



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Purim 5774

By Former Congressman Barney Frank

The ancient rabbi Hillel famously asked: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?” I feel it is important to answer the first two questions in the way Hillel hoped—that we must stand up for both ourselves and for others. (After 40 years as a Legislator, my answer to the third is “as soon as we have the votes.”)

On Purim, Jews remember the oppression we faced and overcame in ancient Persia and throughout our history. With Hillel’s questions in mind, we must rededicate ourselves to combating anti-Semitism throughout the world and to combating the oppression of others.

Today one of the most important ways to combat the oppression of others is to work against the terrible wave of homophobia that is oppressing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in several African countries. While this prejudice is powerful, we should not paint the whole continent with this brush. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela demonstrated his unsurpassed commitment to defending human rights for all by including in the South African constitution recognition of the right of LGBT people to be free from discrimination. But sadly, Mandela’s example is not always honored.

As a Member of Congress, I did what I could to combat the oppression of LGBT people in Africa. I was successful in getting my colleagues on the Financial Services Committee to adopt an amendment urging the U.S. Treasury Department to oppose World Bank loans to countries which—like Uganda at the time, and Nigeria since—denied the basic humanity of LGBT people. I am proud to note that my colleagues in the Congressional Black Caucus, despite their understandable strong support of aid for Africa, agreed that we should not support loans to countries that sanction bigotry.

I was very pleased when former Secretary of State Clinton declared American opposition to this pattern of abuse, and I am pleased that homophobic acts are now documented in the annual State Department survey of global human rights of the world and are condemned by our government.

I have also made a point of conveying my feelings personally. For example, I told a high-ranking Nigerian official that I would not accept her invitation to visit her country as long as its government persisted in treating people who shared my sexual orientation so brutally. When she assured me that I would be treated respectfully, I responded that I was not interested in being the personal beneficiary of an exemption from bigotry.

Over the years, I have heard two recurring objections from African leaders. The first was: “Do not tell us to respect homosexuals, because homosexuality is contrary to African values.” Homosexuality, they argue, is a concept alien to Africa, imported from the decadent West. To start with, this is factually wrong. Homosexuality is indigenous to all cultures, and the LGBT people in Nigeria, Uganda, and other African countries who are facing imprisonment or death are Africans exercising their own identities, not Western values. Moreover, that argument is basically a version of one that was used to justify the very colonialist oppression that Africans deplore. Fifty years ago or more, many in the West happily agreed that there were deep cultural differences between African people and those of us in the West, and these alleged differences were cited to justify Western rule.

The argument that “so-called human rights” are a Western construct inapplicable in African societies has had a destructive impact on Africa. All Africans suffer when their leaders reject the view that basic rights should accrue to every human being, including the basic right of freedom from the fear of physical abuse or imprisonment for one’s personal choices. It is also sad to see some of those who were victims of discrimination and abuse in the past, now turn against some of their countrymen and women.

The second argument I have confronted when asserting that American policy should work to protect the LGBT minority against official oppression is that it is none of our business. “Stay out of our internal affairs,” I have been told by African leaders. Sadly, history demonstrates that there are times when justice demands that we intervene. When the racist white rulers of Rhodesia and South Africa angrily instructed liberal Americans that their internal affairs were no legitimate concern of ours, we ignored them. I remember with great pride standing in Statuary Hall in the Capitol Building listening to Nelson Mandela tell us that if not for the U.S. sanctions against the Apartheid regime (which Congress passed over Ronald Reagan’s veto), he would not have been a free man.

I do not remember officials of Uganda complaining when I was one of the leaders in passing legislation that forgave hundreds of millions of dollars in debt that Uganda owed to the United States, other governments, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. No Africans told us then that it was none of our business.

At Purim, we remember the story of a small group of people rising up to defend themselves after being demonized, abused and threatened with annihilation by Haman, the evil Persian minister. This story should move us to reassert our determination to respond to Hillel’s second mandate. Yes, we are for ourselves, and will defend Jews worldwide against oppression; but, yes, also, we will stand up for others who are now threatened. Today, LGBT people in Nigeria, Uganda, and elsewhere on the African continent need us to “be for them.” That’s why I am supporting the *We Believe* campaign of American Jewish World Service, the Jewish voice for global LGBT rights. No one should be hated for whom they love.



Barney Frank served as a U.S. Congressman from 1981-2012, and as Chairman of the House Financial Services Committee from 2007-2011. While in Congress, Frank worked to adjust America’s spending priorities to reduce the deficit, provide less funding for the military and more for important quality of life needs at home. He has also been a leader in the fight against discrimination of various sorts, championing the interests of the poor, the underprivileged and the vulnerable. In 1987, Frank became the first member of Congress to voluntarily come out as openly gay, and in 2012 he married his longtime partner, becoming the nation’s first congressman in a same-sex marriage while in office. Frank is known as a superb legislator and a pragmatic politician whose sharp intellect and sense of humor has made him one of the most influential and colorful figures in Washington.

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