From the CCAR Convention

Marking the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Acceptance of Openly Gay and Lesbian Rabbis in the Reform Movement

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Yoel H. Kahn

It is an honor to be here today. As a congregational rabbi, as I’m sure my colleagues will understand, I spend eleven months of the year agonizing over what I will say at the High Holy Days. Ten of those months are devoted, of course, to finding a joke to open with.

OK, I’m glad I got that out of the way.

This is the second time I have addressed our Conference on the topic of homosexuality and the rabbinate, but our Conference’s discussion on the larger question of gay Jews goes back at least to 1973. My first and hitherto only invitation to speak in this forum was in Cincinnati in 1989 at the one hundredth anniversary convention of the Conference. Some members objected to the inclusion of what they saw as an unseemly topic for our anniversary convention and feared that bringing up this divisive issue would mar the celebration; and here we are today, marking a different anniversary, twenty-five years since our historic vote at our 1990 Seattle convention.

In 1989, the topic was relegated to the very last morning of the convention; it was perceived by many members as an afterthought.

YOEL H. KAHN, PhD. (NY85) is rabbi of Congregation Beth El in Berkeley, California.
YOEL H. KAHN

on the agenda, as well as a ploy by the leadership to not draw attention to the issue.

What was once controversial or difficult has become an increasingly important value for our Conference and our Movement. Those of our members who long felt invisible, endangered, or marginalized, are now not just offered a seat at the table but today can even sit at its head.

This is a theme we recognize; we learn in the Mishnah about how to begin the seder: our story moves from degradation to praise, from oppression to liberation. Ours is a story of movement; many of us, I know, spent a long, prayerful time wandering, seeking to discern our way: —my father was a wandering Aramean.

Yet core to our identity as Reform Jews is the ongoing capacity to listen and respond to God’s call, and to change; we cross over from where we started to new places of understanding and action; reluctantly perhaps, the prophet Jonah declares: (lit., I am [one who] crosses over).

Have we ever moved! I am so honored and grateful to be here with our president and with you on this celebratory occasion; but I also come to gently remind our conference and one another that before we were such enthusiastic supporters of LGBT colleagues and outspoken supporters of same-sex marriage, the vast majority of rabbis—like the rest of our communities—were aghast at the idea, if they could even imagine it.”

Early in Torah, we read about a Jew who could not live in hiding. , our father Jacob, lives at home, tending an organic herb garden and a flock, (a dweller in tents), while his older brother, , (a man of the fields) joins the NRA and goes hunting. Jacob loves to cook—but what does he make? He prepares the recipes his older brother favors, you know, “that red-stuff.” Intimidated by his older brother, Jacob lives by his wits. He is beloved to his mother, yet he yearns for his father’s approval—a blessing he only secures when he dresses up and pretends to be the person he is not. At the end of Parashat Toldot, he flees for his life.

The next week’s parashah is called —Jacob came out. Jacob comes out at Beth El; fearful that he was destined to a life of exile, both personal and spiritual, Jacob realizes that even now—in fact, especially now, acknowledging his true identity and
naming his deepest truth—he can indeed be in relationship with God. Jacob wakes up from his denial, and realizes that in this moment he is a reflection of—and in the presence of—God. Jacob now understands that his fears were unfounded.

(I did not know). I wish I could say that all my fears had been unfounded, but over the years, I have learned more and more about how precarious my own beginnings were: (I was a wandering Aramean). I first wrote this Vayeitzei d’rash in a homiletics class as a student in 1983. I talked about having the courage to come out of hiding and claim one’s own identity—“b’tzelem Elohim”—but I left the gay part out. Summoning others to speak the truth, I dared not even allude to my own. I served on the CCAR’s ad hoc Committee on Homosexuality and the Rabbinate; I have spoken to the Conference and to other forums of the Movement many times; but I have never before had occasion to speak in the first person. Previously, I have always felt it was my responsibility to speak on behalf of the colleagues and Jews who did not have a voice, and I was always fearful, afraid that I would be dismissed as the “gay rabbi” and not heard as the “rav b’Yisrael.” I yearned to be, and fearful that my own rabbinate would be endangered.

