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Congregation Kol Shofar
Sermon on Torah portion of Noah
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Noach Ish Tzadik Tamim Haya B'dorotav. "Noah was a righteous man in his generation." (Genesis 6:9) He was relatively righteous compared to the corrupt and violent people who lived in his generation, but he wasn't considered all that righteous...Why? He was eager to save himself and his family from the coming flood, but he wasn't concerned with anybody else. He let the rest of the world be destroyed. He stood idly by the blood of his neighbor, as the Torah commands us in Leviticus (19:16) not to do. Noah has been described by our tradition as a "tzadik in peltz," a righteous man in a fur coat, meaning someone who is only concerned with keeping himself warm, while others are freezing.

We've all heard in the last week or two about the terrible tragedies that have taken place among young people across the country - as a result of ridicule, bullying, or despair, in most cases, because the young person was thought to be gay. Tyler Clementi was the freshman at Rutgers University, the shy and talented musician who killed himself by jumping off the GW Bridge after his college roommate invaded his privacy and posted a video of him with another man on the internet. Here in California, Seth Walsh, killed himself after relentless bullying and taunting by his peers. He was 13 years old. 15 year old Billy Lucas in Indiana, and 13 year old Asher Brown in Texas also took their own lives, unable to bear the torment of bullies.

In this parasha of Noach, we consider that being truly righteous is not just taking care of ourselves, but looking out for others, not standing by while others' blood is shed, while others are suffering, while others are being bullied. You young people know what goes on at school, how kids are picked on, teased, tormented. Maybe you've been bullied yourselves. Or maybe you've even been the bully at times. I know I frequently hear kids using homophobic slurs that create an unsafe and isolating environment for people. For us adults, what message are we sending to kids when we allow bullying, homophobic language, when we don't create safe spaces for kids who are struggling with their sexual identities, or with anything else for that matter? We too are standing idly by.

At the end of the portion, after the flood, after Noah and the animals are saved, and society starts over with a second chance, God says to humanity: “Whoever sheds the blood of a person, so shall his blood be shed. For in the image of God, did God create the human.” (Gen 9:6) And the Torah commentators understand this prohibition of murder to also include a prohibition to not publicly embarrass a person. As the verse says, each person is created in the image of God, and to cause a person to feel ashamed of who they are diminishes them and diminishes the image of God. It can also lead to bloodshed, as we’ve tragically seen too often recently:

Suicide is among the top three killers of young people, and gay and lesbian kids are four times more likely to commit suicide. Last year, 9 out of 10 gay, lesbian, or transgender middle and high school students reported having experienced verbal and/or physical harassment.

The other thing that happens after the flood is that God creates a covenant with the earth, an agreement never to destroy the earth again. And the sign of the covenant is the rainbow. The rainbow is a symbol of gay pride, originating here in San Francisco in the 1970’s – the rainbow suggests the beauty of the diversity of humanity, that people come in all different colors and stripes, and all are created in God’s image.

And there’s also another interpretation of the rainbow as a symbol, found in Maimonides and other Jewish commentators over the centuries: The rainbow is a bow, like that used to shoot arrows. It’s a weapon, but it’s a sign of peace because it’s pointed away from the earth. It shines its true colors without the threat of violence or bloodshed.

This week, I signed a pledge on behalf of our Kol Shofar community on “Keshet” online, which means “rainbow” in Hebrew and is an organization that affirms a place of dignity and honor in the Jewish community for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. It’s a pledge to not stand idly by, and to commit to ending homophobic bullying and harassment and to speak out when we witness anyone being demeaned for their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. It’s a pledge to commit ourselves to do whatever we can to ensure that every person is treated with dignity and respect.

I want to say to every young person or adult that bullying, including internet and facebook bullying, spreading rumors, threatening someone physically or emotionally is cruel, it's wrong, it's against Judaism, and it's dangerous, life-threatening even. We grieve for those young people whose lives were cut short because of the pain and isolation that they felt in their schools and communities. Those who bullied them and those who did nothing to ease their pain have to live out their lives knowing the tragedy of the suffering they inflicted or ignored.

And to every young person here who might be the target of bullying, whether it's homophobic bullying or any other kind of bullying, I want to say: you are created in the image of God. You are sacred exactly as you are. You are worthy of love, you are not alone, you have a wonderful life ahead of you, and your life *will* get better. If you feel alone, afraid, or hopeless, please talk to an adult you trust, a parent, a teacher, you can talk to me.

May our reading of Noach remind us to be truly righteous by concerning ourselves with those who are suffering, and may God's rainbow covenant remind us of the beauty of God's diverse creation, all of whom deserve to live in dignity and peace.