

Parashat Yitro

February 16, 2005

Speech by
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Today is Abraham Lincoln's birthday, and it's not a coincidence that we advocate for marriage equality, for equal rights in general, on this day.

Lincoln himself gave us many words to guide us in our struggle. Among them were these: "Most governments have been based practically on the denial of the equal rights...ours began by affirming those rights." [Fragments on Slavery Abraham Lincoln. April 1, 1854]

"From the beginning, America has been different from other nations. Bound together neither by race and blood nor by ancestral territory, Americans inherit but a single legacy: equality under the law and equality of opportunity." [The Party of Lincoln The Weekly Standard ^ | February 16, 2004 | Lewis E. Lehrman <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1073226/posts>]

We are a long way from Lincoln's America, and from Lincoln's Republican Party, for that matter. Or perhaps I should say, our country's leaders and influencers today are a long way from Lincoln's America and Lincoln's Republican party, but those of us gathered here today are not - we are inheritors of many of Lincoln's visions, including his certainty that one's private beliefs in God and religion may well govern one's own actions, but may NOT well govern a country.

We gather today for simple reasons:

- For the simple reason that we protest discrimination against our chosen families and against our commitments to one another.
- For the simple reason that making ourselves known helps allay the fears of those who do not yet know us.

- For the simple reason that the government under which we live, the government designed by our nation's founders, provides us with certain rights that we need to claim.
- For the simple reason that those of us who pledge our commitment to another - to be there for someone in family partnership - require the same legal rights and responsibilities that other couples and families are given in this country.
- For the simple reason that coming together to speak our truths out loud strengthens our hearts and our cause.

I am a rabbi ordained by the Reform Movement of Judaism, the largest movement of Judaism, and a movement that almost a decade ago voted its full support for the civil right of same gender couples to marry in the eyes of the law, and 8 years ago declared its rabbis free to officiate at the marriage ceremonies of same gender couples, if they so choose.

The synagogue I serve, Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC), was founded here in Los Angeles 33 years ago as the first gay and lesbian synagogue - in fact its first home was the MCC, the Metropolitan Community Church and its founder, the Rev. Troy Perry -- and the clergy of BCC have been officiating at the ceremonies of same gender couples for 3 decades.

Judaism is a religious tradition that well understands and appreciates the separation of church and state. The ceremonies rabbis and cantors conduct under a Jewish wedding canopy may not always be ones recognized by the state, but they are recognized by the community of family and friends that gather in support. And many of us understand them also to be blessed by God.

[Btw, I'm here today with some couples from BCC - some who married in San Francisco, some who married under a wedding canopy in our sanctuary].

So today, despite the fact that our struggle continues, we come together not just to protest and to advocate for our civil rights, but also to celebrate our love, our commitments, our certainty that in our faiths and in our states and in

our hearts we have every right to say who we are, to be who we are, and to claim our rightful place in this society.

I wish those of you who married last year in San Francisco a happy anniversary.
And to those of you about to recite vows - MAZEL TOV!!!