So today, as my classmates and I mark our thirtieth anniversary in the rabbinate, I would like to share with you a little bit of my own personal story. I hasten to assure you, there are many, many other rabbis whose stories deserve to be heard, surely more compelling than my own. Some of these colleagues are no longer with us; some were so deeply closeted that coming out was never possible; some became so embittered that they left the rabbinate; others were never allowed to even try. Many are here today among us in this room.

I am a product of the Reform Movement; my summers at UAHC Camp Swig (now URJ Camp Newman) were the most important experiences of my young life. While an undergraduate, I was recruited by HUC-JIR but wasn’t sure I could get in. There was a very wide understanding among my Jewish circle that the College-Institute would not knowingly admit or ordain a gay or lesbian student. Incoming students were required to take the MMPI personality test; of particular importance to the College, by all accounts, was the scale on the test which purported to identify homosexuals. On the way to my psychological interview, I lost my score sheet and never turned it in. I was counseled to apply via
the Los Angeles campus, which was reportedly a more sympathetic venue, and, despite having been warned I would never be admitted, I was let in the door. Many other qualified students in the years before, and some after too, were counseled away, were denied admission, or were too discouraged or afraid to apply.  

I spent five miserable years at HUC, living in constant fear of exposure and expulsion. I was unable to study with the faculty member whose work had inspired me to want to become a rabbi; his outspoken antipathy to gay students made me afraid of getting too close, and so I never got to pursue the academic subject which had led me to rabbinical school in the first place. I concealed my relationships and social life. Apparently, though, some people knew, because as a rabbinic student I was blacklisted from getting a job at UAHC Camp Swig—and the director was clear why. The dean of my school consulted with the national administration about what to do about the suspected homosexual students on campus.  

It was not until the actual moment of ordination that I was sure I would be allowed to become a rabbi.  

When the placement director met with my graduating class to review placement opportunities, he went down the list and stopped at Sha’ar Zahav of San Francisco, one of the Union’s gay and lesbian outreach congregations, and declared: “Whoever takes this position will have the *shmutz* of homosexuality on his resume and will never get another job.” I did not get callbacks for interviews; the senior rabbi of the congregation where I thought I had the best chance called me up to say, “Please do not apply. If you come here and people find out, we both will lose our jobs.” These events were among the many inspirations for the proposed 1986 resolution to the CCAR, for which we must thank our colleagues Margaret Wenig and Margaret Holub. It was not until 1990, five years after its initial proposition, that the Conference took a stand in support of the full inclusion of gay and lesbian rabbis in the Movement.  

Along the way, rabbis had positions offered and then abruptly withdrawn; most lived in constant fear, especially when they heard of colleagues who came out or were outed by senior rabbis and congregations and then lost their positions. While dedicated students continued to apply and were ordained, others were discouraged from seeking to serve our people in the rabbinate. Unlike many, I have been able to serve our people in the rabbinic capacities I have sought. Many others have not been so fortunate. As we
celebrate our accomplishments on this joyful anniversary, let’s also make room for the pain, for the disappointments, and for the unnamed, still-closeted grief.

As the public debate about gay marriage in the civil sphere continues, it is worthy of note that the public civil debate today is parallel to and invokes many of the same arguments that we debated within our Conference over the last thirty years. Because we believe in a high wall between shul and state, the CCAR has long been outspoken on behalf of civil rights for gay people, first passing a resolution in 1976, and coming out for civil gay marriage in 1996; on the other hand, the religious status of gay and lesbian Jews was long a topic of conflict and dissent. Let’s look back about how we got to this place of inclusion and advocacy where we now stand.

