

By Rabbi Lisa A. Edwards  
 Beth Chayim Chadashim, LA  
 March 31, 2000/II Adar 25 5760  
 Parashat Shemini, post CCAR Greensboro conference  
 Ul'hav-dil bein ha-kodesh u'vein ha-khol  
 "Distinguish between the sacred and the profane"

Been reading any headlines in the last couple of days?

Let me share some more with you:

Rabbis Sanction Same-sex Unions — USA Today

Rabbi Group Votes to Officiate at Same-sex Unions — Oakland Tribune (No. Calif.)

Reform Rabbis Agree to Allow Same-sex Ceremonies — San Jose Mercury News (No. Calif.)

Reform Rabbis OK Same-sex Unions — Winston-Salem Journal (North Carolina)

Rabbis Given OK to Preside at Gay Unions — The Charlotte Observer

Reform Rabbis Back Blessings of Gay Unions — NY Times

Reform Jewish Leaders Allow Same-sex Unions — High Point Enterprise (North Carolina)

Rabbis Sanction Same-sex Unions — Chicago-Sun Times

Reform Jewish Leaders Accept Gay Commitment Ceremonies — The Inquirer (Philadelphia)

Rabbis OK Same-sex Ceremonies — San Francisco Chronicle

Rabbis OK Gay Weddings — San Francisco Examiner

Or today's LA Jewish Journal: "Reform Rabbis: Same-Sex Ceremonies Kosher"

Or how about the one above the fold, no less, on the front page of our own LA Times yesterday. It reads: "Gay Unions Affirmed by Reform Rabbis." And the headline on page A21 where that same article continued:

"AFFIRM:" it says in bold caps, and then: "Reform Rabbis Are Free to Preside at Same-Sex Unions."

Or my favorite so far, from La Repubblica, Milan, Italy: *Unioni gay, se dei rabbini Usa Gli ebrei riformati: "Siamo tutti uguali"*

Gay Unions, Yes, from USA Rabbis Reform Jews: "We're All Equal."

How many of you thought you'd ever live to see such headlines? Does anyone here remember when BCC was voted into the UAHC in 1974, when our congregation became the first gay, lesbian congregation of any religion to be accepted into a mainstream congregational organization? [Invite those people to stand and be acknowledged] Or 1990-Does anyone remember in 1990 when the Reform rabbis approved ordination of gay and lesbian rabbinical students? [Raise hands].

I remember it well, I was a rabbinical student at the time. Although I was already completely out - to everyone - the vote changed things, changed the way I felt inside. Safer, for one. Yoel Kahn, already the rabbi serving our sibling San Francisco congregation in 1990 when the ordination vote was taken, recalled this past Tuesday that when he was in rabbinical school he didn't know until he was walking up the steps to the bima to be ordained, whether or not they would ordain him. It was a different era.

Lately, in terms of progress for our community, our people, "an era" seems to last only a few years. What happened in Greensboro, North Carolina this past Wednesday? History. History in our own time. What else happened in Greensboro, North Carolina this past Wednesday? Torah. Torah in our

own time.

Perhaps you noticed already in tonight's seat bulletin the "Torah verse of the week" that the Torah study group chose last night from this week's portion, Parashat Shemini: Ul'hav-dil bein ha-kodesh u'vein ha-khol, u'vein ha-ta-mei u'vein ha-tahor "For you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean." [Levit. 10:10]

