, as in the morality of Victorian-era England; due to the prominence of the British Empire, many of these values were spread across the world and remain, in some circles, normative unto today. From this vantage, the word abomination denotes things, words and deeds that are inherently evil and morally

wrong, which of their very nature are always harmful, degrading, debasing, dehumanizing or lethal to the human person, things like illicit sex, idolatry, lying, murder and deceit.

But the word abomination is also used to describe unclean foods. In fact, *Proverbs* (6:16-19) lists seven other things which are *toevot*: "haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are swift in running to mischief, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers." I daresay within this list, all of us are guilty of abominations, crimes, subject in Biblical times to death by stoning. I know that none of us would want to sit in absolute moral judgment of another who has, at one time or another, displayed arrogance, told a lie, schemed against another, did something mischievous or caused strife amongst loved ones or friends. A better translation, then, of *toeva*, might be a taboo, and we all know that taboos are very often socially constructed, rather than possessing intrinsic evil. For example, "Jews don't get tattoos" or "it is preferable to get married before having a child" or "Jews shouldn't eat pork or shellfish." They may be socially frowned upon, but they are not wicked.

My truth is life is too short to get caught up in judging others; in many ways our socially constructed taboos feel like Jr. High behavior on a grand scale. I hated it then and I loathe it more now. There are too many important things to focus my time and energy and emotion on: living each day fully, making a difference in the world, loving those nearest to me, showing compassion to the sick and bereaved, treating others with inherent dignity and worth, modeling the Jewish values that lead to the repair of the world and the redemption of humanity from poverty, war, oppression and evil. And I really believe it all boils down to love. Loving ourselves. Loving our neighbor as ourselves. Loving our family members, our children and grandchildren, our friends and neighbors. Love . . . is all we need. Amen.