

Rabbis as Directors, Jews on the Cutting Room Floor

By Robert Rabinowitz

Perhaps the most powerful moment of this year's CLAL Rabbinic Leadership Retreat, held in Newport, Rhode Island from March 12 through 15, 2001, was on the final night when Trembling Before G-d, a documentary movie about Orthodox gays and lesbians, was shown. The movie was made by Sandi Simcha DuBowski, a filmmaker and writer based in New York City, and features CLAL Senior Teaching Fellow Rabbi Steve Greenberg, an openly gay Orthodox rabbi. It has been shown at the Sundance Film Festival and it won two awards at the Berlin Film Festival. (Further details about the movie and its theatrical release can be found on the movie's Web-site: www.tremblingbeforeg-d.com.)

In letters and telephone conversations prior to the retreat, we had informed the 31 rabbis from all streams of Judaism across North America and Israel who would be attending that pluralism for us was not about playing nice or finding a lowest common denominator. We had emphasized that pluralism was about the ability to have deep disagreement with respect. The program of the retreat was designed to give the rabbis plenty of time, both structured and unstructured, to build the respectful personal relationships across ideological boundaries necessary for discussion of difficult issues without spiraling into vicious cycles of recrimination. We had placed such emphasis on the relationship- building element of the retreat that one of the rabbis present complained that we had been avoiding the many difficult issues that divide Jews. But if ever there was a movie that would bring such disagreements to the fore, this was it.

My only nervousness about showing the movie was that the subsequent discussion would focus solely on the responsibility of the Orthodox community for the suffering it caused by ostracizing gays. We certainly had not brought together this wonderful inter-denominational group of rabbis so that we could attack one portion of the community. I was eager for the humanity and struggle of all parties to this difficult situation to be shown. I also felt that critique of Orthodoxy could distract the non-Orthodox rabbis from reflecting on the decisions they all make which in turn make others feel ostracized. But I could not have anticipated the quality, depth and complexity of the discussion that followed the movie.

After the movie, we sat in a large and ungainly circle and began slowly and hesitantly to unravel the feelings and thoughts it had provoked in us. Things were slow and halting at first as people struggled to articulate for themselves and others precisely what the incredibly powerful scenes they had just witnessed meant to them. The discussion greatly intensified when, in an ironic adoption of language from the gay rights movement, one Orthodox rabbi accused the movie of Orthodox-bashing. He felt that it focused almost exclusively on people who were ostracized by their families even though this was in defiance of the views of the Orthodox rabbis who appeared in the movie.

There followed a very difficult and often tense discussion, but one that was always respectful. An African-American rabbi talked about the assumptions that are made about his beliefs and values because of the color of his skin. A lesbian Conservative rabbi talked about her persistence in staying within a movement which officially does not welcome her. She said that she sympathized deeply with the people portrayed in the movie because, like them, her identity is not defined solely by her sexual orientation. She claimed that each of us needs to define ourselves as Jews, based on our understanding of and relationship to God, Torah and Jewish law. When this ideal seems to conflict with one's ability to be in a complete human relationship, great pain and struggle result.

For me, one of the most interesting aspects of the discussion was a couple of exchanges and asides about whether homosexuality could be described as a "lifestyle." At stake was the issue of whether homosexuality is something innate or something chosen, whether it is something that can be resisted without performing spiritual amputation. Of course, the language used to describe homosexuality cannot be separated from the larger debate of the meaning of homosexuality. It's not as if one party or another to the debate is using a particular term, but not thinking about its logical and moral consequences.

But then I began to think of the implications of this debate for other areas of life. The vast majority of the rabbis present at the retreat would not perform an intermarriage, a decision which could cause those wishing for a rabbinic benediction at their marriage ceremony great pain. The rationale for that decision is presumably that there are some choices that people make, including the decision to marry a gentile, that are harmful or bad and for which they need to take responsibility. But do Jews choose to fall in love with someone not Jewish? And once they are in love, can they choose not to be without performing spiritual amputation on themselves? And what about me? I am extremely skeptical of many traditional Jewish theological, ethical and historical beliefs. Now there are many people who would tell me that my skepticism is a result of my yetzer hara (evil inclination) which I have allowed to overcome the Jewish neshama (soul) inside me which still believes in the full complement of traditional beliefs. I have to say, however, that I do not see myself as having chosen what to believe. Indeed, I feel myself in some way bound by my convictions and I remember that the first time I talked about them with my father, I felt like I was coming out of the closet.

In conversation with Sandi the following morning, we discussed the editing process for the movie. He told me that he had started out with several hundred hours of footage which he had to edit down to its current 90 minutes. I sympathized with the difficulty of this process, remembering my own experience with my doctoral dissertation, as sections that had taken precious weeks of thought and writing were first relegated to footnotes and then removed from the text altogether. It turned out, however, that Sandi's winnowing process had been much more agonizing, as it had involved editing out footage of real people who

had been willing to expose their pain publicly and who had a powerful desire to be heard. He told me that his editorial decisions had seriously harmed or even severed some personal relationships. Hearing this, I recalled one scene in the movie in which a gay man returns to meet the rabbi who had counseled him many years before on how to overcome his homosexuality. Despite the personal warmth between them, this was a similar process of "editing out" in which somebody is told that, notwithstanding many admirable and wonderful qualities, he just doesn't fit.

I told Sandi that I would have liked to be the documentary filmmaker filming the scenes in which he informed various people that they would not be appearing in the movie. For at some point we are all making, and have all been subject to, editorial decisions with hurtful consequences. To pretend otherwise is to deny the complexity of life. The gift that Sandi DuBowski has given us is to bring us face-to-face with the painful consequences of such decisions, forcing us to consider the standards and values onto which we are willing to hold even at the cost of deep pain to others. And the challenge it offers us is whether we have the strength of character and honesty to treat the people whom we are "editing out" with the respect they deserve as images of the Divine.