



Flags of Love: What Hasidic Texts Can Teach Us About Pride Month

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This month, my family participated in our annual pre-Pride parade ritual in which my kids covered themselves from head to toe in temporary rainbow flag tattoos. Adorned with flying rainbow flag headbands, my wife and I headed to our local Pride parade where we joined a small sea of joyful people with flags of many varieties: large banners, small handheld ones, flags on faces and strollers. While I knew almost no one there, I felt a sense of community as LGBTQ+ identified and allies alike came together to celebrate Pride: to affirm queer identity, to lift up different kinds of families, to celebrate a boundless love.

This year, Pride Month means something different. In the United States, we are living through political and cultural backlash against LGBTQ+ rights, and against trans rights in particular. In states across the country, we're seeing scores of laws that, for example, restrict access to trans healthcare and carve out space for anti-LGBTQ discrimination, often in the name of "religious freedom."

The trend is more troubling than any one bill. At a time when the idea of unique personhood, the recognition of identities beyond heteronormative and gender binaries, is under attack,



Jewish texts offer a way to reaffirm this fragile idea. The Song of Songs (2:4) imagines a boundless love between two lovers in which one lover says of the other, “his flag of love was upon me.” That’s how I felt at Pride. I was surrounded by flags of love. Quite literally, we covered ourselves and our kids with flags celebrating love of self, love of relationship, and love of community.

Several weeks ago, just before we received the Torah on Shavuot, we first began reading from the Book of Bemidbar. There, in the wilderness, the tribes were arranged, each tribe bound together, marked by banners unique to the tribe. There’s a *midrash* in Bemidbar Rabbah (2:3) that teaches that these flags were a great sign of God’s love for the Israelites. Each tribe received a flag that they could carry with them in the wilderness, around which they could assemble and be marked. The *midrash* asks, “how do we know [these flags] were a sign of God’s love for Israel?” We know it from Song of Songs. As it says, “his flag of love was upon me.”

The 20th century Hasidic thinker R. Shalom Noah Berezovsky teaches that there’s a deeper meaning to these flags that open the book of Bemidbar. R. Berezovsky in his essay on Parashat Bemidbar teaches that the banners not only united and marked each tribe, they signaled that each division and tribe in Israel has its own special role and unique path in divine service. What is true about tribes in the wilderness is also true about individuals. Each of us has our own special role and unique path to contribute in this world. We each carry a flag that is unique to us, that reflects the fullness of ourselves and what we have to offer the world.

In the world we are living in, it can be uncomfortable or perhaps even terrifying and dangerous to walk carrying our flags flying high. But when it comes to the Israelites’ flags in



the wilderness, R. Berezovsky warns us that we have to guard these flags of love that we have been given. We cannot trade them away; they are ours to carry and raise up.

I am not someone who is by nature a proud flag carrier. I don't like huge crowds of people and I'm not inclined toward massive, colorful Pride parades. And yet, I see how important rallying around these flags is for my kids' identities, and I experienced how uplifting it is to show up together and be supported by the community. It can be easier to hide, and perhaps it is safer, but I'd like to be brave enough and proud enough to be marked by my flag with my tribe.

These sacred texts do not explicitly mention LGBTQ+ identity. Still, I cannot help but read them as a call to those who identify as LGBTQ+ and as allies to raise up our flags of love and to rally around our banners. May we not only proudly raise up the flags that distinguish us, finding community amongst our tribe, but may we be raised up alongside them, buoyed by a boundless love.

