



"Gay Judaism" and the Struggle for Inclusion

By Joshua Lesser

I WAS TUTORING two girls in preparation for their *b'not mitzvah* when one of their mothers interrupted, explaining that the Supreme Court had just ruled in the *Lawrence v. State of Texas* case (June 26th) in favor of abolishing all sodomy laws. "I think I'm going to cry!" she said.

I was not able to process my feelings about the magnitude of this decision because the two twelve-year-old girls looked at me and asked, "What is sodomy?" There, in front of a parent, I chose careful words to explain what sodomy is, and I explained the decision as meaning that being in a gay or lesbian relationship was no longer a crime anywhere in the United States.

The full impact hit me later, at a celebration held by Lambda Legal, the gay civil rights organization. Listening to the speakers, I realized that Georgia, the state in which I had grown up and still live, was the American cradle of sodomy laws — and that Judaism was their universal cradle. At the Hebrew Academy of Atlanta, my Orthodox day school, the topic of the evils of sodomy had come up more than once. I recall studying Leviticus in the seventh grade and being lectured about the forbidden sexual acts. Skipping from incest to homosexuality, we arrived at bestiality, which our teacher explained was an unspeakable *averah* (sin). I raised my hand and, in what I'm sure was a case of misplaced anxiety, asked her with a smirk, "Even goldfish?" She began to reprimand me, but after only two words she giggled and the entire class burst into uproarious laughter. Despite my successful joke, however, I knew deep inside that the true joke was on me: This good Jewish boy was a religious criminal.

The negative impact of sodomy laws has been immense, even beyond the thirteen states that still had them on the books as of this year. Cases involving gay adoption, child custody, divorce, employment discrimination, civil rights and hate crime legislation have all been argued against gay and lesbian interests based on the fact that sodomy was illegal and that the Supreme Court, in *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986), had declined to extend Constitutional privacy protections to same-sex sexuality. Beyond their octopus-like legal impact, sodomy laws encouraged hatred directed towards gays and lesbians — and fueled self-hatred for many of us. The very notion of "sodomy" became a significant piece of evidence that the very being of gay folks was innately flawed and repugnant. The law said we were criminals — and Judaism said we were abominations.

How was I able to bridge these gaps and become a rabbi? How can any gay or lesbian or

bisexual or transgendered Jew make peace with Judaism?

My journey towards the rabbinate began with a call to my Hillel rabbi, shortly after I graduated from Northwestern University, to ask his opinion about whether I was suited for rabbinical school. He was Orthodox, and I was a nondenominational Jew who had struggled with Jewish education in an Orthodox setting. Without my telling him that I was considering applying to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, he told me that the RRC was the only place for me. Then he posed an unexpected question: “Are you gay?”

I was stunned into silence. “Never mind, that was inappropriate,” he said. “Let me make a statement, since I don’t really need to know. It is better for you if you are straight; I hear that RRC is overrun by gay men.”

Hanging up the phone, I was excited: Had I ever found the right place for me! I was going to apply to the Provincetown of rabbinical schools!

My Hillel rabbi was not the only one with this perception. My parents told my cousins, to whom I was not yet out, that I was applying to RRC. Their response: “We didn’t know Josh was gay.” In Atlanta, the assumption was that because the gay-founded synagogue, Congregation Bet Haverim, was affiliated with the Reconstructionist movement, Reconstructionism was “gay Judaism.” This is still a common misunderstanding today, because the Reconstructionist movement has aligned itself with the desire to fully recognize gay and lesbian Jews as essential members of our community.

The foundation for inclusion was set a few years before I arrived at RRC. In 1990, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA) and the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF, then called the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot) formed a Commission on Homosexuality, which embarked on a long process of study of broad issues related to Judaism and homosexuality. The result was the adoption of a Jewishly rooted policy of acceptance in our congregations of gay and lesbian Jews as members and leaders. A workshop series had been created, and I was impressed with the integration into its curriculum of many important issues relating to gay and lesbian Jews.

“The Reconstructionist movement is among the Jewish movements seeking a contemporary approach to homosexuality that is just and authentically Jewish,” the Commission wrote in its report. “In 1984, the RRC established a policy of non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in admissions for candidates desiring to enter the rabbinate. The RRA has, from its founding in 1975, welcomed all graduates of the College for membership. At its 1990 convention, the RRA established a formal policy of non-discrimination in membership and recommended that the movement establish a similar policy in rabbinic placement. The following year, a movement-wide policy was enacted prohibiting discrimination in the referral of resumé of candidates for positions with congregations.”

Despite this history, when I arrived for my school interview, I was shocked by how wrong

my Hillel rabbi had been. The group of gay men at RRC when I applied was a group of one. It amazed me that the rumor that RRC was crawling with gay men could exist when there was only a solitary gay individual.