The ad hoc Committee was appointed as a compromise, to avoid having the proposed resolution calling for the full inclusion of gay and lesbian rabbis in our Conference and our Movement brought to a vote at the 1985 convention. This compromise, and the subsequent repeated postponement of any resolution by the leadership of the Conference, was always done with the best of intentions, shalom bayit: Let’s not divide the Conference; let’s not create a rift between our rabbis and our congregations; let’s not raise a contentious issue for our colleagues in Maram. Patrilineality was damaging enough; let’s not further alienate other American Jewish movements.

These claims on behalf of K’lal Yisrael were ultimately only countered by the deepening awareness of how many members of the Conference were actively serving Reform synagogues and the Jewish people while living fragile, closeted lives, and by the responsibility the leadership of the Conference felt towards protecting its own members. Thus, the most important sentence of the 1990 Committee report to the Conference was addressed to congregations and other employers: “[We] urge that all rabbis, regardless of sexual orientation, be accorded the opportunity to fulfill the sacred vocation that they have chosen.” Dayeinu?!

By this time, the College-Institute had agreed that it would not affirmatively discriminate against gay and lesbian students. And since all ordained students of the College-Institute automatically became members of the Conference, Dayeinu?!

Yet the Committee members could not overcome their ambivalence and even hostility towards the idea of homosexuality. Before the ad hoc Committee on Homosexuality and the Rabbinate could take
a position on whether gay people were worthy of being ordained as rabbis, it decided, it first had to address the theological status of the homosexual, or, more precisely, of homosexual relationships. Thus, the topic of the public talks prepared for the Conference in 1989 was not “Should gay and lesbian Jews be ordained as rabbis?” but “Is there the possibility of k’dushah in homosexual relationships?”

Is not the primary purpose of marriage procreation? How can one possibly suggest that a marriage that has no biological possibility of producing children be considered as a model? If the Jewish people are numerically endangered, should we not do everything in our power to encourage the raising of children? How can a rabbi who is not married and raising children be considered a “Jewish exemplar”? Are we not fundamentally overturning a core institution of our tradition and community?

I will not rehearse for you the answers that were offered. Some were rooted in text, since Judaism has never insisted upon procreation as the exclusive purpose of marriage and sexual intimacy; others were statements of faith:

God does not create in vain. Deep, heartfelt yearning for companionship and intimacy is not an abomination before God. God does not want us to send the gays and lesbians among us into exile—either cut off from the Jewish community or into internal exile, living a lie for a lifetime.16

Our impatience for those who have not “evolved” as far as we have on these issues may be tempered when we recall how not so long ago we asked the same questions, albeit in a Jewish religious setting:

I have been repeatedly asked, if we elevate homosexual families to an equal status with heterosexual families, will we not undermine the already precarious place of the traditional family? I do not believe that encouraging commitment, stability and openness undermines the institution of family—it enhances it. . . . K’lal yisrael is strengthened when we affirm that there can be more than one way to participate in the Covenant.17

Our deliberations about the place of gay and lesbian Jews—the B’s, T’s, and now, Q’s and I’s weren’t on the radar at all—in the community and in the rabbinate pointed out some of the internal tensions within our Movement. Although the Pittsburgh Platform had firmly
declared Mosaic and rabbinical laws about diet, priestly purity, and
dress to be “entirely foreign” to our present spiritual state, and Re-
form Jews had no compunction about letting them go, we have had
deeper trouble in naming the criteria by which we evaluate other
historical Jewish claims, especially when they conflict with our con-
temporary understanding of what Torah requires of us.18

In the intervening years, we have become more outspoken about
how the meeting of tradition and modern values can inform a Re-
form Jewish ethic of human sexuality. We have diminished to the
point of erasure historical teaching condemning homosexual be-
havior by raising up counter values, equally rooted in tradition,
emphasizing human dignity and human agency. Dayeinu?!

