Shabbat Shalom everyone! First of all, I want to think Rabbi Liben, Cantor Richmond, and the entire Temple Israel community for welcoming me, on behalf of Keshet, here today to celebrate Shabbat with you. For those of you who are unfamiliar with our work, Keshet is a national nonprofit that works for full lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer equality and inclusion in Jewish life. What that means for me as National Director of Education and Training is that I work with communities such as yours, around the country, on educating them on LGBTQ identity and the concrete steps they can take to make their institutions and communities more inclusive of LGBTQ individuals.

I am particularly excited to join you on this Shabbat, during LGBTQ Pride month, as it gives us a time to reflect on the journey our country has been on towards greater LGBTQ inclusion, as well as remember the start of the LGBTQ civil rights movement. Scholars and activists largely mark the birth of modern LGBTQ civil rights movement in the United States with the Stonewall Riots on June 28th, 1969, (which is why Pride falls during the month of June). However, I want to go back farther than that, because if we have any hope of creating a more inclusive world, we must know how deep the pain goes within the experiences of individuals from marginalized communities.

One way in which oppression works is by silencing the history and stories of marginalized communities in favor of supporting the dominant narrative. In Western, American society, the dominant narrative is that people are heterosexual and cisgender (that is, not transgender and only either men or women). Any other narrative is perverted or immoral. As such, the history of LGBTQ Americans throughout our collective history has been one of silence, erasure, pain, or oppression. We have existed since time immemorial, but it is only our stories that have been forgotten and devalued. Often times, we have been forced to hide our authentic selves, live in the closet, fearing violence and our safety if we expressed the deepest wishes of our hearts and souls. The state was our oppressor, and instituted laws that made it illegal to both act on our desires (laws around sexual behavior, such as anti-sodomy laws) and for wearing clothes (there were laws in place that allowed men who dresses as women to be put in jail. Police would raid our social spaces for illusory reasons. Our fellow citizens would police us with their words and let us know that we were foul, despicable creates, forming stereotypes and lies that we are threats to societal order and, worse, threats to “women and children”. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the FBI and police departments kept lists of “known homosexuals”, their favored establishments, and friends. State and local governments followed suit: bars catering to the LGBTQ were shut down, and their customers were arrested and exposed in newspapers. Cities performed "sweeps" to rid neighborhoods, parks, bars, and beaches of queer people. They outlawed the wearing of opposite gender clothes, and universities expelled instructors suspected of being LGBTQ.[15] Thousands of LGBTQ individuals were publicly humiliated, physically harassed, fired, jailed, or institutionalized in mental hospitals. Many lived double lives, keeping their private lives secret from their professional ones. These experiences leave scars and wounds that may never truly heal.

In spite of this, my queer siblings thrived as best as they could: creating art, making progress and advances in science and technology, even serving as leaders of our society. We also did not take this lying down. Before the Stonewall Riots, in 1966, at Compton’s Cafeteria, in San Francisco draq qeens and other gender non-conforming folks were sitting in this establishment when police arrived to arrest those dressed as women. A riot ensured over the span of a few days.

This brings me back to Stonewall where a similar event happened. As I mentioned, The Stonewall Riots happened on June 28th, 1969, in response to police raids at this particular bar in the West Village of New York City. Led by two transgender women of color-Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, they rebelled against the police brutality. Following this, other actions sprouted up around the country and the Gay Liberation Front was formed, the first known organization to fight for Queer rights with Gay in its title. From there, things expanded. The first "Gay Pride"-Christopher Street Liberation Day-was held on June 28th, 1970 in NYC to mark the anniversary of the Stonewall riots, the reason Pride is in June, and NYC Pride falls when it does. By 1972, Pride had spread to Atlanta, Buffalo, Detroit, Washington DC, Miami, Minneapolis, Philadelphia and SF.

The 80's brought on the AIDS crisis. This decimated the community, particularly amongst gay men. We were left, abandoned by the state. President Ronald Regan famously took 5 years before uttering the word, AIDS, and nearly 7 years before he spoke publically about it. Because the state would not protect us, we had to protect ourselves. This era sparked a renewed sense of urgency; we were fighting for our lives. The most famous activist of that time period is probably Larry Kramer, who founded Act Up. You also probably heard the phrase, "Silence=Death". *The Normal Heart* is a play, written by Larry Kramer that depicts this part of his life. *Angels in America*, a Pulitzer Prize winning play by Tony Kusner is also a really great representation of being queer in America in the 80s. I was born at the tail end of this decade and came of age in the 90s and early 2000s. This was the time of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, prohibiting LGBTQ individuals from serving openly in the army. DOMA was passed, preventing same-sex marriage, the death of Matthew Shepard, a gay man in Wyoming, made national news.

