



NFTY-Southwest Fall Kallah – Temple Chai – Phoenix, AZ

D'var Torah – October 2, 2010 | 24 Tishrei 5771 – Parashah Bereshit

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Glee, Fox TV's musical dramedy about a high school glee club in Ohio, might be the closest thing to reality TV when it comes to the highs and lows of high school life. The cliques, the clubs, the classes, and of course the music – it's as if Glee has become our collective iPod experience. Your response to the first chords of Don't Stop Believin' is no different than mine was when the song was originally released in 1985, when I was your age, a NFTYite in the Ohio Valley region.

Glee mixes cross-generational storylines with lots of music and dance. Often through humor, generally through song, Glee has tackled topics such as peer pressure, sexual orientation, ethnicity, teen pregnancy, and disability.

Glee has also given us more than a mouthful of high school bullying. Teens and adults of the cast find their characters often as victims, as well as perpetrators themselves. Bullying, teasing and harassing know no bounds in Glee. It seems that no one in Lima, Ohio, is safe – anyone can be a Lima-Loser.

In the very first episode, as Rachel explains her need to post updates to her social networking page daily, the cheerleaders are simultaneously laughing and cyber-bullying with comments like – “they should sell you back”, and “get sterilized”.

Most of the characters have been met in the hallways with a slushie facial, and more than one student has been tossed into the dumpster as a statement of the community's value of their worth – and to be clear, in one case, the person was tossed in on multiple occasions, but their designer clothes were not.

Students have been asked a variety of inappropriately probing questions, such as “How has life changed since the birth of your bastard child?” “How do you get the white on rice?” and the memorable calling out of the minority students in school, “Santana! Wheels! Gay kid! Asian! Other Asian! Aretha! and Shaft!

And then, there is the onslaught of comments about homosexuality.

“Well I think we really came together this week as a team. Yeah, a gay team. A big gay team of dancing gays.”

“People think you're gay now. And you know what that makes me? Your big, gay beard!”

And in the opening scene of season 2, we see Jewfro-bearing cyber-blogger Jacob Ben Israel, narrating his update of summer gossip, which he calls McKinley High Glee Club's 'Big Gay Summer', during which he addresses his teacher, Will Schuester by saying, “How do you respond to a recent post on my blog saying your glee club song selections sound like they come from a drag queen's iPod?” Jacob's quip – 100% gay.

I want to tell you about 18 year old Tyler Clementi, a freshman at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Just last week, Tyler's roommate and a friend secretly streamed video of Tyler and another young man engaging in sexual activity by covertly changing the direction of their webcam, turning it on, and tweeting



to friends to 'watch the show' on iChat, intentionally outing him as gay on the internet. Later that day, Tyler killed himself by jumping from the George Washington Bridge, the primary crossover between New Jersey and Manhattan; a bridge I drive across every Tuesday when I make the trip from Kutz Camp to the Union for Reform Judaism's offices in New York City.

In recent weeks there has been a shocking number of teens who have been teased and bullied online and in person specifically around sexual orientation, and have felt the need to move to this drastic end. In a public service announcement aired this week, Ellen DeGeneres implored that, "this needs to be a wakeup call to everyone that bullying and teasing is an epidemic in this country as the death rate of teens is climbing. And how many teens are suffering in silence? Being a teenager and finding out who you are is hard enough without someone attacking you. We cannot let intolerance and ignorance take one more life. And I want anyone out there who feels different or alone that I know how you feel."

You are not alone.

In NFTY, we work to build inclusive communities, where each individual is celebrated because of their uniqueness. As I'm afforded the opportunity to travel the world for NFTY and Kutz, I hear over and over again that this is a safe place, that you can be yourself here, that you are accepted for who you are here. As we read this week in Bereshit, the first chapter of the book of Genesis, 1:27 *Vayivra Elohim et-ha'adam betsalmo betselem Elohim bara oto zachar unekevah bara otam*. God created man in God's image. In the image of God, God created him, male and female, God created them.

Betselem elohim – created – in the image of God - each of us. We sing about it at the top of our lungs, but do we really understand what it is to be created?

Bereshit goes on to offer a second interpretation of the creation of man, as noted in Genesis 2:7 *Vayitser Adonay Elohim et-ha'adam afar min-ha'adamah vayipach pe'apav nishmat chayim vayehi ha'adam lenefesh chayah*. God formed man out of dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils a breath of life. Man then became a living creature.

What is even more vivid here is that our bodies come from the earth, but our souls are a gift from God, with that breath, we are created. As I often share with our summer participants at Kutz, every person is the most important person in the world to someone – sometimes they know it, sometimes they don't, but you never know when the next person you meet may become the most important person in the world to you.

And we get that here in ways that seem so foreign when we're at home. The reality is, tolerance, and acceptance, and understanding, and community building, and the worth of every human being for who they are, is in each of your hands. You have the power to take these NFTY lessons and apply them to other aspects of your life.

We are Reform Jews, part of a larger movement that has the ability to take stands on specific issues. The Reform Movement, including the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the American Conference of Cantors, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Union for Reform Judaism, and the Religious Action Center, among others, have worked to create specific stands on humanitarian issues that our Movement believes in – environmental issues, gender equality, the right for people of all faiths to be free to observe their faith without fear of persecution, equality for people with disabilities, a woman's right to choose, and the right to love whomever you want to. The Reform Movement is all about *tikkun olam* at its very best, and next February, at NFTY Convention, NFTY will come together and take a stand on issues surrounding GLBT rights in a way that no other youth movement has, or can.



Several of the Kutz alumni in this room took part in an amazing endeavor this past summer at camp, as we held our first session-long Gay/Straight Alliance. As we did at camp, I'd like to suggest that each of you takes the time to understand things that are different than what you might choose, rather than judge and make assumptions. The souls inside of the bodies sitting next to you today, that bring you such comfort and joy, have the exact same value as the souls of the students that surround you in your math, and art, and English classes at school. We are all created in the image of God, and each of our souls is a gift. And we are each the most important person in the world to someone.

Tyler Clementi wasn't a member of NFTY. I don't even know what faith he observed. I do know from news reports that he was a beloved son, and brother, and friend, whose family and community is deeply grieving his loss.

I also know that no one should be made to feel so ashamed of living life - that it's worth giving up on life.

And in the real world, life is not a musical - bullying at school won't be eradicated by an amazing closing song and dance number. Each of you has the opportunity and ability to make a difference, to ensure that you treat people with kindness, to step up when others are unkind and call them out on it, to work aggressively to ensure that your home communities are safe spaces as well.

As we begin this new year, as you read from Bereshit this morning, let's remember that this is a new beginning, another retelling of our sacred texts where the lessons are more resonant because you are a year wiser, and that this year is your opportunity to make the world a better place every single day because of how you positively affect someone else's life.

Your soul is a gift – go out and share it.

Shabbat shalom.