

These Are a Few of My Favorite... Columns



One of my themes for this year will be "A Few of My Favorite..." Many congregants are studying with me as I review some of my favorite teachings and lessons. In each issue of the Newsletter, I am reprising some of my favorite Perspective columns from the last thirty-five years.

This issue's column originally appeared in 2007, following a landmark decision by the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards which made it possible for gays and lesbians to be ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and serve in Conservative Movement congregations. I first spoke about this issue in 1994, in a Yom Kippur Sermon in which I clearly took the position that I believed then that members of the LGBT community should be entitled to full participation in Jewish life including being rabbis and cantors. I was happy to see the Movement finally embrace that position. During the last two years, there has been a major shift in attitudes on LGBT issues in the nation. Gay marriage is now possible in a growing number of states, and I hope Pennsylvania will soon join this group. This article reflects my position on these issues, positions I continue to endorse today. Even more so.

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards Conclusions on Issues Relating to Gays and Lesbians

During the first week in December, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) of the Conservative Movement in Judaism concluded a long-running set of deliberations regarding issues relating to gays and lesbians. In this column, I would like to set out, briefly, the main conclusions, the implications for the future, and where I stand as a rabbi on these issues.

First, some background. The CJLS is the single body empowered within the Conservative Movement to interpret halachah, Jewish law, for the movement. It is composed of twenty-five voting members, all of whom are rabbis appointed by the Rabbinical Assembly, five non-voting members appointed by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, and one non-voting member appointed by the Cantors Assembly.

The CJLS deliberations are based on teshuvot, papers written by the committee members about specific issues in Jewish law that require review. If a paper receives six votes out of the twenty-five voting members, it is considered to be an official halachic position within the Conservative Movement. It is possible for two or more conflicting papers to be accepted, each being legitimate. In such a case, individual rabbis may choose to follow either opinion, and still be consistent with the halachic position of the movement.

This process may be difficult for non-rabbis to understand, but it is within the parameters of Jewish law as it has been classically understood. Ever since the destruction of the second Temple, and the ending of the period of the Sanhedrin, Jewish law has been decentralized. There has not been one halachic authority which is acknowledged by all.

In 1992, the CJLS considered a wide array of issues relating to gays and lesbians. Its decisions affirmed that gays and lesbians are welcome in our congregations, that they could be accorded all religious rites in the synagogue, serve on synagogue staffs, and hold any office in a congregation. Discrimination against gays and lesbians was deemed improper.

However, in two key areas restrictions were imposed. First, the CJLS determined that gays and lesbians could not be ordained as rabbis or cantors, and that rabbis should not officiate at same-sex unions between gays or lesbians.

Over the past fourteen years, a growing sentiment has been developing that these two issues need to be revisited. During the last two years, the CJLS has met on several occasions and considered various proposed teshuvot without coming to a definitive conclusion. After papers were reviewed, critiqued, and rewritten, deliberations were set for December 5 and 6 for final debate and voting.

As a result of the deliberations, two main teshuvot were adopted by the CJLS. The teshuvah by Rabbi Joel Roth reaffirmed the 1992 rulings that held that under Jewish law the rabbinical schools of the movement could not ordain as rabbis or cantors those individuals who were openly gay or lesbian, and that Conservative rabbis should not officiate at ceremonies of same-sex unions. The teshuvah by Rabbis Elliot Dorff, Daniel Nevins, and Avram Reisner ruled that Jewish law could be interpreted in a way that would permit gays and lesbians to be ordained, and that individual rabbis could, consistent with Jewish law, perform ceremonies to consecrate same-sex unions.

What is the effective result of this long-awaited set of decisions?

The decision to intermarry is an individual decision, and not one that can be banned or controlled—not by parents, though in the past some sat shiva for children who intermarried; not by rabbis, though none in the Conservative and Orthodox Movements will officiate at intermarriages, and many in the Reform and Reconstructionist movements similarly will not; and not by congregations, even though some in our movement still will not publicly acknowledge intermarriage even in their newsletters, much less from the pulpit.

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A Rabbinic Perspective *By Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom*

Reprinted from the April 2014 Adath Jeshurun Newsletter

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Why do we care who our children marry? Why do we care about intermarriage?

Many couples see our opposition as nothing if not prejudice. But for those of us in leadership positions in our Movement, it is not prejudice against anyone, but preservation, the preservation of a critical mass of Jews that will make the American Jewish community viable. That is our concern.

But, the vast majority of couples planning an interfaith wedding will tell us, we don't want to abandon Judaism. We just want to marry the person we love. This is not a rejection of our heritage, our family, our congregation, or our people. It is an individual choice and expression. Rabbi, they will tell me, I am the same person I always was.

Of those of our children who intermarry, most see themselves as Jews. In fact many learn more about Jewish weddings when they are planning their interfaith weddings than they knew previously. I am often amazed at how couples work creatively, study and plan, in order to incorporate Jewish symbolism in the ceremony. More often than not there is a huppah, seven blessings, wine, breaking the glass, even a ketubah. And where once the incorporation of this symbolism was just to please their parents, today it is their own free choice. It comes from within them. It often surprises even them.

So what do we do? Do we hold back and stand away, as if embracing the intermarried couple will make us guilty of capitulation? As if we were aiding and abetting the weakening of the Jewish people? Or do we grab them, and hold the door open to their continuing connection to the Jewish people, not knowing which couples will raise Jewish children and which not; and not knowing which of those children will one day claim their Jewish roots and become a creative force in the renewal of Judaism.

I'll be candid with you. As a Movement, we have tried to have it both ways. We won't perform the intermarriage, or even validate it before it happens. Then we say we will do Keruv, bring them near and invite them in as a couple. But those we push away on Saturday night by making the wedding off-limits, a non-event, are not so easily swayed to come back on Sunday morning when we are ready to welcome them.

They have to be really motivated, and really committed, to get over the initial sting of rejection.

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