Our critics outside of Reform Judaism were of course quick to speak out when the resolution passed. We expected as much, we Reform rabbis. In fact, we encourage it. We know there are those among klal Yisrael, the community of the Jewish people, who are always hungry for an opportunity to criticize Reform Jews, and since we Reform rabbis take seriously God's instructions to help feed the hungry, we like frequently to toss a morsel or two to our critics hungry to criticize. And what a tasty morsel we tossed to them on Wednesday! So none of us should be surprised to see the criticism. And be prepared, for it will continue, both inside and outside the Reform movement, for many months and years to come. But I was particularly struck by the comment of one Orthodox rabbi quoted in the LA Times on Thursday, struck that he made his remark in the week we are reading Parashat Shemini and the verse I just quoted you, for he said about the vote, "This is another indication that there is nothing sacred to Reform Judaism," [Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein, director of the Jewish Studies Institute at Yeshiva of Los Angeles, LA Times, p.A21]. For me, his remark coupled with our Torah verse of the week is simply another indication of the differing ways Torah is read and understood among serious Jews. For it seems to me that what is true is exactly the contrary of what he said: it is precisely because something in particular IS sacred to Reform Judaism that the Reform rabbis took the action they did. It is precisely because ALL human beings -- the creatures God created b'tzelim elohim, in the image of God -- it is precisely because ALL human beings are sacred to Reform Jews, that we are here tonight celebrating.

ul'hav-dil bein ha-kodesh u'vein ha-khol, u'vein ha-ta-mei u'vein ha-tahor  
 "Distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean."

Something else I remember about the 1990 vote on the ordination of gay and lesbian rabbis is also true about Wednesday's vote, and it's important to remember. Both 1990's statement and this new one are watered down. They are not the statement any of us would have written had it been entirely up to us. But they were good enough to get the headlines we wanted, and I think, the resultant changes in attitudes and actions.

The Greensboro conference was a major lesson in the politics of compromise and consensus building. For you need to know (I'm sure it comes as no surprise to any of you) that there are still many Reform rabbis who remain unconvinced that we should be approving, or officiating at, same - gender unions. Hence the line I most dislike in the resolution - "that we support the decisions of those who choose to officiate" -- that's a good line -- but then, "and we support the decision of those who do not." Few of us who wanted the resolution really wanted to vote for actually supporting the decision of those who do not choose to officiate.

So the resolution isn't perfect. You'll see that quite clearly when you pick up a copy after the service and study it. Sadly, it is in fact far from perfect. So I want you to know some more of the story, of how we came to vote for the particular resolution we approved: First of all, the resolution we passed on Wednesday was not the same resolution put forth by the Women's Rabbinic Network (the WRN) a year ago when that esteemed group decided they wanted to champion this cause. Even their original resolution made compromises in the hopes of getting enough votes. But the opposition got organized

and vocal (as oppositions often do!), and by last week it seemed likely, if not certain, that the WRN resolution would not pass in its original form.

What to do? Well, God bless them, the leaders of the CCAR (the Central Conference of American Rabbis) had decided it was time to pass a same - gender officiation resolution. One had already been postponed two years ago, and again last year. Rabbi Charles Kroloff, who is president of the CCAR for a two year term only, was determined to have a resolution approved during his presidency. That meant it had to be this year. Rabbi Paul Menitoff, the salaried CCAR executive vice president, and Rabbi Elliot Stevens, CCAR's executive secretary for 25 years, were also on board for this to happen this year. So were WRN co-chairs Rabbis Shira Stern and Susan Stone (who did amazing work, and took a lot of heat, including verbal bashing. As straight women rabbis they stood up against taunts and insults, and proudly laughed and cheerfully agreed when critics call them lesbians, and so did their husbands!). Also at the forefront of the organizing were GLRN (Gay Lesbian Rabbinic Network) coordinators Rabbis Eric Weiss, Val Lieber and Denise Eger (all of whom, by the way, went well beyond the call of duty working on this - thank them, please. Rabbi Eger was amazing and devoted every step of the way). Rabbis Menitoff and Kroloff of the CCAR leadership went to Rabbis Stern and Stone of the Women's Rabbinic Network just last week and said, would you work on a compromise resolution if we can get the opposition to do so as well? They all agreed.

So what they wrote last week is what we voted on (plus a few last minute positive amendments made just before the vote was taken)- it is "THE compromise." Those folks then came to us, to the GLRN (the Gay/Lesbian Rabbinic Network): would we back it? We met. We discussed. So did our straight allies. "It's not strong enough," some said. "We could pass a stronger resolution," said some. On the other hand, no one was sure of that. The opposition had already signed on to what we had in hand. There would be no big fight if we went with this form. The GLRN members agreed amongst ourselves to back this resolution. The headlines will still come out in our favor, we suspected (we were right!). Then our task for the next few days in Greensboro was to make sure our allies backed it too. Many of them turned to us, asking if it was okay with us. Others came up to us with comments like, "I might have to vote against it because it's not strong enough." "Please don't do that," we answered. "Let it pass. It will do what we need it to do."

