



Conservative rabbis reach out

BY ETHAN JACOBS | JULY 7, 2005

About 15 years ago Rabbi Victor Reinstein made a decision that put him at odds with his congregation in Victoria, British Columbia, and with the vast majority of his Conservative rabbinical colleagues: he chose to officiate at the commitment ceremony of a lesbian couple at his synagogue. Some members of his congregation were so angered by his decision that they sent letters of complaint to the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism in New York, the association of conservative synagogues in North America. When Reinstein sought out other Conservative rabbis willing to perform commitment ceremonies for advice, he only found about three in all of the United States and Canada. Yet in spite of widespread disapproval, he officiated at the ceremony.

"I realized that if I didn't do that I'd be closing another door in their face, and it was my first real human encounter with the depth and the meaning and the seriousness of this issue," said Reinstein. "It was very lonely in the Conservative movement."

Reinstein isn't lonely anymore. Now leading the Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue in Jamaica Plain, Reinstein received an e-mail about a week ago inviting him to sign up with a new Web site called Keshet Rabbis (www.keshetrabbis.org), joining Conservative rabbis from around the world in declaring their support for greater inclusion of LGBT people in Conservative Judaism. When Reinstein visited the site, he found more than 100 rabbis from the United States, Europe, Israel, and South America. He immediately joined the group.

"I just thought, 'Wow, what a statement of change,' that I could barely find anyone to turn to, any colleague to turn to, 15 years ago, and now look at this, that no one of us would be alone in doing this work now," said Reinstein.

The Keshet Rabbis site is the product of a series of e-mail discussions between LGBT-friendly rabbis from the United States, England, and Israel. One of the rabbis, Menachem Creditor of Sharon, Mass., said that when they launched the Web site they hoped they would be able to attract at least 50 rabbis to join their group, and when they first sent out the emails to their colleagues about a month ago they were astonished at the response. As of press time there were 137 members.

Creditor said the site has two purposes. In the short term the goal is to serve as a directory of LGBT-friendly rabbis for LGBT Conservative Jews, their families and rabbis struggling with LGBT issues. The site denotes which rabbis are available for counseling and which languages they speak. The long term goal, Creditor said, is to lobby for institutional change within Conservative Judaism. In 1992 the Committee for Jewish Law and Standards, the authority on Jewish law within the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly, issued a consensus document that welcomed gay and lesbian people into Conservative synagogues but reiterated the ban on blessing same-sex relationships and on ordaining openly gay and lesbian rabbis. The document left it up to individual synagogues to decide whether gay and lesbian people may serve as teachers and youth leaders and whether they may receive honors in the synagogue. Last month the committee announced that while debate on the inclusion of LGBT people will continue, for now the policy will remain as is.

Creditor said he hopes his organization eventually will persuade the Conservative Jewish movement to make substantive policy changes to be more LGBT-inclusive.

"[The 1992 consensus document] tries its best to not be condescending and yet remains firmly committed to the status quo," said Creditor. "When you say you care and you don't act on it, the statement rings hollow."

All of the rabbis in the organization support LGBT people as full members of the Conservative Jewish community, but they do not necessarily agree on every issue, particularly on same-sex marriage. Some rabbis on the list may feel comfortable performing full-fledged marriages, while others may choose to perform commitment ceremonies. Rabbi Neal Joseph Loevinger of Temple Israel of Swampscott and Marblehead, another local member, said that because Conservative rabbis are obligated to base all of their decisions on scripture, their interpretation of those texts will determine what sort of ceremonies they are willing to hold. In contrast, Reform Judaism, a more liberal denomination, officially endorsed same-sex marriage in 1996.

"The fact is, there are verses in the Bible which seem to prohibit certain sexual acts, and we have to wrestle with that, and I think different people are going to come up with ways to deal with those textual issues," said Loevinger. "We've got to come up with ways of taking Torah seriously and taking inclusion seriously, and we're going to have different ways of doing that."

Unlike Reinstein's old congregation in British Columbia, Loevinger said his congregation has been supportive of his commitment to LGBT people and has been since he first began officiating there in 2001. After same-sex couples began marrying in Massachusetts in May 2004, Loevinger was invited to officiate at a ceremony for a lesbian couple, and he told his temple board that he planned to accept the offer. All but one board member approved of his decision, and the one dissenter backed down after seeing the support from his peers. For LGBT Conservative Jews, the formation of Keshet Rabbis is a welcome step.

"I'm definitely pleased with the number of people who have responded so far [to the call to sign up on the Web site], but in the scene of things it's a very small step on a very long road," said David Levy, incoming co-chair of the board of Keshet (not to be confused with Keshet Rabbis), an interdenominational Boston organization working for inclusion of all LGBT Jews in their respective denominations.

He said the organization picked an opportune time to form because there will soon be a change of leadership at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the academic center of Conservative Judaism. The outgoing chancellor, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, opposes ordaining gay and lesbian rabbis.

"It's a really important time for statements like this to be made because as the search committee is being formed to choose a new chancellor, they need to know that not only is this an important issue to keep on the table, but their colleagues across geography and age demographics are increasingly supportive of," said Levy.

Ariel Wortzman, who lives in Framingham and interns for Keshet, said the denomination's stance on LGBT issues is part of what drove her away from Conservative Judaism. While the formation of Keshet Rabbis has not persuaded her to get involved again, she said it is an important step in addressing many of the issues that prompted her to leave.

"It means I'll have to come up with a different reason to tell my family I can't be a rabbi," joked Wortzman.

Beyond Conservative Judaism, same-sex marriage advocates believe Keshet Rabbis will be a powerful ally in their push for marriage equality, even if the rabbis do not all agree on exactly how same-sex couples should be recognized.

"I think any time a conservative religious voice comes out in support it begins to quiet the extremist opposition because it becomes clearer and clearer that support for marriage equality is broad-based in religious communities and that all people of faith are not against it," said Rabbi Devon Lerner, a Reform rabbi and co-chair of the Religious Coalition for the

Freedom to Marry.

Loevinger said change at the institutional level in Conservative Judaism will not come overnight and will likely be the product of years of further debate.

"We change slowly in a process of working with our scholars and teachers, and that's okay," said Loevinger. "In the immediate future I want gays and lesbians to know that there are rabbis that support them."

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