

Marriage Equality As A Reform Jewish Value  
Rabbi Rosalin Mandelberg  
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About twenty-five years ago, in 1990, I was asked to take part in the wedding ceremony of my dear friend, Brian. We were all in our mid-twenties and had lots of friends getting married in those years. Brian and his partner, David, were no different from the others. Very much in love, they had created a warm, loving home filled with great joy, adoring family and many good friends, and, a desire to sanctify the holiness of their relationship before God and their community. It was a no brainer and I was in. The night of their wedding, two tuxedo-clad man-boys and over a hundred guests gathered to celebrate and, under a *chuppah*, a Jewish wedding canopy, with a rabbi and several good friends taking part, they exchanged their vows. "With this ring, you are consecrated to me as my husband, for I love you as my soul," each promised to the other. Amid laughter and tears; respect and pride; unfettered joy and absolute reverence, they had joined their love and lives in marriage.

Back in those days, there was no talk of marriage equality. But I'm telling you now, legal or not, their marriage was real; their union was sanctified by God and absolutely sacred; and what happened between them mattered. It mattered to them. It mattered to their families. It mattered to their dearest friends and to their community comprised of lesbian, gay and straight friends; it mattered to me, as a soon-to-be rabbinic student. And, I believe, it mattered to God. And so, their vows were no less holy, than any other commitment made to fidelity, mutual respect, compassionate care, passion and adventure, and a Jewish home where the cycle of life and the passage of time were marked by appropriate rituals imbued with abiding faith and joy. In other words, their marriage was no less holy or valid or binding than any other ever entered into under any wedding canopy anywhere else before or since.

You see, the Jewish concept of marriage, called *Kiddishin*, comes from the Hebrew root word "*kadosh*," meaning holy, separate or distinct. Up until the enlightenment and the innovations of Reform Judaism, *kiddushin*, a Jewish marriage, was defined strictly by sexual boundaries. When a Jewish couple was married, the blessing recited limited the bride's sexual relations exclusively to her husband; she was now distinctly his. (We won't get into why men weren't subject to the same exclusivity, but there was no such thing as gender equality, let alone marriage equality back then either). Thankfully, today, Jewish marriage, *kiddushin*, at least in the Reform Jewish context, is based on "the characteristics of a couple's relationship," rather than gender or sexual orientation. What defines their commitment, as *kadosh*, as holy, separate or distinct, is the way in which they treat one another; love, honor and cherish each other; and create a Jewish home together.

While it may have taken the American Judicial System unto this week to catch up, these values have been part of Reform Judaism's understanding of love, on record for over 50 years, since 1965, when the Women of Reform Judaism (the mother organization of our Temple Sisterhood's) passed a resolution calling for the decriminalization of homosexuality. The umbrella organization of our 900 Reform Congregations, the URJ, and the membership organization of several thousand Reform Rabbis, the CCAR, followed suit, first calling for human rights for homosexuals in 1977. In the nearly forty years since, every arm of our movement has spoken out in support of issues specific to Reform

Judaism, such as the inclusion of gays and lesbians the rabbinate and cantorate; as well as on national issues such as support for civil marriage, elimination of discrimination in the armed forces and the Boy Scouts, and non-discrimination in the workplace.

Specifically on the issue of marriage equality, the URJ resolved, over twenty years ago in 1993, to extend the same benefits of synagogue membership to same-gender couples and families as are afforded to all families. Similarly, in 1996, the CCAR Resolution on Gay and Lesbian Partnerships stated that the Reform Rabbinate "opposes governmental efforts to ban gay and lesbian marriage." Proponents of civil unions for gay men and lesbians on the secular, purely legal level for decades, in the year 2,000, the Central Conference of American Rabbis made history by becoming the first major group of North American clergy to support the decision of individual rabbis to officiate at same gender ceremonies. The resolution stated that a relationship of two people of the same gender can serve as the foundation of stable Jewish families and is worthy of affirmation through appropriate Jewish ritual. Of course, many rabbis had been sanctifying these marriages for decades, but to have a body like the Reform Rabbinate's CCAR make such a statement was nothing short of historic.

So why is Marriage Equality a Reform Jewish Value? Our tradition teaches, in *Genesis* 1:27, that all people are created in the image of God<sup>i</sup> and, because of this truth, we all have *kevod habriyyot*, innate value, worth and holiness, regardless of our race, creed, color, class or sexual orientation. That means that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual<sup>ii</sup> people are no less human, or holy, or valuable, or worthy than straight people; their *kevod habriyyot*, their dignity and worth, must be honored no less than that of any other child of God. Besides, if God has created all of us as a reflection of the Divine Image, it is impossible to believe that a good and benevolent God would have made us the way we are and not want us to celebrate the most sacred part of ourselves -- the capacity for love, intimacy and family.

So, when in *Genesis* 2:19 God declares: "it is not good for a person to live alone," how could this command not hold equally for all God's creations!?! If one of our grounding principals is the innate worth of every person, another is surely the imperative to pursue justice. The Torah commands 36 times that we not oppress each other.

Indeed, three times daily in our prayers, we affirm the theological conviction of the Psalmist, praying: "God is good to all, and His mercies extend to all His works (*Psalms* 145:9).<sup>iii</sup> As a Reform Jew and a rabbi, it would be nothing short of immoral not to follow the way of God, as it says in *Genesis* 18:19," to do what is right and just," or in our own language, to seek justice for all people, including the right of same gender couples to marriage equality.

I am proud that our congregation lives by the words of the Prophet Isaiah, "Our House shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" and I am proud that we honor Marriage Equality as a Reform Jewish Value. I have not yet been asked to officiate a wedding for two men or two women here at Ohel Sholom, but when that day comes, for all of the reasons I've given, it will be my honor to sanctify their love and commitment as it was for me to do for Brian and David twenty-five years ago.

ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> *Genesis* 1:27.

<sup>ii</sup> According to the *Tahoe Safe Alliance*, **LGBTQIA** stands for:

**Lesbian** – A female-identified person who is attracted romantically, physically, or emotionally to another female-identified person.

**Gay** – A male-identified person who is attracted romantically, physically, or emotionally to another male-identified person.

**Bisexual** – A person who is attracted romantically, physically, or emotionally to both men and women.

**Transgender** – A person who is a member of a gender other than that expected based on anatomical sex.

**Queer** – An umbrella term, which embraces a variety of sexual preferences, orientations, and habits of those who do not adhere to the heterosexual majority. The term queer includes, but is not exclusive to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transpeople, and intersex persons, traditionally, this term is derogatory and hurtful, however, many people who do not adhere to sexual and/or gender norms use it to self-identify in a positive way.

**Intersex** – Someone whose physical sex characteristics are not categorized as exclusively male or exclusively female.

**Asexual** – A person who is not attracted to anyone, or a person who does not have a sexual orientation.

**Ally** – A person who does not identify as LGBTQIA, but supports the rights and safety of those who do.

<sup>iii</sup> Elliot N. Dorff, *For the Love of God and People*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society), 2007, 234-237 and 287-290.