



New Year, New Community?

Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, the Days of Awe in general (generally labelled, I thought as a child, because it was so awful having to catch up on school work after so much time off) are typically a time for *teshuva* – repentance, rethinking, reviewing.

I've got frummer as I've got older, and in recent years I've been more inclined to undertake personal *teshuva*. Even if I'm never that sure I've done anything wrong. A couple of years ago, *erev Kol Nidrei*, I called a family member to wish them well over the fast, and said the standard-shtick: I hoped they would accept my apologies if I'd done anything to hurt or offend them during the year. They said: 'I've never forgiven you for that thing you did ten years ago.' So much for *teshuva*.

Thinking about a time for renewal, for new beginnings, reminds me of a wonderful new beginning I witnessed in April, on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, the day that the Children of Israel were freed from slavery in Egypt. (See, I told you I was getting frummer.)

Two female friends of mine, who've been in a committed relationship for more than five years, invited me to share in their *Brit Ahava* – covenant of love – ceremony. It was a pleasure and privilege to share their extraordinary, special day, and I believe that in some way we all helped make Anglo-Jewish history.

You all know that there's no halachic precedent for lesbian or gay commitment ceremonies. My friends created something truly unique – they're the kind of *gelerndt* women every community would practically kill to have as members, and they developed their own independent ceremony, based around Rav Kook's guiding principle to 'make the old new and the new, holy'.

So they separated out the halachic elements of a traditional wedding ceremony – the legal processes described in the *ketubah*, the formal processes of *enusin* (betrothal) and *nisuin* (nuptials) – but incorporated the symbols and rituals that to most of us are what a wedding is all about: the *chuppah*, circling each other, stamping on the glass at the end of the ceremony (*Mazal tov!*).

And they also included new traditions: instead of a *ketubah* they had a *Shtar Brit*, a contract of covenant; the seven blessings recited under the *chuppah* were not the traditional *shevah brachot*, but *brachot* they selected

personally; and they ended the celebratory meal with *Sheva Ikarim*, seven principles – seven songs expressing the ethos by which they plan to live their lives together.

My friends created a ceremony that was at once personal and community-focussed; it was wonderfully, traditionally Jewish, but in a moderately (small p) progressive way. It was Anglo, without being stilted; it was inclusive while reflecting both their personalities and interests. The kosher catering was better than the regular Friday-night style fayre (perhaps we should all go vegetarian). They both looked like film stars (although we all know looks aren't important). Their grandparents were sitting in the front row.

The whole event was a thoughtful, sensitive reflection of their collective commitment to Jewish life and deep commitment to each other, and I hope that they have created a blueprint that other couples can use for their ceremonies.

An old friend told me that his parents' best friend was a single man whose Saville Row suits were flamboyantly lined with pink silk. *Nisht frei di sheyla*. He'd come over for Seder and Yom Tov, didn't have any family.

Maybe you saw Sandi Simcha DuBowski's 2001 film, *Trembling Before God?* A moving documentary telling personal stories of gay and lesbian ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic Jews, trying to reconcile their love of Judaism with the biblical prohibitions of homosexuality.

We all know someone who knows someone who's gay and Jewish and can't find their place in the world, but it seems to me that the time has come for us as a community to stop counting people 'out' – not straight, not Jewish, not Jewish enough, not Jewish enough to get into JFS – and to find a place in our community for everyone who wants a home. This year's group *teshuva* exercise is about giving up turning a communal blind eye to our inherent diversity and freeing our gay and lesbian members from their second-class-citizen slavery.

Oh, and if I've written anything that offended you during the year, I hope you can forgive me. 🙏