

Shabbat Shalom!

In general, when I think about a message from the *bimah*, a sermon or *dvar Torah*, my first concern is “what does the Torah portion have for us this week; where is the relevant verse to expound on in the effort to make the text relevant to our lives?” Tonight, with your permission, I’m departing from that approach - though I will certainly talk Torah shortly.

Tonight, I want to address a subject that is very difficult for many in this nation, in this state and here in this synagogue. It is the question of Marriage Equality, the right of same-sex couples to marry and acquire the same responsibilities, benefits and recognition as heterosexual couples are accorded by the state. It is a relevant question, as in less than three weeks, Marylanders will stand in the voting booth and be asked to decide on “Question 6” - a referendum petition on the Maryland Civil Marriage Protection Act passed in the State legislature and signed by Governor O’Malley last term. Because I want to be clear what I am addressing, here is the language that you will find in front of you on November 6th:

[The Maryland Civil Marriage Protection act] Establishes that Maryland’s civil marriage laws allow gay and lesbian couples to obtain a civil marriage license, provided they are not otherwise prohibited from marrying; protects clergy from having to perform any particular marriage ceremony in violation of their religious beliefs; affirms that each religious faith has exclusive control over its own theological doctrine regarding who may marry within that faith; and provides that religious organizations and certain related entities are not required to provide goods, services, or benefits to an individual related to the celebration or promotion of marriage in violation of their religious beliefs.

A word or two about politics from the *bimah* first. I thought long and hard about weighing in on this topic in sermon form. When I was interviewed for this position, I was asked about my views on political sermons. I’m pretty sure that I replied that I think this is generally not the place for it. I know that I have always opposed, and will continue to oppose, endorsement of any candidates in the synagogue, promotion of specific parties, or telling anyone the way I think they should vote. This is not just an ethical and moral stance - this is also one about the tax-exempt status of this congregation. While there are religious institutions on both sides of the ideological divide who cross these lines every weekend, I promise this will not be the case here - not tonight and not in the future.

However, our tax-exempt status does not prevent us from taking up an issue, and examining how our specific religious tradition approaches this question. Before taking up any issue, though, I have a few questions to ask myself:

Is there anything specifically Jewish about the issue?

Is there additional insight from within the Reform Jewish tradition that will help shape decisions on the question?

Will my voice, as a rabbi, add anything to the conversation that otherwise would not be a part of your thinking about the question?

Can I do this without alienating those who may disagree? Is it purely partisan? (that is, am I

using the pulpit fairly?)

So - Is Marriage Equality a specifically Jewish issue?

Our views on homosexuality generally begin with a sense that the Torah forbids it. Some will have the verses from Leviticus 18 and 20 prohibiting a man lying with another man in their head. Just last week, we read the creation narrative and the account of the first couple. Opponents of marriage equality are fond of pointing out that the Bible only knows of heterosexual couples. Throughout the Talmud and other compendia of Jewish law, there are sporadic discussions of homosexuality, most of which refer back to the two Torah verses in Leviticus. Interestingly, one of the only mentions of same sex marriage in traditional Jewish sources occurs in a *midrash* on this week's Torah portion, which notes that the destructive flood of Noah was not sent by God until "they started writing marriage contracts between two men, and between man and animal."¹ (Seems Rick Santorum and Pat Robertson may actually be scholars of *midrash* - who knew!) On a separate question, last Shabbat we also read the verse "פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ *p'ru ur'vu* - be fruitful and multiply." It's the first mitzvah given to humanity, and many who oppose marriage equality will point out that homosexual marriage does not perpetuate families and procreation. There are many other factors here, but for the sake of brevity, I'll just say - marriage equality is made a Jewish issue because so much of the argument against it begins in a Jewish, or Torah-based, system.

Is it one where Reform Jewish teaching is relevant?

