

## Trembling Before God on Yom Kippur

By Steven Greenberg

Every Yom Kippur, gay Jews who attend services are faced with a dilemma. The dilemma is lost on those who show up for *Kol Nidre* in the evening and *Neila* the following evening. Only those who essentially spend the whole day in synagogue confront this pain. In the afternoon service of Yom Kippur, the service of least attendance during the whole 24 hour-long marathon of prayer, the portion from *Leviticus* delineating the sexual prohibitions is read.

Ever since my homosexuality has been even quietly self-acknowledged, I cringed to hear my shame read aloud on the Day of Atonement. The emotions accompanying the reading have changed through the years. At first, what I felt was guilt and contrition. Later, I felt a deep sadness for being caught up in gay desire and I would petition heaven for understanding. At other times, I would sob in my corner seat of the *shul*, acknowledging the pain of those verses upon my body and spirit. I have tried to connect myself with Jews of countless ages, listening in *shul* to their deepest feelings of love and desire turned abhorrent, ugly and sinful. Finally, listening has become, in addition to all else I might feel, a protest.

During this entire period, I never missed the afternoon service on Yom Kippur. Never did I leave the synagogue for this gut wrenching reading. It never dawned upon me to walk out. Over the years, I developed a sort of personal custom to stand up during the reading. Since I have always spent Yom Kippur in the seriously prayerful Orthodox environments, no one ever noticed that, wrapped in my *kittel* (a white cotton robe worn all day on Yom Kippur and in which pious Jews are buried when they die) and my *tallit* (prayer shawl) over my head, I stood up for a single portion of a Torah reading, and cried. In time, as my self-acceptance grew, the tears stopped and in their place was a stoic sense of rising to hear the unfair accusations of a heavenly court upon me.

Yom Kippur 1996, I took my submission/protest one step further. I decided that it was not enough to stand up. I wanted to have the *aliyah* (to be called up to the Torah) for the reading of those very verses. I arranged with the *shamos* that I would have the proper *aliyah* and when it was time, I went up to the *bima* in the center of the *shul*. My heart was pounding as I climbed the steps to the table where the scroll is read. I felt as if I was standing on the top of a mountain in a thunderstorm. My head was swirling as I looked out at the congregation seated around me. The men standing on each side of me at the podium were intent on their jobs, oblivious to me. Before me was the scroll.

It is hard to express the feeling of standing before an open Torah scroll. The Torah scroll possesses the highest level of sanctity of any object in a synagogue. If dropped, the whole congregation must fast. To stand there before the scroll as

it is rolled open is both intensely intimate and public. I have studied this scroll for years. On *Simchat Torah*, I have danced with it. I kiss it weekly as it passes through the congregation on Shabbat. The plaintive and magisterial melody of the reading on Yom Kippur is both ominous and comforting. I say the blessing, the scroll is rolled opened and I, too, feel as if my arms have been rolled aside and my heart is exposed.

I hold on to the handles of the scroll for balance. I am surprised. The words are poetry. The uncovering of nakedness repeats. Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy father's wife, the nakedness of thy sister, the nakedness of thy daughter-in-law, the nakedness of thy aunt. I am aware of the power of this text on the Day of Atonement for all those sexually abused. On a day of healing, we cannot avoid confronting how the intimacy of families can be turned into violence.

And then it comes: Thou shalt not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abomination. To my surprise, when it is read, I no longer feel pain or threat or even accusation. I feel strangely empowered. In exposing myself to this verse, it has become exposed to me. Standing amid the congregation I feel the eyes of many upon me. I am not looking at them, but at the scroll. And for the first time that I can remember, I feel it looking back at me.

I have come to understand that whatever those verses in *Leviticus* mean, they cannot be truly understood without the testimonies of those bodies and souls that have been ripped apart by them, who have suffered for years under their weight. Until our stories are told in the midst of the learned, until the scholars discover that among their own flesh and blood, their own students and teachers, their friends and colleagues are gay people whom they love—until the countless gay people pushed out of our communities come home and stand up in integrity and claim their place -- those verses will remain, dark and indecipherable, or worse, an ongoing excuse for blind hatred.