

# Disclaiming and Reclaiming; Gay Rights in Leviticus

by Cantor Ken Richmond • April 27th, 2007

On April 24, 1999, six months after the murder of Matthew Shepard, I was in synagogue, about to chant the infamous verse from this week's Torah portion, Leviticus 18:22: "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; it is an abomination." I suddenly realized that in good conscience, I could not simply chant the words without making any comment. I felt that with my silence, I would join the religious voices that either condemned gays and lesbians or at least passively condoned discrimination against them.

So before chanting the *aliya*, I made the disclaimer that this verse, without radical reinterpretation, did not necessarily reflect the opinions of the synagogue or its clergy, and should not be used, as it had in the past, to encourage bigotry.

During the eight yearly cycles of the Torah since then, both the secular world and the Jewish world have made progress towards welcoming our GLBTQ friends into the community, but we have much more work to do. Gay marriage is currently legal in Massachusetts, as it is in the Netherlands, Belgium, South Africa, Canada, and Spain, and as many of us suspected, this has not led to the dissolution of any heterosexual marriages.

Civil unions are now legal in several states and in a number of countries. On the other hand, though, a majority of U.S. states have passed constitutional amendments banning gay marriage. The U.S. military still keeps the "don't ask, don't tell" policy that harms both itself and the GLBTQ community. And for eight and a half years since Matthew Shepard was murdered, legislation to make violence to gays a hate crime has been stalled.

As this law is taken up again by the new Congress, there is much we can do, locally, and nationally, to try to influence our communities to be less hateful, and more open and welcoming.

Within the Jewish sphere, this has been a historic year for gay rights in the Conservative movement. Although more sweeping measures were not passed, and two rulings that upheld the status quo were, the passage of a moderate liberal ruling paved the way for both the University of Judaism and the Jewish Theological Seminary to begin accepting openly gay and lesbian rabbinical and cantorial students. These seminaries, like the U.S. army, had spent many years rejecting talented applicants and forcing others into the closet, simply because of their sexual orientation. However, for the average Conservative synagogue, the new rulings don't necessarily make a difference. Rather, we need to make a difference, and after years of offering a lukewarm welcome to GLBTQ Jews, the burden is on us to show we have changed by becoming actively welcoming, instead of merely neutral. For starters, we can ask how we can better serve gay congregants, educate our congregations to be more welcoming, and start Gay-Straight Alliances.

While this week's double Torah portion contains the two verses (Lev. 18:22 and 20:13) that have been a source for hostility towards the gay community, it also contains some verses that may be part of a solution. In the "holiness code" of chapter 19, verse 14 says not to insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind. I suggest that we read this broadly as an injunction to

be aware of each person's particular needs as we relate to them. Sexual orientation falls squarely among those qualities over which people have no control and for which it is cruel to use these qualities against them. Verse 18 includes the famous words "*V'ahavta l'rey'acha kamocho,*"—"Love your neighbor as yourself."

I have noticed that heterosexuals who advocate for gay rights tend to have friends or family members who are openly gay. Perhaps the first step that many of us need to take is to recognize GLBTQ people as our neighbors. Rabbi Harold Kushner teaches that we are commanded to love the stranger (v.34), because the natural reaction to being abused, as our people was in Egypt, is to become an abuser oneself. Rather we are commanded to learn from our experience to empathize with and support the oppressed. Finally, the holiness code begins by saying, "You shall be holy, for I, your God, am holy." One of the best ways we can get closer to God is by seeing every person as made in God's image and treating him or her as such.

Just today I heard from a congregant whose elderly mother had passed away after an illness. Her son had recently traveled from abroad in order to spend a few weeks with his dying grandmother, and now that she had passed away, he regretted that he had not felt comfortable telling her that he was gay or introducing his partner to her, lest he upset her during her final days. I hope that someday soon, if we are to read the two troublesome verses from the middle of Leviticus without discussing their problematic nature, it will be because the GLBTQ community has been fully accepted into secular and religious life. We still have much work to do before this day comes. Let us do our best to take action to speed its arrival.

*Ken Richmond is the Cantor and Family Educator of Temple Israel of Natick, MA, where he works with a new Gay-Straight Group. He teaches in the Cantor-Educator Program at Hebrew College in Newton, MA. He and his wife, rabbinical student Shira Shazeer, lead the Klezmaniacs and Fish Street Klezmer.*