

Being an LGBTQ Ally Isn't About You

In the early hours of Sunday, June 12, a gunman opened fire at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Fla. He would go on to murder 49 people and hurt at least 53 more.

At the same time, Jews worldwide were immersed in Tikkun Leil Shavuot, an all-night program devoted to Torah study to re-enact the ancient Israelites' preparation for receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai.

On Monday night, after the holiday ended, Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld took the members of his Orthodox congregation, Ohev Sholom, to Fireplace, a predominantly African-American gay bar near his synagogue in Washington, D.C.

Rabbi Herzfeld was so moved by his own actions that he wrote an article about the night in The Washington Post. "I learned that when a rabbi and members of an Orthodox synagogue walk into a gay African American bar, it is not the opening line of a joke but an opportunity to connect; it is an opportunity to break down barriers and come together as one; it is an oppor-

tunity to learn that if we are going to survive, we all need each other."

I know that many people are looking for ways to show their allyship and



Guest Column
By Robbie Medwed

love after Orlando, but this isn't it.

Newspapers and magazines have been flooded with articles that describe how gay bars are sanctuaries and sacred spaces for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) people. For so many, gay bars are one of the only places we can remove our masks and be ourselves without fear of retribution or bodily harm.

We aren't worried about being assaulted in a gay bar's restroom. We don't have to change our speech patterns or mannerisms or do anything different just to fit in. For many of us, gay bars are the one place where we can just be who we are, in freedom.

To have a crowd of non-LGBTQ people invade that sacred space, even if the intention is positive, removes the sense of refuge from the outside world. Rabbi Herzfeld describes how his mother approached a man standing by himself outside the building who invited them in. What if this person wasn't in the mood to play host for a group of visitors? How could anyone turn down a Jewish mother? He invited them in, but we do not know if everyone inside the bar was happy he did so.

Rabbi Herzfeld continues with vignettes of tearful conversations and forged connections. I don't discount those conversations, but I wonder how many in the bar wanted their night to turn from mourning with their own community to having to engage in conversation with curious outsiders.

Worse, writing an article about how meaningful it was for the congregation centers the pain on non-LGBTQ people, which breaks the very first rule of being an ally: It's not about you. This article congratulates its author and his congregation for being Such Great Saviors. The congregation's members were far more focused on dealing with their own emotions than on allowing others to mourn in peace.

(Had someone from the bar written about how moving it was that this group came to spend time with them, it would be an entirely different story.)

If you want to stand now with the LGBTQ community, and I sincerely hope you do, go to vigils and speak out against bigotry and hatred, especially in your own congregations. Direct your actions inward to make change.

How is your own synagogue, school or community complicit in reinforcing anti-LGBTQ sentiment and bigotry? How can you help dismantle those systems to make your spaces more welcoming for LGBTQ people?

Rather than invade someone else's space, see how your space can be changed to be more accommodating.

LGBTQ people throughout history were forced to create their own refuges away from the world because they weren't welcome anywhere else. Do not demand they step aside and give you room in their safe spaces. Help them defend their safe spaces from the outside and ensure they remain safe.

These visitors are from a movement that doesn't recognize the full humanity and equality of LGBTQ people. The Orthodox movement has made huge steps in welcoming LGBTQ people — I don't want to diminish that — but it still has very, very far to go.

If Orthodox Jews truly want to be LGBTQ allies, they must start with the systems in which they live. They must also understand the role that religion has played in causing pain to LGBTQ people over the centuries and the role they themselves play in that.

For many in the LGBTQ community, religion has been one of the greatest sources of pain and strife. While religion, and Judaism in particular, can be a wonderful place for so many, we have to understand that this is far from a universal feeling. Bringing our religion to others, especially in a non-religious setting where they have not asked for our attention, forces it upon them in a very unfriendly manner.

There are many great ways to be an ally, no matter your religious beliefs. None of them involves placing your needs first. Be someone's friend. Ask people what they need. Listen to the response, then give them exactly that.

Being an ally sometimes means putting someone else's comfort or needs above your own. It means doing it because you want to be there for someone who needs you and not the other way around. ■

Rose Anne Schulman
"Rose Anne Brings You Home!"
Life Member Million Dollar Club



Coldwell Banker
Residential Brokerage
5252 Roswell Road
Atlanta, Georgia 30342
404-252-4908 | Cell: 404-502-5921
roseannerealtor@gmail.com



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