To be fair, there was a thriving lesbian community, and one of them passed to me a piece of advice: that I should choose anything but the congregational rabbinic track at RRC if I was planning to be out. Many of our colleagues, they said, were closeted in their pulpits, and the mindset that caused this was not being significantly challenged in the movement. Thus I began exploring other paths of rabbinic service in which I could avoid the closet and avoid compromising my integrity too significantly. My disappointment was heightened by the fact that the rabbis and lay leaders who had comprised the Commission clearly had worked hard to put out an ethical vision, which I had hoped would have brought about the changes needed.

The RRC was a decade ahead of the movement in its treatment of gay folks on a day-to-day basis. There were some straight allies working with Reconstructionist communities that wanted to become *kehillot mekabelet*, welcoming communities [see Roberta Israeloff's "Becoming a Kehillah Mekabelet: The Struggles of Transformation" in RT, Summer, 1998], but, on the whole, there was simply a recognition of the gulf between the RRC and the rest of the movement on these issues. Among the rabbinic students, there was a small but growing concern that all of us, straight or gay, might be labeled as gay. At times, it seemed as if our presence and our politics were "contaminating" the movement, taking away from the impact that Reconstructionism might have had on Jewish life had we not taken such initial bold strides to recognize gay and lesbian Jews.

While this feeling may still emerge, it is now rare. During the six years that I spent at RRC, and my subsequent four as a rabbi, I have seen both the College and the movement shift in immeasurably positive ways. We now have a number of openly gay or lesbian rabbis serving JRF congregations, many of our congregations strive to welcome gays and lesbians, and our rabbis are trained to meet the emotional, spiritual and life-cycle needs of gay and lesbian congregants. Our movement has created new liturgy and rituals for lifecycle events never before recognized, has struggled earnestly to welcome gay and lesbian Jews, and has recognized that the entire movement is strengthened by these acts and by the knowledge, insights and spirituality of gay and lesbian Jews.

Many people draw parallels between *Brown v. Board of Education*, which abolished segregation in education, and the *Lawrence* case. *Brown* helped to eliminate second-class citizenship based on race and allowed much more access for African-Americans to the fruits of American society. Still, racism has not vanished. I have no doubt that the Supreme Court's reversal of *Bowers v. Hardwick* will have a major, positive impact on the ability of gays and lesbians to raise children, claim children of whom they are rightful parents, participate in the institution of marriage and shift some fundamental societal views about sexual orientation. How much such views have already changed was evidenced by the line-up of groups that advocated for an end to oppressive sodomy laws: They included the American Bar Association, the Cato Institute, the Religious Action Center for Reform

Judaism, and an abundance of prestigious law firms, mental health organizations and public health institutions. Even the Bush-Ashcroft Justice Department, which plays a rightwing advocacy role in many Supreme Court cases, did not write a brief regarding *Lawrence v. Texas* — a very meaningful silence.

To draw another apt analogy, this Supreme Court decision is the legal equivalent of the American Psychiatric Association's 1973 determination to drop homosexuality from its nomenclature of mental disorders. That change removed the stigma of mental illness from homosexuality and opened doors for much social change.

On a religious level, the values-based approach of the Reconstructionist movement has given rise to an understanding that whereas the *halakha* has recognized homosexuality simply as a sexual act, we recognize it as a fundamental aspect of identity that deserves to be treated with the Jewish value of *b'tzelem elohim* (respect for human beings as made in God's image). As Justice Kennedy wrote in the *Lawrence* case: "when sexuality finds overt expression in intimate conduct with another person, the conduct can be but one element in a personal bond that is more enduring." Most Reconstructionist rabbis today perform same-sex Jewish weddings (rituals are including in our *Rabbi's Manual*). Our movement has been in the forefront on these issues and has made great strides in eliminating religious second-class citizenship for gay and lesbian Jews.

Yet perhaps we are resting on our laurels. While we are doing many right things in our communities, the hurt that gay and lesbian Jews have endured is not righted overnight. Today, our Commission report of 1992 today sounds stilted and stale. The workshop series created to address inclusion issues in our synagogues does not reflect current definitions and new understandings of gay and lesbian (and bisexual and transgendered) identity and sexuality. The Reform movement's Kulanu sourcebook, and their resource page on their rabbinic website, are superior to our materials. Our approach and practice remain the best, but this does not alleviate our responsibility to renew our materials to support Reconstructionist communities in their continued efforts towards inclusion.

Our next step, I believe, should be to create a timetable for all Reconstructionist communities to be inclusive and welcoming to gay and lesbian members and staff. One model for this would be the process that our movement created when we had a few synagogues that still prayed with a *mehitza* (a wall or curtain dividing men from women) or did not permit women to read from the Torah. We gave these communities generous time in which to progress towards egalitarianism, but we made it clear that gender egalitarianism was a definitive Reconstructionist value and standard of affiliation.

Similarly, we could mandate that all affiliates fully welcome gay and lesbian Jews and grant them access to the same lifecycle and membership privileges enjoyed by heterosexual Jews. We could reaffirm standards of inclusiveness and a deadline to meet those standards. At the very least, we could redefine the process and hope for and work towards a hundred percent buy-in.

It is our duty as a movement to set an example for all religious movements by reaching for inclusion based on our spiritual values. To back off from this duty is to back off from our fundamental vision. .

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