I'm grateful to have seen the advances we have made since I was a child. More and more people courageously lived their lives opening; many states have moved for greater LGBTQ inclusion, Marriage Equality is the law of the land. However, as we look ahead to the years ahead, we are also looking at the potential roll back of LGBTQ civil rights victories. We are already seeing the renewed push to push transgender, non-binary, and queer folks back to the margins and out of public life in the "bathroom bills" that have swept the nation. Even here, in MA, the recent victory for Trans Accommodations that passed the State Legislature will now be put to a popular vote in the next election.

But Daniel, you may be asking yourself, this history lesson is really important, but what does it matter to me? Our community is warm and welcoming, why do we need to be so forceful with this conversation? To answer that, let me give you a deeper look into my own experience as a closeted gay, effeminate boy.

I was born and raised in Southwestern Ohio, in the suburbs of Cincinnati. When you think of the Midwest and imagine what growing up there must have been like, it is probably pretty close to that image…except I didn't tip any cows, though there was a cow pasture across one of my schools! Life is fairly simple; people are often set in their ways. As a frame of reference, with no value judgment attached, John Boehner (no relation), the current Speaker of the House, has been the representative of my home district since 1991. I was born in 1987, my brother 1990…so needless to say, politics in that area lean more to the conservative side of the spectrum.

In terms of a Jewish population, Cincinnati is home to Hebrew Union College, so there is a surprisingly sizeable one, just not in my area. I was one of a handful of Jewish kids in my grade level-I was often charged with going up to the front of the class and explaining the story of Hanukkah to my peers. By middle school, I was often called SuperJew as a nickname, which I think, partially indicates a certain degree of tokenism, though I wore it like a badge of pride. I mention all of this to highlight how salient my identity as a Jew was to me as a child. I had always been different. I had always known what it was like to feel excluded, in some respects, from the larger community, not necessarily in a hostile way, but in a way that a child can understand that one of these things is not like the other.

My synagogue was small, about a 20 minute drive away from my house, and part of the Conservative movement. Our rabbi leaned definitely more towards very traditional, and our religious school director was from the Ultra-Orthodox community. I remember once, in the post Bar Mitzvah class, he asked us what we all wanted to study, and we said Kabbalah, and he refused to teach us because we weren't 70 year old men (that is pretty much a direct quote). Our religious school stayed fairly consistent, so those I grew up with were peers from the ages of 5 up to 18 when I left for college. It was a group of about 10-15 in my age cohort, +/- 3 years on either side, however, only 1 other person who was a *Bat Mitzvah* the same year I was. So we were small. Insular. Tight knit. By the time I was 10, I was there 3 days a week-Sunday for religious school, Wednesday for Hebrew School and Bar Mitzvah prep, and every Saturday morning for the 2 years leading up to my Bar Mitzvah. After home and school, it really was like my second home. It was a safe space where I knew everyone, they knew me. With that framed, I'm going to leave my synagogue life to contrast it with my other educational and community environment-school.

I was a good student. Having teacher's as parents I think has a way of doing that to you. I was the teacher's pet, Hermione Granger, etc , etc. What I also was, was an effeminate kid who did not conform to what my peers thought being a boy was. I was called the F-word, which is also the word for a bundle of sticks starting in elementary school (it's a word that still holds a lot of emotional power for me, so I never use it)-before anyone else knew what it really meant. We just knew it was used against someone who did act the way they were "supposed to". I carried my books close to my chest "like a girl" instead of by my side "like a boy". I was awful at sports. I made friends with girls easily. I was also small and thin. My hips move side to side when I walk in a very distinctive way-my aunts and cousins used to call me chicky-butt. I liked to play dress up and play with Barbies. It wasn't until about 10-11 years old, when I learned what being gay was, did I realize that it was something applied to me. However, just because I learned that I used this word to describe me, I did not come out or acknowledge this. Instead, I knew that I was in an environment that I could not be myself, so I retreated into myself. My goal was to be invisible, to get by, and to not stand out. Standing out meant people potentially recognizing who I was and all I wanted to do was get by with the least bit of resistance. But how did I, a child, know that who I was, was not welcome, that it wasn't even an option?

I've already talked about the messages I was getting from society at large and at school. Kids can be cruel, so I definitely wasn't feeling welcomed and included by them. My school was public in an area that was pretty conservative, so there opinion wasn't going to change either. This was the time of groundbreakers like Ellen, Will and Grace, Elton John-when there were few role models and LGBTQ

rights weren't really a topic that was discussed. Without a national discussion going on, there wasn't much seeping down into life in suburban Ohio to break through. My parents also didn't know anything about what I was going through because I didn't feel comfortable coming to them with questions about it. When the birds and the bees talk happened, it was framed in a way that assumed I was heterosexual, because for them, it wasn't even a thought in their minds that I would be something other than that.

