

I Do: A Look at Same-Sex Marriage

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Twenty-five years ago, on the eve of my becoming a rabbi, I stood before all of my professors and classmates at Hebrew Union College, the rabbinic seminary, for I had one last requirement to fulfill before being ordained and that was to deliver a senior sermon. I stood in the sanctuary in New York, and informed my classmates that at some point in our future, and that time would be upon us sooner than we thought, we were going to be faced with the decision of whether we would perform gay and lesbian weddings. And when I sat with the rabbinic search committee of this congregation, 23 years ago, I informed them I wanted to be on record that when the day came, I would officiate for same-sex marriages.

It has taken longer than I predicted and hoped for, but that day has now come; first in Massachusetts and now, in California, for, last May, the California Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples were guaranteed the basic civil right to form a family relationship.

In response to that decision, on the ballot for this November is Proposition 8, which seeks to amend the

California constitution so to prohibit same-sex marriage. While I believe that there are cogent civil rights reasons why same-sex marriages should be legalized, I want this evening to address the moral issue, which is simply: are gay and lesbian marriages kosher? Are they morally ok? And in doing so, I want to examine the reasons for all marriage, for though same-sex marriage does not threaten opposite sex marriage, it most certainly challenges us to answer the question: What is the meaning of marriage? What is it for?

I want to start first with the individuals who comprise the marital relationship. This Rosh Hashanah evening marks the anniversary of the creation of humankind. Our tradition states that 5,769 years ago, the world was created and on the 6th day of that creation, on Rosh Hashanah, the first human was made. On Rosh Hashanah, we are reminded that every human being contains God's breathe of life. Gay and straight; all of humanity is created in God's image.

Though all of us are descended from the first human, humanity is diverse: each one of us has a unique face, a unique personality and soul. Unlike the U.S. Mint that stamps out identical coins, our rabbis taught that God makes each human being unique. On Rosh Hashanah we are

reminded that diversity, including sexual diversity, is not something that we are to tolerate, rather that diversity is an integral part of creation.

On Rosh Hashanah we are also reminded that we cannot control much of our life. "B'Rosh Hashana y'kateivun", we will recite tomorrow morning: "On Rosh Hashanah it is recorded who shall live and who shall die." We did not choose when we would be born and we, for the most part, do not chose the day of our death. In between those two ultimate markers, in the time in which our life lies, there is much there, too, we cannot control. We have little control over our physical stature, our eye color, what will eventually become the tone of our voice, the amount of intelligence we have. Oh yes, we can alter these in small ways, make cosmetic changes here and there, work to develop our greatest potential, but ultimately, there is so much of us that is fundamental that is out of our hands. And another fundamental area that we do not choose is sexual orientation; who we are attracted to. It is not a choice to be a heterosexual or a homosexual.

And on Rosh Hashanah, we are reminded that what God created on the first six days is good. The world may be unfinished, there still may be pockets of darkness and chaos, but fundamentally, we proclaim that creation is

good. Same-sex and opposite sex attraction are part of God's good creation.

Though we do not have control over who we are, we do have control over what we will do with the gifts we have been given. Will we use them to their full potential or let them languish? Will we do our part to bring more goodness and holiness into the world?

And though there are a myriad of ways in which we can bring goodness into the world, for the Jewish people, the most dependable way to maximize our clout, to potentiate our efforts, is to join together in community. Thus, we raise our voices together in prayer, join with one another to comfort those in sorrow or rejoice with the good fortunes of others; in collective efforts we reach out to others in need. For that reason, our community is to be open so that all may join us.

Whether one is straight or gay is no barrier to performing mitzvot. It is no barrier to prayer or to engaging in acts of kindness and bringing more justice into the world. Gay and Lesbian Jews, therefore, are to be full and welcome members of our synagogue community, whether as congregants or staff, as they have been for our entire history as a congregation.

And within our community, the Jewish tradition has stated that of all the relationships that are possible, the best way of supporting and sustaining ourselves is by joining with another in marriage. For marriage, in its ideal state, results in new life being brought into the world. It alleviates the loneliness of existential existence, it enables the multiplying of mitzvot as partners strengthen one another. It provides for economic and emotional support, for sexual satisfaction, for intellectual and spiritual growth. As Goldie proclaims in Fiddler on the Roof: "For 25 years I've lived with him, fought him, starved with him, 25 years my bed is his. If that's not love, what is?"

