

June 3, 2015

Dear friends,

I am writing to share a recent change in my position on the subject of gay marriage. After many years of personal soul searching, research into Jewish texts and halakhah as well as study of relevant scientific papers, I have come to the conclusion that Jewish law and tradition should – indeed, must – wholeheartedly embrace homosexuality and same-sex relationships, and that same-sex marriage should be sanctified and embraced within tradition as well.

As a Conservative synagogue, and in accordance with tradition, B'nai Jeshurun invests me with authority as the Mara D'atra (the authority on all matters of Jewish law for the congregation). Conservative Judaism empowers the rabbi of a community to make changes in Jewish law through study of sources, responsa and careful halakhic consideration. This decision is mine, made after considerable study of sources and reflection. This change is also in line with the position of several decisions of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly. Though in some cases the halakhic basis for the decision was different, it is also the position of many other Conservative synagogues and their rabbis. Nonetheless, I felt it was important to share this decision with our Board of Trustees at their last monthly meeting before making it public. The majority of the Board offered their support for this change.

What are the implications of this decision for our congregation? It has already been the case for many years that we have had members – both individual and couples – in our congregation who are gay and we have embraced them as part of our congregational family. But this change means that I will now officiate at same-sex weddings, that we will recognize gay couples/families formally as family units, invite them to *aliyot* and other honors as a couple, celebrate their anniversaries on the *bimah* and in all other ways involve them equally as couples in the life of the congregation. (For those wondering, Ohio law does not recognize gay marriage but it does not forbid them from taking place, nor clergy from officiating at them.) Beyond law and ritual, I hope that we as a congregation will embrace gay and lesbian members as our friends and part of our congregational family.

I realize there may be some in the congregation who are not comfortable with this decision. I urge you to read the corresponding responsum which explains the basis and sources for the change -- and why it is deeply grounded in tradition and in the core beliefs of Conservative Judaism. Here, though, is a summary of the thinking that went into my decision.

*(over, please)*

As you know, twice in Leviticus, the Torah prohibits male homosexual intercourse. (The sages prohibited lesbianism as an extension of the male prohibition.) Yet the reality is that there is broad scientific consensus today, based on extensive research, that homosexuality is not a choice. Sexual orientation, though perhaps a mix of biology and early environment, is fixed by a very early age – some say as early as 3 or 4 – and cannot be changed.

Maimonides teaches us that our belief system and understanding of Torah must take into account the scientific understanding of our world in our time. This forces us to confront the question: How is it possible that God would create human beings who can only achieve fulfillment through a partner of the same sex and then prohibit that relationship, leaving them to live their lives in isolation and pain? There is no way to square such a concept with our belief in an all good, loving and compassionate God. The only answer then is to recognize that these two verses of Torah are not an expression of God's will.

Conservative Bible Scholar Rabbi Robert Gordis taught what has become a very mainstream theology within Conservative Judaism. We recognize that the Torah was not given word-for-word at Sinai but is instead a compilation of smaller texts written at different times and edited together. We do not, however, see the text as merely a human document. Instead, we assert that those writers and editors were moved by divine inspiration. God's voice is therefore to be found in the text; but it is not the only voice in the text. God is perfect and infinite. We are not. It is not possible to imagine that we with our limitations and biases could fully comprehend God's message. The result is that the reception of God's revelation is tainted by human limitations of comprehension and biases.

Gordis teaches that revelation did not cease with the Bible. We, too, continue to receive God's revelation through our conscience and our interaction with traditional texts. Our task is to separate out what is God's voice and what is not. In this task, we begin by assuming the text reflects God's will -- except where it bumps up against our ethical convictions in a dramatic way. When it does, we are compelled to draw a distinction between what is God's voice and what is the voice of the Biblical writer/editor. In my estimation, the prohibition of homosexuality is an example of a writer's voice, not God's.

To claim that a verse in Torah is not valid is a dramatic step, but one that is recognized by the Talmud itself. The Talmud draws on a verse in psalms and the story of Elijah to assert that there are times when preserving God's honor and respect for Torah actually requires us to overturn a matter in the Torah itself. When we affirm the centrality and applicability of a verse of Torah that offends our moral sensibilities, we bring dishonor to God. True piety demands that we seek to reconcile our ethics and our halakhah so that our religious practice reflects our belief in God as good, just and compassionate.

In the end, full embrace of and acceptance of homosexuals and homosexuality is a matter of recognizing the sanctity of every person as being in the image of God, and recognizing our obligation to preserve and honor the dignity of each and every human being God created. Every being deserves to love and be loved. Everyone deserves to be in a meaningful, loving, intimate relationship with the person who completes them. Everyone deserves for that love to be embraced, upheld and supported by their friends and community.

If you have questions, please contact me. I am happy to speak with you. I hope that you will join me in making B'nai Jeshurun Congregation a warm and welcoming place for everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Shalom,



Rabbi Stephen Weiss