



JEWISH MOSAIC THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR SEXUAL & GENDER DIVERSITY
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torah **QUEERIES**

Welcome to Torah Queeries, a joint project of Jewish Mosaic and the World Congress of GLBT Jews! Check back regularly for creative and incisive “queer” takes on the weekly Torah portion or Jewish holiday, brought to you by some of the Jewish world’s most dynamic scholars, rabbis, activists and lay leaders.

Taking Steps

by **Amos Lassen**

Parashat Eikev-- Deuteronomy 7:12 - 11:15

on Saturday August 2, 2007 (20 Av 5767)

The book of Deuteronomy focuses on the time just before the death of Moses. The Israelites are encamped on a plateau in Moab, poised to enter the land of Israel. Parashat Eikev, the third Torah portion in Deuteronomy, opens with Moses addressing the assembled Israelites. Eikev translates from Hebrew as “if” or “as a consequence of.” Yet, the literal translation of “eikev” is “heel” and comes from the same root as the name “Ya’akov” (Jacob), who was so named because he was holding onto the heel of his twin Esau when the two were born. We, therefore, can read Deuteronomy 7:12 as saying, “And it will come to pass on the heel of your hearkening to these rules....” Nothing in life occurs in a vacuum, nothing happens just by itself; everything happens “eikev”—on the heel of everything else. As we venture through life, we are always dependent on someone or something and as we strive to achieve our goals, we rely on each other and G-d.

The word “eikev” in the context of Torah teaches us to make decisions that are in accordance with G-d and with the larger society—even more so when the larger society is unjust.

Looking again at the word “eikev” as “heel” or “that part of the foot we use in walking,” we see that whenever a person takes a step—either literally or figuratively—he or she must first reflect and decide if that step demonstrates respect for society and for the will of G-d. If in doubt, then we should hesitate to take the step. We must understand the verse of scripture to be “Vehaya eikev,” and realized that with every step we take, we shall learn if it is the will of G-d that the step should be taken.

When the Israelites took their first steps into the Promised Land, “eikev,” or on the heel of the long journey of the Exodus, they found a “good land” (8:7) and one rich in resources and beauty. The wealth of the land posed its own danger, though and the children of Israel were warned that wealth can bring about false pride. Herein lies the message to us, the GLBT community. Our position today in society is good—at least in most places in the United States. It is “wealthier” than it has ever been before, but we cannot let that sense of pride stop us from making even more progress.

The entire “gay pride” issue has always been a difficult one for me. I am not always sure what exactly it is that I

am supposed to be proud of; sometimes, I am concerned that some of us abuse the word “pride.” As I read Deuteronomy, it seems to me that pride is something to be earned. Gay pride is more than a parade once a year followed by a series of parties. We march proudly because we have accomplished something. Asking for equal treatment is a socially just act. But I often wonder: How can we be proud and expect others to accept us if we do not accept ourselves? Just as Moses told the children of Israel that they must be honest and true, so must we.

Many times in the Bible we are commanded to follow the rules that G-d has set before us, but what is the incentive? In Parashat Eikev, the incentive for the children of Israel was to enter the land. As the GLBT community today, ours is to be equals in the world at large. Following rules, though, assumes that people are capable of exercising free will, of making conscious choices from real alternatives and we are thereby held accountable for our actions. Looking at the phrase “if you obey and observe them,” Rashi sees that observing the will of G-d is not necessarily a given; it is a matter of free will. We in the GLBT community can choose to follow the rules of G-d and we can choose to work within the existing system to change it. Otherwise, do we have the right to demand that we be a part of it?

We, like the children of Israel, are crossing our Jordan. What we say and feel matters and our importance is increasingly recognized. It is time to leave the gay ghetto behind us and cross our metaphorical Jordan into mainstream America while knowing and accepting who we are.

Like the children of Israel who crossed the Jordan and made their home among enemies, we must do the same. People fear what they do not know. Once you know who YOU are, there is nowhere you cannot go. However to know yourself, you must be honest with yourself, you must not rely on false pride to see you through.

“Know then that G-d does not give you this land because you are virtuous but because of the wickedness of the other nations...” Let us show others who we are and then show them, as well, that we are the children of Israel, the GLBT children who are coming to the land that He has promised us.

While Moses prepares to say farewell to the people he has led for forty years, he offers to them a blessing that G-d “will love you and bless you...” Moses, here in his final speech sees the entire Exodus as a test of faith, “That G-d may test you by hardships to learn what is in your hearts...” We, GLBT Jews, often regard ourselves as being “twice chosen.” Many of us do not feel comfortable being chosen once much less twice. Because we are “chosen” we have been singled out for persecution and censure, resentment and envy. Do we have the right to hold ourselves above and apart from others? We must attempt to find our place among others and no longer remain separate by our or their choice.

When we recite the prayer that states that G-d gave us the Torah, we realize that this one singular thing is what makes us “special.” How special are we if we do not share that gift with others and that we do not allow others to see us for who we are—proud GLBT Jews!

We have a beautiful gift for the world—we bring diversity, we bring the rainbow, we bring love and understanding. We have crossed our Jordan and we are home and we should be proud.

About the Author:



Amos Lassen was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. After getting his M.A., he made aliyah and lived in Israel for many years as a member of a kibbutz near Degania Bet. He served as supervisor of secondary English education for the State of Israel and taught at several universities there. He returned to the United States and New Orleans right before Hurricane Katrina hit and was evacuated by the National Guard to Little Rock, Arkansas, which he calls home until he returns to Israel. He is on the faculty of the University of Central Arkansas where he teaches English and Biblical Hebrew. Amos is the founder of Literary Pride—a gay reading group, and Cinema Pride—a gay movie group. He is extremely proud of two accomplishments—getting the Arkansas Literary Festival to recognize gay

literature and for organizing the first GLBT film festival in the state.