This all brings me back to my synagogue. As I said, my synagogue was effectively a 2nd home for me. Imagine how much different my experiences growing up could have been had that space been one that was inclusive and welcoming. Now, sure, there is an argument to be made that my synagogue not being inclusive and welcoming could be more towards the geographic area that I was in, or symptomatic of the times. However, the reason why I think that this space could have made the difference is precisely because it was the **Jewish** space. I say this, because, for me, I truly believe that my desire to do work surrounding inclusion and social justice work is rooted in very Jewish values. Values I learned studying with the walls of my Temple.

When I look back on my Jewish education, a few things stick out. One of the first is the idea that "I am my Brother's Keeper". In Sunday Religious School, during our Judaica studies classes, we would have these morality/ethics workbooks. In them, there would be a story or dilemma and then some questions that surround it. It then would reflect back on the Torah and highlight a parashat where the Torah teaches us about the subject. I remember that one of the first lessons was this very one, connecting it to one of the first accounts in the Torah-that of Cain and Abel. To me it laid out the lesson very clearly-we have a responsibility to look out for each other and we have a vested interest in the well-being of others-it is our duty.

In these same classes, we were introduced to the many examples throughout the history of the Jewish people where we, as a community, were excluded or discriminated against: the stories of *Pesach*, *Purim*, *Chanukah*; the horrors of the Holocaust; Europe in the Middle Ages/Renaissance; even up to this very day, Jews are excluded, harassed, persecuted. As a community, we are the inheritors of a history that calls upon us to do better. As a child learning about these and trying to make sense of them, the lesson was clear to me: being Jewish was antithetical to the idea of discrimination. It didn't make sense. The concepts of *Tzedakah* and *Mitzvot* are central tenets of our people. Later as I explored Judaism in a more academic context in College, I finally took that class on kabbalah as part of my religion studies minor, and it was there that I learned about *Tikkun Olam*-Lifting Up the Pieces to Repair the World. It was our duty as Jews to make the world a better place.

For me, it is all there, the Jewish tradition of inclusion. However, that isn't want I got. Were people openly hostile? No, but I wasn't openly out. Maybe everyone would have been affirming of my identity had I explored it and perhaps I had just given them a chance to show it. However, for me, it is important to remember that silence can be just as harmful, if not more so at times, than outright hostility. For many, particular those with an identity that is hidden unless you disclose, you are constantly navigating spaces to determine if it is one that is safe for you to be open. I was constantly bombarded by the messages that who I was, was not normal, that I was wrong. My synagogue was just

as complicit in its silence by not combating these issues and not stating exclusion goes against our values.

As I look ahead to my future in today's world, I can't help but wonder how the kid like me in today's America, and if the Jewish community will represent something different to him than it did to me growing up. Will it be a place of solace, strength, and security, or just another space in which the pressures to conform and hide his true self will overwhelm him.

In this particular moment in time, the Jewish community, all of you, all of us, have a decision to make. What kind of community do we want to live in? What kind of country do we want to live in? With this in mind, I want to close by turning to the Torah and reflecting on what wisdom this week's portion can provide us on this Pride Shabbat in Natick, Massachusetts, America, 2017. As we read/heard earlier this morning, today's portion recalls the moment where Moses sent spies into the Promised Land and when they returned, while they described the land flowing with milk and honey, they also noted all of the obstacles that would keep them from making a home in this Paradise. They convinced the Israelites it was a futile mission, and as punishment, God curses them to wander the desert 40 years, until the generation freed from Egypt has all died out, leaving their children as the ones who are allowed to enter the Promised Land. The entirety of a generation is cursed, save two, Joshua and Caleb. Joshua and Caleb are spared the curse because God recognized that they "were imbued with a different spirit and remained loyal". The spirit they were imbued with had faith in the strength of their community and their God to show the way to the Promised Land.

The work of building our own Promised Land, of creating safe, inclusive, beloved(to borrow terminology from the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr), communities, takes work. It takes faith. However, it is also hard. There are those voices that say, "why we need to do this work?", "we aren't that kind of synagogue", or "we don't want to be known as the "gay" synagogue". What I see in those cases is the voices of the few dampening the spirit of others, and reminding them that it is too hard to get to the Promised Land. I know I'm guilty of falling prey to that kind of talk, we all do. But today, what I want us to think about, is that perhaps what we need to do instead, is to trust in that very Jewish spirit of resilience, of inclusion, of looking out for the stranger because we too were strangers in a strange land. Only with that spirit, will we be able to get to the Promised Land, of communities that see and recognize the rights, dignity, and experiences of their members, together.

Shabbat Shalom.