

When I was ordained from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 2006, the majority of my classmates and I wore rainbow buttons pinned to our gowns. While, to my knowledge, not a single member of my graduating class identified as gay or lesbian, many of us had made our peace with the fact that we were choosing to attend a rabbinical school that would not ordain openly homosexual students by committing ourselves to work towards change from the inside. We convened symposia to explore the *halakha* (Jewish law) of LGBT issues, invited individuals to share their stories at lunch-and-learns, circulated petitions, and organized demonstrations of solidarity. We accepted our diplomas with pride tinged with not a little bit of guilt, wondering if there wasn't something incongruous about becoming teachers of a tradition that didn't yet represent our highest moral aspirations.

And then, incredibly enough, things changed! In December of 2006 the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS), our movement's highest lawmaking body, revisited issues related to gay ordination and marriage, this time approving two different legal responsa – one written by Rabbi Joel Roth which upheld the traditional prohibitions on homosexuality and one written by Rabbis Dorff, Nevins, and Reisner which took a far more permissive approach. (In one of the quirks of the CJLS, members of the law committee may vote for more than one paper – even when they come to differing conclusions – and diametrically opposed responsa may both become majority positions of the body.) Dorff, Nevins, and Reisner argue that the two verses from Leviticus traditionally understood as prohibiting same-sex relations actually forbid but one act only, anal sex between men, while all of the other laws governing homosexuality and Judaism – lesbian relationships, other kinds of sexual activity between men, etc. – were added later by the rabbis. As a result, they advocate for upholding the original ban while undoing the rabbinic restrictions that follow – an act that is not undertaken lightly but can be justified here on the basis of a variety of scientific, moral, and theological considerations explored more deeply in their paper. In particular, they argue that the Talmud itself declares the Jewish value of *k'vod habriyyot*, a commitment to the inherent dignity of each and every person, constitutes sufficient grounds for abrogating a rabbinic prohibition and that the refusal to allow gays and lesbians to marry and serve the Jewish people as clergy would certainly be an affront to such dignity. While I, personally, preferred some of the minority papers which went even further in terms of challenging Leviticus on moral grounds, I am grateful that the Dorff, Nevins, and Reisner paper opened up the gates of both of our U.S. Conservative Movement rabbinical schools to gay ordination and empowered scores of rabbis to start performing gay weddings.

This short message cannot do justice to the many and complex *halakhic* considerations explored in the process of investigating questions of Judaism and homosexuality, and those who would like to read more should visit the Rabbinical Assembly's website where all of the *teshuvot* (legal position papers) related to this topic are listed: <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/jewish-law/committee-jewish-law-and-standards/even-haezer>. An excellent summary of the history of same-sex relationships in the Conservative Movement can also be found in *The Observant Life* edited by Martin S. Cohen which I have in my office and am happy to loan out. I share this brief summary today, however, on the first Shabbat in June, in honor of LGBT Pride Month which began just a few days back. I am grateful to be part of a movement whose Torah has indeed come to represent the values of equality and inclusion which I hold dear.

Over the last year our fabulous congregational LGBT Inclusion committee comprised of Susan Kay, Harriet Robbins Ost, and Karen Thirman has been busy with some of the following initiatives:

- We conducted a communications audit to make sure that our membership applications, school registration materials, and other forms are sensitive to issues of gender and sexual orientation.
- Next up, we will be creating a designated LGBT section of our website.
- We purchased resource materials for our library for both children and adults to provide information and support around LGBT issues and to feature families of different compositions. We also made sure that such materials were available for purchase at our congregational book fair.
- We are in the process of having the single bathroom stall by the entrance of the school wing more clearly identified as a gender neutral space.
- Our synagogue Ritual Committee appointed a task-force to study issues related to our clergy officiating at same-sex aufrufs and weddings (should they wish to do so) and unanimously found this to be permissible. The issue was then brought to the full Ritual Committee where it was also unanimously accepted and has now become the new policy of our community.

Finally, for the first time ever, BHCBE will be walking in the Chicago Pride Parade to be held on Sunday, June 26th (the same day as the dinner dance but the hearty among us will be able to do both). A bus will be leaving the synagogue at 9:15 AM sharp or you can join us at 10:15 at the corner of Lawrence Avenue and Broadway to line-up downtown; the bus will also meet us at the end of the route with an estimated return to Wilmette by about 4:30 PM. An \$18 fee/person covers round-trip bus service, a BHCBE pride t-shirt, water bottle, and light snack, and those interested should contact Phyllis in the office (847-256-1213; phyllis@bhcbe.org) by June 12. In addition to signaling an atmosphere of true welcome to LGBT individuals and their families within our synagogue, marching as a congregation indicates that LGBT inclusion is a value held by people of faith in general and by the Jewish community in particular. Given that this has not always been the case, it seems to me important to make this public statement of solidarity.

Happy Pride Month to all and I hope to see you on the 26th!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Annie Tucker