The Reform movement has been on the vanguard of virtually every civil rights issue in American history. In the mid-1960s, it was the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods who first took a stance against discrimination directed at homosexuals, and their call for the elimination of state-based laws criminalizing homosexuality spread from the Sisterhoods to the UAHC and throughout the Reform movement.² By the late 1970s, there were resolutions at major conferences calling for full rights for gay and lesbian Jews, encouraging synagogues to support policies that welcomed them into the Jewish community. Reading those early resolutions, it is almost hard to believe some of these things needed to be expressed, but the journey toward acceptance is exactly that: a journey with many points along the way.

By the late 1980s, the question of gay and lesbian rabbis and cantors emerged, with students able to enter the Hebrew Union College "out of the closet" from the beginning. That said, there were professors who refused to sign the ordination certificates of openly gay and lesbian rabbis, because their choices would not lead to procreation, that first mitzvah. One particularly prominent teacher of mine, Dr. Eugene Borowitz, held that position - and as the most prominent Reform Jewish thinker of the late 20th century, it was painful for me to see his opposition. My own ordination certificate is, in solidarity, missing only his signature from among all of my teachers, though I was a straight student who was both married and a father by that point. Two years ago, in response to a sermon by a student at the College³, Dr. Borowitz did what is perhaps

1. *Bereshit Rabbah* 26:5 רבי הונא בשם רבי אמר דור המבול לא נימוחו מן העולם עד שכתבו גמזמסיות לזכר ולבהמה

2. For a fuller historical consideration of Homosexuality and the Reform movement, see

<http://urj.org/ask/questions/homosexuality/>

3. <http://rabbisteinman.com/2010/05/17/the-sermon-heard-around-the-world/>

the most brave and difficult thing for people of tremendous intellect and influence - he publicly changed his stance.⁴ In his mid-80s, he concluded that a stance he had held for four decades was no longer correct, and since 2010, Dr. Borowitz has signed the ordination certificates of rabbis regardless of sexual orientation.

I share this story, in part, because it illustrates a journey in the shaping of opinion and response. The Reform movement began with the question of discrimination and criminalization of homosexuality; then progressed to the question of providing a welcoming environment in the synagogue for gay and lesbian Jews; then took up the question of leaders - rabbis and cantors - who were homosexual; and since the late 1990s has embraced the celebration of marriage equality as both a civil rights (i.e., non-religious) question and as a question of what our tradition calls "*Kiddushin*" - the holiness of marriage. In Greensboro, North Carolina, the Central Conference of American Rabbis passed this historic resolution in 2000:

"We do hereby resolve that, that the relationship of a Jewish, same gender couple is worthy of affirmation through appropriate Jewish ritual, and further resolve, that we recognize the diversity of opinions within our ranks on this issue. We support the decision of those who choose to officiate at rituals of union for same-sex couples, and we support the decision of those who do not."⁵

When I was interviewed for this position at Temple Isaiah, I was asked whether I would officiate at the marriage for same-sex couples. I responded that not only would I, but that I looked forward to the real possibility that they would actually be state-recognized in the near future. I did not hesitate on that answer, though to be honest, there was no guarantee that the committee had one or another answer they were hoping for.

Which is where this question becomes one in which **my voice, as a religious leader, as your rabbi brings to the conversation something that otherwise would not be present.**

I recently officiated at a wedding for the first time in the state of Maryland, my first Temple Isaiah wedding. As I filled out the marriage license, it struck me that the state has decided that my ordination as a rabbi is the primary qualification that I bring to the table. Though the couple could have similarly gone to a judge or court clerk to have this license completed, they were standing with me because I am a religious official of a recognized organization, empowered by the state to officiate.

