Israel Rising Like a Lion
Rabbi A. Brian Stoller
Pride Shabbat / June 13, 2025

June is Pride Month, and tonight is Pride Shabbat at TBE. Through music by LGBTQ composers and an inspiring sermon from our fellow congregant Rabbi Laurie Gold, we will celebrate the right of every person to live proudly and authentically as God created them.

I begin our service, though, with pride of a different kind.

The opening statement of the *Shulchan Arukh*, the definitive code of Jewish law, is a call to confront each day with pride: "Strengthen yourself like a lion to rise early and serve your Creator," and do not be ashamed in the presence of those who mock you. (OH 1:1)

Sometime yesterday evening our time, Israel launched a strike against the military leadership and infrastructure of Iran. It called it Operation Rising Lion, maybe an allusion to this well-known Jewish text: Israel knew, of course, that it would be condemned, ridiculed, and scorned by its international opponents, but it acted anyway.

As the operation unfolded last night, former Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett said in an interview: "I am very proud tonight to be an Israeli."

I think many share his pride, even if we dislike the current Israeli government.

Of course, we're anxious about what might come next. We're scared for our Israeli brothers and sisters who, at this very moment, are forced to remain in their safe rooms amidst a barrage of Iranian missiles coming their way. Our hearts ache for the IDF soldiers who are fighting this war, and their families who can only wait and pray for them to return safely.

War is not something to be celebrated. But the words of Ecclesiastes also ring true: "There is a time for everything under the sun." (3:1)

For too long, the ayatollahs have explicitly threatened to annihilate the Jewish state, and their threats are not empty. For decades, they have used their terrorist proxies Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis to attack Israel and murder Israelis. They have tried to develop nuclear weapons.

A little more than a year ago, Iran fired missiles on Israel from its own soil for the first time. And, of course, there was October 7. There is no doubt that Iran will stop at nothing to wipe Israel off the map.

Time and again, Israel has seemed in disarray, plagued by internal division, corrupt leaders, religious extremism, and the inevitable horrors of military occupation. But somehow, it finds a way to rise again like a lion.

On Yom Kippur this past year, after Israel crippled Hezbollah with exploding pagers, I said, "Almost miraculously, out of nowhere, Israel retook control of its own destiny and started fighting to win."

Something about this moment feels like that again.

In a text exchange this morning, Rabbi Meir wrote to me: "I really think that our amazing people might have changed history. This is one of the most transformative moments in the last hundreds of years. The Jewish people have created the real possibility of a Middle East that will be committed to peace and prosperity."

Rabbi Tara chimed in: "I married an optimist."

True, it is far too early to know how this will play out. But for the moment, I choose, even amidst the fear and uncertainty, to embrace the spirit expressed by Naftali Bennett and Rabbi Meir: the spirit of pride.

Pride Shabbat guest sermon
Rabbi Laurie Gold
6/13/25

Shabbat shalom and happy Pride Month, everyone. It is wonderful to see each of you tonight. Rabbi Stoller and Rabbi Megan, thank you for inviting me to be TBE's pride speaker this year.

I wish to offer my talk in memory of John and Herb Hirsch-Leiman. Many of us here had the pleasure of knowing these kind and courageous men. For those of you who did not know them, John and Herb were an out-of-the closet gay couple who were very active members of TBE. Herb was an usher, and John ran the Judaica shop.

John and Herb were active in the Union for Reform Judaism, the URJ, which is the umbrella group for all Reform temples. They spoke at URJ conferences, at our temple, and at other temples about the great need for congregations to welcome LGBT people into their fold.

John and Herb, along with Linda and Norman Diamond, created an important organization here at TBE. It was called the Gay and Lesbian Inclusion Committee, or GLIC.

GLIC warmly invited LGBT people to gatherings here at Beth-El. GLIC and the temple Brotherhood marched in the Long Island and NYC Gay Pride Parades. John and Herb served as grand marshals at some of these parades. This wonderful couple helped change TBE, Reform Judaism, and the world for the better.