While procreative marriage is the ideal human relationship for the continuation of the human species and the preservation of the Jewish people, that ideal is not possible for all individuals. As we know, not all marriages will produce children. Sometimes there are infertility problems. Other times the couple for various psychological reasons, decide not to have children, and other times the partners are past the age of child bearing. But though ideal, the lack of procreative possibility is not a barrier in Judaism to marriage. That's why we marry those in their 50s or older and bless the union of

infertile couples. The fact that some same-sex couples will not bring forth children is no reason to deny them the right to marry. And, in fact, procreation is possible for many same-sex couples through artificial insemination and surrogacy. There is adoption, as well.

Though procreation is important, marriage is about more than that. It is about contractual, holy relationships. We call such relationships, in Hebrew, Kiddushin, from the Hebrew word for holiness, Kadosh.

What precisely are holy relationships? First, they are monogamous. The couple is reserved for one another. Just as on Shabbat, we set apart a period of time as holy, in Kiddushin, the couple are set apart from others. Their relationship is a unique one that is shared with no one else. Holy relationships are also mutual and respectful; there is trust and honor which each partner extends to the other. There is patience, kindness and forgiveness. It is right and it is good for humans to come together and to form contractual relationships that contain these qualities, for this type of relationship represents the most exalted of relationships, the ideal toward which all other relationships should strive for.

This partnership between two individuals is even used to express God's relationship with the Jewish People. Our

prophets frequently likened the relationship between God and Israel as the relationship between committed partners. God promises the Israelites that they will never be abandoned, saying, "I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness, justice, love and compassion."

Though we have no choice as to our personality and other fundamental traits, we do have a choice concerning the partner with whom we will enter into kiddushin. And when we find the right mate, the right partner, whether they are of the same sex or the opposite sex, something greater than our self occurs. "The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism, stated that when two souls that are destined to be together find each other, their streams of light flow together and a single, brighter light goes forth from their united being." It is right and it is good for humans of all sexual orientations to come together in contractual, holy relationships.

So I say to you tonight, that when, in November, the time comes to vote for or against Proposition 8, you should know, from a Reform Jewish perspective, that same-sex marriages are moral and holy. The question we need to be asking, when a couple stands before us, is not whether they are of the same-sex or the opposite sex. The question that

we need to ask is whether they are able to form a committed, loving, monogamous, trusting relationship with one another.

That is the challenge which same-sex marriage poses to those of us in opposite-sex relationships. If marriage is not going to be about one's sexual orientation but rather about the quality of a relationship, then this evening, those of us who are in long-term relationships or marriages that are just a few weeks old, need to ask ourselves some hard questions.

What is the quality of our relationship as a couple? Is there loving support or is there growing impatience, intolerance, sarcastic put-down? How kind are we to one another? Is there a deepening of affection or is there a weary, taking-for-granted distance that has grown up between us? Do we trust one another? Can we depend on our partner? Can they depend on us? Are we forgiving with one another or do we relish the opportunity to nurse old slights and wounds, just waiting for the opportunity to bring them out as weapons? Are we still lovers? Are we still good friends? Are we still best friends?

The challenge before all of us, whether gay or straight, is whether, in this coming year, we can turn away from the destructive habits which have dulled our lives as

a couple; whether we can turn away from the sarcastic word, the heavy sigh, the too-quick retort, the indifference; whether we can turn towards the softer word, the helping hand, the grateful look, the loving touch. Can we, in this New Year, take a step to help make our relationships more holy, more unique, more precious?

On this evening of Rosh Hashanah, in which we celebrate God's creation which has brought forth a diverse humanity; on this evening in which we proclaim that all of creation is good; on this night in which we affirm that loving partnership is the way to bring even greater goodness into the world, we pray that the One who blessed our ancestors, bless all our families, and grant them health and happiness, prosperity and peace. Blessed are You, Eternal God, Creator of Humanity in All our Forms, Sustainer of all relationships. Blessed are You, Adonai, who has created harmony and love, peace and companionship, who brings loving companions together, to rejoice in one another.