So much of the opposition to marriage equality has come from a religious perspective, with the claim being that religious leaders and organizations would be forced to recognize and officiate at same-sex weddings that violate their traditions. But, not only is it not the case that any religious leader or organization would be compelled to do so (as you will read in the clear language of this question on the ballot), I find it offensive that those who oppose marriage equality on the basis of their religious tradition would presume to dictate what my religious tradition, what our religious tradition directs us with regard to same-sex marriage. Yesterday, I stood together with religious leaders across a spectrum including a Roman Catholic nun, the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese

4. http://wrtemple.org/client_images/pdf_documents//Rabbi_Blake_Sermons/Chayei_Sarah_Marriage_Equality_5771.pdf

5. <http://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/resolutions/2000/same-gender-officiation/>

of DC, a Conservative rabbi and several Christian pastors in solidarity with religious leaders who affirm marriage equality. All of us are empowered to sign that civil wedding license, and look forward to the day when we will sign it regardless of the sexual orientation of the couple standing before us.

The CCAR's resolution acknowledged that there were Reform rabbis who would not be comfortable officiating at same-sex marriages, and as is the case with the question of intermarriage officiation, no rabbi should ever be compelled to do so. There are good, thoughtful and treasured colleagues of mine who will not officiate for same-sex couples, and I have no less respect for them on account of that decision - just as I would expect them to respect my convictions.



Which leads to the final question I posed myself: **Is this issue truly partisan? Can I give this message without alienating those who disagree?**

The first part of this question is far more simple. While the numbers certainly reflect general trends among Democrats and Republicans, and independents are all over the map, the question of Marriage Equality is not as simple as blue or red. When former RNC chairman Ken Mehlman and vice-president Dick Cheney both actively campaign for Marriage Equality, while several prominent veterans of the 1960s Civil Rights struggle add their voices to the opposition, it is hardly a partisan issue. The reality is that people all along the political spectrum feel differently on this question.

Which is in part why I want to stress that good and decent people, good and decent Reform Jews, can have a difference of opinion on the question of marriage equality. While the statements, positions and platforms of the Reform movement have consistently and increasingly supported full equality for all regardless of sexual orientation, including both the civil and religious rights within our states and synagogues, they also uphold the central Reform principle that an individual may be guided by their conscience to disagree, and this does not question their place or the validity of their dissenting voice within our movement. Jewish tradition has always celebrated the dissenting voice, and at a minimum made sure that it was recorded alongside the majority rule.

I hope you will hear me: I respect your opinion if you disagree with me, and look forward to the exchange in which you may choose to tell me so. If you are opposed to marriage equality, this sermon is not meant to alter your convictions or tell you that you are wrong. It is not my right or my intention to do so. And besides, since I got through the High Holy Days without saying or doing anything that provoked a strong negative reaction in members of the temple, I figured I

would at least have to shake it up a bit as we move into the year!

I did promise a bit of Torah though. So I will close with the image from last week's Torah portion, which records the creation of humanity. We are told that the human being is created *b'tzelem Elohim* - in the image of God. This teaching leads me to look at the vast diversity of humanity and remind myself that all of it is in God's image. That every skin tone, every body shape, every voice, every political persuasion and every sexual orientation is a piece of the image of God. None of us are God, but we are all, each, made in God's image.

Further, the text teaches us "*Lo Tov Heyot HaAdam Levado* - It is not good for a person to be alone." God could have held with the creation of a single human being, but noticed that Adam was lonely, in need of companionship. This was something that could not exist until there was another person who could share in life with him. While there are those who will choose not to marry, those who will choose to find human companionship in the form of friendship and community, the text emphasizes for us that sharing life with others - in whatever form it takes - is where meaning comes from.

Marriage equality is about supporting and celebrating that sharing of life. It is about justice and civil rights, yes. But as I stand here in front of Torah, it is for me about thinking of my friends, neighbors and family who are involved in long-term, committed same-sex relationships, and seeing the same holiness, *kiddushin*, there that first existed in the Garden of Eden, the same sense of *Kiddushin* that I felt when Pamela and I stood under the *huppah* and signed our civil marriage license. The strong chance is that you also have friends and co-workers, neighbors and family-members who either fit into that category, or are searching for a partner with which they can share this holiness. It is for this reason, and so many others, that I look forward to standing under the *huppah* with same-sex couples, and signing not only their *ketubahs*, but also their civil wedding licenses in the near future. I truly do thank you for the opportunity to share this with you tonight.