It is a joy and an honor for me to stand before you in this beautiful chapel, this holy place. Temple Beth-El of Great Neck is so important to me. My parents joined in the mid-'60s. My brother, Mark, and I attended Hebrew school and had our Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies here. Mark and his wife were married in this holy chapel.

Rabbi Renni Altman introduced my wife, Nancy, as a Jew by choice here. Nancy and I got married here in 2011, the first year that gay marriage became legal in New York. Three-and-a-half years ago, Rabbi Tara Feldman led my mother's funeral service in this chapel.

When Nancy and I moved to Great Neck two years ago, we joined the temple, and I take advantage of all it has to offer. I attend Shabbat and holiday services, and I take classes. I appreciate the wisdom and knowledge of our excellent rabbis. I love the talents of our cantorial soloist and our musical director and pianist. I appreciate the music of the Shabbatones! I enjoy concerts, comedy nights, and Brotherhood and Sisterhood events. I like going on adventures with the Temple Beth-El Explorers.

As I look upon your beautiful faces, and hear your beautiful voices, I also see the faces and hear the voices of many other wonderful people who once graced this sanctuary. While they have gone on to life-eternal, to heaven, their spirits live on here, and in our hearts and mind. I feel the spirit of many of your mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and other relatives and friends. I feel the souls of Rabbi Jacob Rudin and Cantor Robert Harmon, who, along with Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson, led my Bat Mitzvah service.

I most strongly feel the presence of my beloved parents, Bill and Cindy Gold. These terrific people were active TBE members. They were trustees and participated in Club Chai, where they served as cochairs. They were also ushers. My father used to run an art-show fundraiser, and he was active in the Brotherhood. During the interfaith seders, he would peel all of the hard-boiled eggs! My mother went to Sisterhood meetings and volunteered in the office. She and I attended Torah study together.

In 1973, when I was in 10th grade, I had my confirmation service at TBE. I will give you a prize if you can pick me out in the photograph of me and my fellow-confirmands! The picture is downstairs, near the elevator. I continued my studies here through 12th grade. In high school, I was a member of the Junior Temple Club. We had a fantastic lounge just for us in the basement, which had a pool table and couches. We teens hung out there all the time. I thought we were the coolest kids in town!

It was around this time that I started finding words to describe what I had been feeling for a long time. When my female friends had crushes on boys and male athletes and TV and movie stars, I had crushes on girls and female athletes and TV and movie stars. I began to learn that the word for what I was is lesbian. When I was 16, the first two people I told were my Junior Temple Club friends. They were totally supportive of me, and I found great solace in that. However, I did believe that being a lesbian was not something that many people in society

thought was a good thing. I felt that even my parents, who were super liberal and open-minded, would not like it if they knew. So, I didn't tell them.

I worked in the Great Neck Library from 10th to 12th grade. Some of you may remember that it used to be in the building that is now Great Neck House. I am grateful that they had many books about gay and lesbian people, and that they were all positive. None of their books said that gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people were bad. I read those library books eagerly, and I was grateful to be living in a town that had a library with books like that.

When I was 20, my parents learned that I was gay, and they were upset. My father was worried about me. He told me that all the gay and lesbian people he had known were unhappy, and he thought I would be, too.

In those days, there were very few laws in America that protected LGBT people from discrimination. We had trouble getting and keeping jobs and housing, unless we hid who we really were.

Initially, my mother thought that she and my father had done something wrong, which caused me to become gay. She also told me that she loved me.

Fortunately, for them and for me, my parents came to understand, and to see firsthand that I could indeed have a happy life. I could get a job and a place to live. I could find someone as amazing as Nancy to love, and who loves me. They realized that they didn't do anything wrong. I was born gay, just like I was born left-handed, and there was nothing wrong with either fact.

