

north shore congregation israel

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Dear Peter,

I want to acknowledge the careful and judicious work that you and the committee have done regarding the position of the CCAR on Homosexuality. At the meeting during the CARR Kallah, you invited written comments. You will therefore find enclosed some notes I put together last June, after reading the original four position papers. The notes are admittedly schematic, and some of the assertions in them require amplification. Since it is not a document for publication, I have not bothered to write the necessary elaborations. If anyone on the committee thinks I should, I will.

My notes focus only on the way I view the concerns of homosexual Jews and Reform Judaism. With your permission, I wish to comment on the issue of strategy: if the Conference were to resolve non-discrimination regarding the ordination of homosexual Rabbis, how would we deal with other movements in Judaism, with our standing in Israel and/or with other religious bodies.

Much has been said about the connection between a ground-breaking position on homosexuality, and the Reform movement's introduction of patrilineal descent. Superficially, the two stands can be tied together as they represent significant departures from traditional Jewish norms and practices. Actually, they are quite distinct and should be treated as such. "Patrilineality" is a tempest in a teapot. It is always remedial through conversion. Indeed, the fundamental question of what is an acceptable conversion into Judaism seems to be far more controversial and divisive between Orthodox and non-Orthodox streams. On the other hand, patrilineality does raise substantial theological, social and psychological questions regarding who is a Jew. Promulgation of this doctrine within the Reform movement has been a flashpoint for the sharpening divisions among organized approaches to Jewish thought and practice.

Sexual orientation is not, however, a criterion for assessing one's Jewish identity. To the best of my knowledge, no one has suggested that a self-declared homosexual is no longer Jewish. When confronting patrilineality we are challenging conventional notions regarding Jewish being;

with homosexuality, we are challenging notions of morality. The corpus of the Jewish people is unchanged.

What is the genesis of the Reform Jewish movement's "problem" with homosexuality? While not knowing the precise details, I would surmise that homosexual Jews thrust it upon us. Encouraged by the general movement of Gay Pride, Jews who had previously sought to hide their sexual preference decided to come out of the closet and demand a place in Jewish life. They approached the Reform movement (I seriously doubt that there were also organized overtures to Conservative or Orthodox institutions. Do you know?), and given the movement's well established record on civil rights, it responded positively. In other words, Reform Judaism is the principle conduit by which self-declared homosexual Jews have sought a comprehensive and dignified place in Jewish religious life. I believe, therefore, that homosexuality is not a Jewish issue, but a Reform Jewish one. This is a distinction that does make a difference.

The movements of Judaism, as you well know, were the inevitable result of our confrontation with modernity. Fundamentally, Western European Jews were given through emancipation a freedom of choice and conviction unprecedented in our history. Some chose to attempt a reconciliation between Jewish thought and practice and the exigencies of contemporary culture; others strove to resist modernity as much as possible. Both Reformers and Orthodox acted in sincere service to the survival of Judaism and the Jewish people. Both have had demonstrable success; and both have had to make sacrifices that have prevented a realization of an authentic and non-contradictory Jewish life. Modernity has produced (at least currently) unbreachable breaks in what it means to act and think as a Jew. At best, we are able to acknowledge these divisions, continue to work together on the not inconsiderable areas of common interest, and pray for the Messiah or intellects far stronger than ours who will resolve the differences.

But it is precisely the differences that lead to the present dilemma. Reform Judaism, as a major, authentic, and popular expression of contemporary Jewish attitudes, is capable of including homosexual men and women in the life and leadership of Jewry. Neither Conservative nor Orthodox Judaism--also major, authentic and popular etc.--are currently prepared to make this offer. That is their right, and that is their loss.


These observations above are the preface: The CCAR should move ahead on opening itself more forthrightly for homosexual Jews. [I have already made clear what I believe are the appropriate limits of such inclusion.] In preparation for this change (assuming it is ratified by the Conference), CCAR leadership should sit down and talk with Conservative and Orthodox rabbinic leaders. They should know that the Reform Jewish initiative is

not intended as a challenge to their own understandings of Jewish thought and practice, nor as a willful act of divisiveness. It is rather a response to a real and articulated need by certain excluded members of the Jewish community, to which the Reform movement must feel obligated to find a place.

Why this meeting? First, the other movements deserve the courtesy. More important, we must distinguish between acts of unifying and of dividing. Inclusion of homosexuals in Reform Jewish life is **not** an attack on Orthodox sensibilities or their understanding of halakha. [Patrilineality, l'havdil, might well be.] All Jews must struggle as best as they are able toward the fulfillment of God's will. It is Reform's role and responsibility, in this place and at this time, to act as we do. We should move ahead, I believe, with confidence, and compassion for both the half-million or so homosexual Jews in America, and for our more traditional co-religionists.

I trust that you are finding your sabbatical both rewarding and refreshing. We should get together for some Torah when you return.

B'shalom,


Rabbi Paul Golomb

cc: Rabbi Salkowitz