Yet what this brings up is precisely what is hardest for us to do:
to state explicitly that our reading of Torah sometimes requires not
just a takana or a halachic loophole, but an explicit statement of dis-
sent from prior Jewish teaching. We would rather just overlook or
set aside. We are reluctant to call out the premises that shaped these
historical practices and hesitant to formally repudiate centuries of
normative halachah. We care deeply about K’lal Yisrael, we are cau-
tious lest we disregard accumulated wisdom, and we wonder if we
are acting from deep principle or transient social pressure. But as
heirs to the prophets and as rabbis in Israel, we are summoned to
teach the Torah’s truth as best we are able to discern it, to speak with
compassion, to stand up for justice, and to balance the teaching and
practices of four thousand years of Jewish tradition alongside the
most important values and insights of our own day.

In 1990, the majority of the ad hoc Committee on Homosexuality
and the Rabbinate declared that while “there are other human rela-
tionships which possess ethical and spiritual value, and that there
are some people for whom heterosexual, monogamous, procreative
marriage is not a viable option or possibility, [we reaffirm] unequiv-
ocally the centrality of this ideal and its special status as kiddushin.”19

On the occasion of our own tenth anniversary, my beloved Dan
and I celebrated our commitment under the chuppah in June 1991.
Marriage was hardly in our vocabulary, and the very idea of a mar-
rriage license from the state was never a consideration. As religious
Jews, we invited people to our ceremony of kiddushin. However,
when I sought to have our news announced in the Mazal Tov col-
umn of the CCAR Newsletter, the Conference refused, saying that it
could not “wish mazal tov” for a ceremony it did not recognize.20
the Newsletter changed the name of the column to “Member News,” so that we would not be in the position of expressing “inappropriate mazal tovs.”

In 1995, the Responsa Committee of the Conference ruled that “We do not understand Jewish marriage apart from the concept of kiddushin, and our interpretation of rabbinic authority does not embrace the power to ‘sanctify’ any relationship that cannot be kiddushin as its functional equivalent,” while the minority expressed the view that “a Reform rabbi may officiate at a wedding or ‘commitment’ ceremony for two homosexuals, although for important historical and theological reasons, that ceremony should perhaps not be called kiddushin.”

Five years later, in 2000, the Conference resolved that “the relationship of a Jewish, same-gender couple is worthy of affirmation through appropriate Jewish ritual,” and called for support of colleagues who officiate at “rituals of union for same-gender couples” as well support for those who do not.

Just last year, in what is perhaps the most important but unannounced position paper posted on the CCAR website, our Responsa Committee was able to reconcile our prophetic summons with a renewed reading of the Reform tradition and declare: “We now affirm that, in light of the underlying purpose and values of Jewish marriage, as well as of our historic Reform Jewish understanding of the concept of kiddushin, Reform rabbis may consider . . . same-sex marriages to be kiddushin, utilizing in the marriage ceremony the Jewish forms and rites that are most appropriate to the Jewish partners involved.” Dayeinu!

The Mishnah about the Seder begins:

מתיחל בוגדพวกเรา בשם ורדים묻גאומיא אובד עף שוגום
כל הפרשה כולה

We begin with degradation and we end with praise; expounding from “my ancestor was a wandering Aramean” until one has concluded the entire parashah. Colleagues, friends, and allies, we have not finished the parashah. There are rabbis who seek to serve our people but cannot find meaningful employment because of who they are; our synagogues and institutions still discriminate, openly and subtly; while we have made immense progress in civil rights, it is legal to discriminate in employment against gay people in almost half of our states, and some state legislatures are now debating codifying into law.
permission to discriminate in public accommodations. The safety and life situation of transgender people is even more fragile. *Am Yisrael* knows too well from our own history what exclusion is.

Within our Movement and within our people, we have a long way to go in order to fully include and welcome the diversity of our families, our children, and ourselves. I do want to recognize and honor the immense progress, the wonderful programs, and the notable achievements in our seminary, our camps, our synagogues, youth programs, and communities, here and in *Eretz Yisrael*. I am so proud to be a part of this Conference, this Movement, and this people. There is, as you well know, plenty yet to be done. But for today, right now, I come to express my gratitude for all that you have done and how far we have come.