"But what if we could pass something stronger? Even if it means a bitter floor fight, and a close vote - I think we could pass something stronger," one colleague said to me. I for one, didn't think my heart could take a bitter floor fight and a close vote, even if we won (and what if we lost?). "Please do it this way," I said. And I'm so glad I said that, for I wouldn't have traded for the world what happened at the moment of the vote. Do you remember the scene in the book of Exodus -- I joke about it every year when we read it again - the Israelites, recently freed from slavery, are gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai. And Moses comes and repeats to them all the commands of God and all the rules and the Torah says, va-ya-an kol ha-am kol echad, "and all the people answered with one voice." [Ex. 24:3]. It actually happens twice while they are at Mt. Sinai that they answer in one voice, and I joke that it's surely the only time in the history of the Jewish people when they all agreed. But I never really thought about what it might sound like if such a thing were to happen. Not until this past Wednesday afternoon when it came time to vote and Rabbi Kroloff said, "all those in favor of the resolution, say 'aye.'" A roar went up from the 500 plus rabbis sitting in that room, [join me] "AYE!" we shouted in one voice. And when he said, "all opposed, say, 'nay,'" I heard two much quieter voices. I bet someone or two at Sinai did the same, but they didn't get recorded in the Book! . . . The sound of all the people answering in one voice still echoes in my ears. I hope it will be with me forever.

Ul'hav-dil bein ha-kodesh u'vein ha-khol, "For you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane," God said to Aaron--to Aaron, the first high priest. "Be of the disciples of Aaron," said Hillel,

in the most read mishnah tractate, Pirke Avot, The Sayings of the Ancestors [1:12]. "Be of the disciples of Aaron: one who loves peace and seeks it, one who loves human beings -God's creatures, one who loves human beings and brings them closer to the Torah."

On Wednesday, March 29, 2000, the 22nd day of the second Adar 5760 -- on the birthday of Isaac Mayer Wise, no less, who some say was the founder of modern American Reform Judaism -- the Rabbis of the Reform Movement proved themselves to be of the disciples of Aaron, proved themselves to be seekers of peace, ones who love others, proved themselves to be among those Jews who would bring people closer to God's Torah. And they - we - proved worthy disciples of Aaron in that we learned, like Aaron before us, ul'havdil bein ha-kodesh u'vein ha-khol "to distinguish between what is sacred and what is profane." Some translate, ha-khol, as "ordinary" rather than as "profane." u'vein ha-ta-mei u'vein ha-tahor "and between the unclean and the clean." Our relationships, said these descendants of Aaron -- the loving, committed relationships of same-gender couples -- are far from unclean, they are neither dirty nor profane, nor are they ordinary--indeed, the Reform rabbis said, our relationships are kodesh, "sacred." How proud I am that my voice was part of the kol echad, part of the one voice that answered "aye" this past Wednesday. How proud I am that this congregation [Beth Chayim Chadashim], this "House of New Life," helped the Reform Rabbis, helped Reform Judaism, helped ourselves, l'higyanu lazman hazeh, to reach this moment. The shehekhiyanu is one of our favorite blessings, of course -- and thank God, we have opportunity to say it often in our lives, and in our life together in this community. But when has it ever been more appropriate for us than right now, for remember what it says exactly: Blessed are You God, our God, ruler of the universe, who gave us life - shehekhiyanu, who sustains us in that life - v'kiyamnu, and who has v'higyanu lazman hazeh who has brought us to this time. Will you join me in reciting that blessing - the same blessing the Reform rabbis recited together in Greensboro the moment after we took the vote: Baruch atah Adonai eloheinu melech ha'olam, shehekhiyanu, v'kiyamnu, 'higyanu lazman hazeh.

Shabbat shalom