The first person my mother went to after she heard I was a lesbian was Rabbi Davidson. When she told him I was gay, he assured her that I would always have a home here at Temple Beth-El, and that our congregation would always love and support me. You can imagine how wonderful and relieved that made my mother, father, and me feel. This was almost 50 years ago! Rabbi Davidson has always had a special place in my heart, because of how he helped my family and me with his words.

Temple Beth-El of Great Neck has always been at the forefront of civil rights. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke here in the 1960s. He had a deep friendship with Rabbi Jacob Rudin.

TBE hired the first woman ever to be ordained as a cantor, Cantor Barbara Ostfeld. TBE also hired the first-ever ordained rabbi who was an out-of-the-closet lesbian, Rabbi Karen Bender. Not only are they great clergy, they also helped raise people's consciousness. At a time when there were few women rabbis and no other women cantors, Cantor Ostfeld was a role model for me and other women. Rabbi Bender was a role model for me and other LGBT people.

Rabbi Davidson inspired me to become a rabbi. His sermons are brilliant, and he is a great teacher and life-cycle officiant. More importantly, Rabbi Davidson has encouraged his congregants to be righteous and compassionate.

I have wanted to be a rabbi since I was a teenager. Unfortunately, when I graduated from college, the Reform Movement's seminary, Hebrew Union College, was not yet admitting openly LGBT students. Having come out of the closet during college, I didn't want to enter the seminary and hide who I was. I was sad, but I made my peace with it. Instead of rabbinical school, I went to law school and was a trial attorney for more than 20 years. I enjoyed the work, but it never felt like my calling.

Then, when I was in my mid-40s, I realized that I could become a rabbi after all. Hebrew Union College had begun to admit openly gay and lesbian students, but they required that all students spend their first year in Israel. My father had recently died, and I didn't want to be so far from my mother. I also didn't want to be so far from Nancy. I heard about another great seminary called the Academy for Jewish Religion, or AJR for short. It has been around since the 1960s and has always admitted openly LGBT people. If I had heard about AJR when I graduated from college, I would have gone there. AJR is pluralistic, which means that students from all the Jewish denominations study there. Their faculty members are from all the Jewish denominations, as well. I really enjoyed studying at AJR, and they ordained me as a rabbi in 2011.

I love being a rabbi. I was a pulpit rabbi in Brewster and Roosevelt Island, New York, and in Danbury, Connecticut. I also worked as a chaplain in several rehabilitation centers. Nancy, my mother, and I traveled the world when I was a rabbi on cruise ships. I have also worked here, filling in for the Feldmans when they needed coverage for classes or services. I am currently tutoring a TBE member for his Bar Mitzvah ceremony, and I will be leading his service next month.

TBE's liberal, warm, and welcoming culture helped me be my own authentic self. From my elementary school years to now, I have felt seen, understood, and heard by TBE clergy, teachers, staff, and members. They have taught me, by their words and by their actions, how to live as proud Jews. Not proud in an arrogant way, but with the pride that comes with the knowledge that we are members of an amazing people with a long and beautiful history—a people that strive to pursue justice and be a light unto the nations.

Judaism has evolved greatly throughout the past thousands of years, which is part of our strength and genius. While many of our beliefs, thoughts, and customs have evolved over time, our core values have not. For example, the Torah tells us, no fewer than 36 times, that we are to be kind to the strangers, and we still teach that we are supposed to be kind to people who are different from us. The great sage Hillel implied that the most important words in the Torah are, "Do not do to others that which you don't want them to do to you." Judaism teaches that each person is created in God's image, and that we each have a spark of divinity within us. All of these values, and many others, have made it easier for me to live as a happy and confident lesbian, Jew, and person.

I feel proud to be a member of this beautiful congregation, led by two amazing rabbis. I am grateful for our current smart, dedicated, and hardworking lay leaders and other volunteers, as well as our executive director, office manager, and other staff members, who have given so much of themselves over these many years. I want to give a special thank you to Joy Palevsky. I am sorry that I will be out of town on the night that TBE honors you for your exemplary dedication to TBE. You were here for my mother, and you have been here for me, and for so many others.