In 1989, when I last had the honor to speak from this *bimah*, I concluded:

I speak to you today on behalf of many Jews—members of our people, members of our congregations, members of our Conference—who are unable to speak themselves. They each seek, as best they are able, to establish a home which will be a *mikdash ma’at*. The gay and lesbian [and, I add today: bisexual and trans and intersex] Jews amongst us seek to live their lives in loyalty to the Covenant and as members of the Covenant people and its community. Turning to us, they offer themselves, their lives, and their sacred commitments as stones with which to build the *sanctuary of the House of Israel*.

Today we declare:

אֲנָכָה נָכְסָה לְבַנְיָם נַחֲתָה לְרָאשׁ פֶּן
The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

אַה שֵׁמְשָׁה פָּנֵי הַלְוָנָן נַחֲתָה
Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with song.

הָנְגָדִיל יְהוָה לְגָשׁוֹת עַפֵּנֵי הָנְיָן שֶפָּחִים: For the Eternal has done mighty things with us, we rejoiced.

וּנְגָדִים מֵפְּרִימִים בְּרָפָה יַקְרָא: Those who sowed in tears shall reap with joy.

Kein y’hi ratzon.
Notes


2. “OUR HISTORY MOVES FROM SLAVERY TOWARDS FREEDOM.
OUR NARRATION BEGINS WITH DEGRADATION AND RISES TO DIGNITY.
OUR SERVICE OPENS WITH THE RULE OF EVIL AND ADVANCES TOWARDS THE KINGDOM OF GOD.”

3. Jon. 1:9. Customarily rendered as “I am a Hebrew,” this hyperliteral reading is consistent with midrashic practice.

4. Gen.25:27:

ץֶבָּה הַגְּלָדָה לֵהָ וַעֲשֵׂשׂ עֹזָא הֵרֶב יְהֹוָה אֶשֶׁת הָאָרֶץ אַשְּרֹה יְשַׁבַּה יְשַׁבַּה אֶשֶׁת הָאָרֶץ אַשְּרֹה

(“When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents”).


6. The weekly portion *Vayeitzei*, begins in Genesis 28:10. The root ש-ת-ח is variously rendered in English as “exodus”—yetzi’at Mitzrayim, “brings forth,” as in hamotzi lechem, or “departed from/left” as in this verse.


9. “Rabbi among and for the [entire] Jewish people.”

10. Well into the mid-1990s, the Cincinnati campus actively discouraged openly gay applicants from applying (personal communication, May 2015).

11. The suspicion arose from the dean’s visits to the HUC excavations at Tel Dan, where he would stay at the Kibbutz Kfar Blum Guest House; I had attended high school on the kibbutz (personal communication from Pinchas Rimon, 2001).

12. “The resolution of the CCAR on homosexuality deals exclusively with the civil rights and civil liberties of homosexuals and seeks to protect them from discrimination. It does not, however, understand it to be an alternative lifestyle which is religiously condoned . . . Judaism places great emphasis on family, children and the future, which is assured by a family. However we may understand homosexuality, whether as an illness, as a genetically based dysfunction or as a sexual preference and lifestyle, we

13. It is perhaps not coincidental that the 1985 responsum on “Homosexual Marriage” of the CCAR Responsa Committee firmly concluded: “A rabbi cannot, therefore, participate in the ‘marriage’ of two homosexuals.” Ibid.

14. The Israeli association of Reform rabbis, an affiliate of the CCAR.

15. Today, all ordainees of HUC-JIR are accepted into membership on a provisional basis. The College-Institute only agreed to refrain from actively excluding all gay or lesbian students as a matter of policy, and some were admitted in the years that followed; others were discouraged or not admitted. Rabbi Eric Weiss was admitted and ordained (1989) as an openly gay candidate before the 1990 resolution was passed.


17. Ibid.


27. Ps. 121:2–3, 5.