

Rachel Salop – Bat Mitzvah Dvar Torah – May 13, 2017

Shabbat Shalom! Thank you to everybody who attended today, it means the world that you're all here.

I won't lie, I had a hard time finding a way to relate my Torah portion to everyday life. I had a lot of ideas, though none of them seemed right. My dad was the one who suggested that my portion related to discrimination. That suggestion instantly clicked, because that thought was in the back of my head the whole time I was reading my passage. Reading my Torah portion opened my eyes as to how the same level of discrimination showed 3,000 years ago is still displayed today.

The standard of physical perfection required for the priests of Aaron could, in some ways, be described as discrimination- though it could also be perceived as a job requirement. "The Eternal One spoke further to Moses: 'Speak to Aaron and say: No man of your offspring throughout the ages who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the food of his God.'" The priests with disabilities or physical imperfections were not deemed qualified to offer

the food of God. That, in my eyes, is unfair. To me, people with scars, or marks, or anything of the sort are more qualified. They have experience, they are learned, they are wise.

The discrimination practiced 3,000 years ago, in many ways, still persists today. For example, a black driver being pulled over for speeding has much more to fear than a white driver, due to the racism and discrimination still active in our society. A white man walking past a police officer on the street has no reason to feel threatened, but a black man does have a reason.

Those who are disabled are mocked or harassed by some, usually for their physical or mental condition. People are made fun of and even threatened because of their religion. LGBTQ+ community members are often mocked or bullied because they openly accept themselves, who they love, their gender. Women are degraded and taken advantage of because, in some eyes, men are superior. There are bullies who pick on people who are different just because their individuality is intimidating.

But through that, there are people who accept and love openly. Students in colleges make protective walls around their Muslim peers as they pray, girls band together to keep each other safe at parties. People of all races, genders, sexual orientation, and religions work together to fight for equality. The things we hear about on the news aren't just stories, either. Our Hebrew center has a pride flag. Many companies on the island support equality and identify as safe places. There was even an equality rally in Oak Bluffs and our own Women's March in Vineyard Haven.

Things are changing, people are becoming more open and accepting. The hope of equality is slowly but surely spreading throughout the world. Pride Flags are flown in Tel Aviv, women all over the country are protecting Muslim girls who fear that their hijab will be pulled off. Countries are legalising gay marriage, refugees are being taken into communities, love is being spread.

Our actions have shown that when bad things happen, good things often happen in response. When the "Muslim Ban" was put into place by the Trump

Administration, immigration lawyers rushed into airports to help those who were trapped. When Donald Trump was elected, thousands of people joined together to participate in the Women's March to show their support for those who might be afraid of losing their rights. When the Pulse Nightclub shooting occurred in 2015, LGBTQ community members and many others came forth to support the victims and their families.

I have a strong faith that the next generation, *my* generation, is going to promote equality so loudly that we will not be ignored. We're banded together by social media, connected by a web that is not easily severed. It's like a group of millions of kids who have sworn to protect each other. My generation is going to change things, I just know it.

I don't know if it's obvious, but I love the band Panic! At the Disco, a band who promotes equality and frequently donates money to LGBTQ+ charities. Well, I had the opportunity to see the band live in March. During the song Girls/Girls/Boys, a song about LGBT acceptance, the fans held up rainbow hearts and shone flashlights through them

to promote gay pride. It gave me goosebumps, and it seemed to give the lead singer, Brendon Urie, the same effect. He spoke about how he also thinks that this upcoming generation will change things, how he's in awe of how accepting and loving we are.

In that moment, when my peers were holding up those hearts and singing along to every word, the feeling in my stomach was indescribable. It was such a *powerful* moment, to know I wasn't alone in this hope for a future of love and equality.

How can I reconcile the apparent discrimination portrayed in the Torah portion? Though I don't agree with the standards to which the priests of Aaron were held, it makes sense to me. Though people are made in God's image, we worship God as someone above us, therefore it makes sense that the Jewish people would only want perfect people to offer the food of God. We deem God as holy, so it makes sense to have "holy" people offer the food of God. "No man among the offspring of Aaron the

priest who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the food of his God.”

I can see how those qualifications relate to everyday life, too. We, like the priests, have standards that must be met for every job or task. For example, it would be ridiculous to hire a programmer who had no experience with programming or a basketball player who'd never touched a basketball. Due to that fact, however, the requirements we're held to can sometimes motivate us to excel.

Writing this discussion took a lot of time, effort, and energy. I kept a notebook within arm's reach at night so that I could jot down ideas. Finding ways to relate the words of Torah to the present day is difficult, but it's doable. I hope that everyone in this room has a unique opinion on what I spoke about, because that's what's really important.

I'd like to open a discussion with a few questions, but feel free to ask me some as well:

Do the standards held to the priests make sense to you? If so, why? If not, why?

Do you think this upcoming generation is going to make a difference? If so, why? If not, why?

If we can be honest for a second, what's one time you judged someone based on appearances alone? How did that affect your relationship?