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Rabbi Victor Reinstein on his lifelong fight for LGBT Jews

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Leviticus 18 of the Torah contains the line, "And with a male you shall not lie the lyings of a woman: it is abhorrent." These few words have been used as a justification to condemn generations of Jewish LGBT people.

But Rabbi Victor Reinstein doesn't buy it. Reinstein has been a rabbi for nearly 30 years and is currently the head of Jamaica Plain's Nehar Shalom Community Center, which he founded five years ago. He routinely speaks out on behalf of the LGBT community; last year, he testified in favor of the Transgender Civil Rights bill, calling on the Jewish community to seek justice for every single person, as we are all created in God's image.

Bay Windows talked to Rabbi Reinstein about his background as a LGBT proponent, about rabbinic teachings, and about whether mainstream religion as a whole will ever reconcile with the GLBT community.

Bay Windows: How did you first get started as a proponent of the LGBT community?

Rabbi Victor Reinstein: For my whole life, I have been deeply affected by injustice. Specifically, it all began in the early 1990s when I was a rabbi in Victoria British Columbia. I helped a lesbian woman towards conversion to Judaism. Soon

after, she and her partner asked if I would marry them. I went through a real period of wrestling, both trying to work with my own feelings, and knowing that it would create controversy both within my rabbinical movement -- the Conservative movement -- and within my congregation. But through a year of talking to these two women on a regular basis, I came to a very different place in understanding what inclusion meant. I did marry them, and I was, I believe, the first rabbi in Canada to officiate at a same-sex commitment ceremony.

BW: Did that cause a lot of controversy?

VR: Initially, there was a firestorm. And I learned a lot from that too, in terms of how to present the issue. There was quite a bit of controversy within the community, and within the conservative movement to which I belonged. We worked to come through that, and in the end, the Jewish community came to a much, much deeper and stronger and beautiful place. Each of these women came to play a very pivotal role in the community before very long. One in fact became the president of the synagogue.

BW: What does LGBT inclusion bring to the Jewish community?

VR: I think it brings all the energy and creativity that comes both from LGBT people as individuals and from the unique perspective that comes of their experience and that includes, I think, a special sensitivity to caring and treatment of others.

BW: Last year, you testified on behalf of the Transgender Civil Rights Bill. How did that experience fit in with your philosophy of campaigning for justice?

VR: I see it within the same framework of equality for all people. It's the need to stand up and walk with people who are being abused regardless of context and moment. If violence and discrimination occurs in regard to a particular group of people -- because of who they are -- then that group needs the protection of law. In this case we need to recognize violence against transgender people as a hate crime. And I spoke largely to one of the beliefs that I have, that every person is created in the image of God, and that God's image is multi-faceted. I also spoke about a rabbinic teaching that the first human, Adam, was both male and female in one.

BW: Do you lead or host events for Jewish LGBT people?

VR: There have been a few, whenever I've been asked to host. I don't have a series of events, but there was one gathering here that was both social and political to prepare materials and write letters in regard to the transgender bill. And more recently, a Jewish LGBTQ group met regularly in the synagogue for a queer beit midrash, which means a House of Study. It was a program of study for LGBTQ Jews, over the

past year.

BW: Do you think mainstream religion in general will ever make its peace with LGBT people?

VR: I approach every issue, and every point of controversy and contention, with hope. And one of the areas I draw so much hope from is precisely from the progress made for justice and inclusion on behalf of LGBT people. I look at personal experience. When I conducted this ceremony in Canada in the early 1990s, there was virtually no one I could call for support. And now, in the case of the Conservative movement, there are hundreds of rabbis on a list that can be called to initiate for same-sex marriage. And it's so easily discussed in so much of the Jewish community. This was unthinkable in that dark time not even twenty years ago. There's a long way to go, but it's precisely in seeing those changes that I do draw hope.

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