I am grateful for all of the fantastic lay leaders and other volunteers, who have served our congregations these past 60 years, some of whom are here tonight. I remember each of the rabbis, cantors, pianists, and interns who have served TBE. I appreciate the wonderful staff members who worked here over the years. All these people I have mentioned, in his or her own way, helped me become the rabbi I am today. They, along with my parents, aunt, and grandparents, instilled and cultivated my love for Judaism.

Two weeks ago, our Torah portion was B'Midbar, which means in the desert. God wants someone from each of the 12 tribes to go with Aaron to take a census. This was done to find out how many men were available in case of a war. Our ancestors knew then, just as we know now, how crucial it is for us to have soldiers to defend the Jewish people. The Torah goes on to say that tribe members should stand in formation, with people from each tribe holding the flag and banner associated with it. It must have been glorious to see the flags and banners displayed with pride. These flags remind of the gay Pride flag that I am holding. You see them waved at rallies and parades during Pride Month. An artist, Gilbert Baker, came up with the idea of a rainbow flag for gay Pride in 1978.

Gay people, like many marginalized people, and all people really, have been deeply affected by the film The Wizard of Oz, and its song "Over the Rainbow." The words in "over the rainbow" express the hopes and yearnings of anyone who longs for a better life, a life of dignity and respect. It is the song of people who want to see all the colors in the world—colors that represent change, hope, and possibilities.

When Jesse Jackson ran for president, he created what he called a rainbow coalition, a community of his diverse supporters. In The Wizard of Oz, Dorothy sings the song "Over the Rainbow." She is a farm girl who wants a change from her monotonous life of chores, a change from her colorless, black-and-white life.

Yip Harburg wrote the lyrics for "Over the Rainbow." His real name was Isidore Hochberg, and he was born in 1896 to Russian-Jewish immigrants. Harburg grew up very poor and attended City College.

My mother and I saw Mandy Patinkin in concert at the Queensboro Performing Arts Center. He sang many songs in Yiddish, and many of the concert attendees sang along. I assumed that they were Holocaust survivors, who were singing in the language of their youth, in the language of

their relatives and friends, most of whom the Nazis killed. I was moved to hear Yiddish sung all around me. It was the language of my great grandparents, who were fortunate to have escaped anti-Semitism when they moved to America. Mandy Patinkin ended his concert with "Over the Rainbow," sung in Yiddish.

You may recall the story of Noah and his ark. After the flood ended, God placed a beautiful rainbow in the sky. The rainbow reminds us that God is here for us, ready, willing, and able to fulfill God's part of the covenant with us, to protect us. May we remember that the covenant always exists, even when we don't see a rainbow. Rainbows remind us that there is a beautiful variety of colors in our world, and that this beauty is often apparent to us only after a dark, rainy, and dreary day.

Nancy and I bought rainbow flags for you, to remind you of God's promise to take care of us, and so that you can express your support for LGBT people. I asked Stephanie and Shy if they and the Shabbatones would sing and play "Over the Rainbow" after my talk, and they kindly agreed. I thank them for that, and I really look forward to hearing them perform it.

When Rabbi Megan sent me an email asking me to speak tonight, I was very moved. I was especially touched when I saw the date for tonight's service, as June 13 is a very important date for me. It is the date of my Bat Mitzvah ceremony. It feels spiritually, cosmically, and emotionally significant to me that I am speaking to you on the anniversary of my Bat Mitzvah.

I leaned on this very same Torah table when I read from the Torah for the very first time, exactly 55 years ago. I stood before this same ark. I remember how proud I was to be Jewish, and to be a member of this wonderful congregation. During his speech to me, Rabbi Davidson said he hoped that I would always feel so noble and proud to be Jewish as I did at that moment. His hopes were realized, and my feelings have only increased over the years. I wish you a peaceful Shabbat and a happy Pride Month. Thank you.