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“We regard the Jewish values that affirm the inherent dignity, integrity and equality of human beings as having primacy over historically conditioned attitudes based on . . . texts that condemn homosexuality as an abomination. It is our duty to correct the misunderstandings and resulting injustice of the past and to fulfill the Jewish obligation to seek justice.” Welcoming Congregation

This paragraph appears in *Homosexuality and Judaism: The Reconstructionist Position*, a groundbreaking report issued by the Reconstructionist movement in 1993. To “seek justice,” the report urged “all Reconstructionist affiliates, rabbis, and members of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College community to engage in a process of education about the issues relating to Judaism and homosexuality.”

I first heard about the report through my rabbi at Kehillath Shalom (Cold Spring Harbor, NY), Arthur Schwartz. A political activist and longstanding ally to the gay and lesbian community, he mentioned it at a board of trustees meeting in the Autumn of 1994. He suggested that our synagogue become a Kehillah Mekabelet (Welcoming Congregation), and asked if anyone would be interested in working with him on this issue. New to the board, I had been looking to carve out a niche for myself. This seemed a perfect opportunity.

I’m happy to report that Kehillath Shalom today has an official policy statement welcoming gay and lesbian Jews into our congregation. Unhappily, we also have fewer gay members than we had before we adopted our welcoming policy statement. Looking back on the process that unfolded over the past four years, I can’t help but acknowledge that we made many well-intentioned mistakes — all understandable, costly and avoidable.

Our first mistake was assuming that we had our finger on the membership’s pulse and could accurately gauge their collective position on this sensitive issue. Sheer hutzpah! Yet our assumption had a historical basis. Kehillath Shalom is a 200-member congregation on Long Island’s North Shore. Its founding members broke away from a more traditional synagogue in 1968, at the height of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, because of their passionate belief that social and political issues belong squarely on the bimah. Reconstructionism itself, moreover, arose from a philosophical commitment to rethink issues and renounce orthodoxies. Because we embrace the same, distinct version of Judaism, it’s a short step to assuming we also think alike on political and social issues

Our second mistake followed fast on the heels of the first. Assuming that 90 percent of our members already supported our position, we didn’t see the need to spend weeks educating and sensitizing congregants to the needs of gay and lesbian Jews. We decided to forego the careful



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curriculum offered by the JRF, Homosexuality and Judaism: A Reconstructionist Workshop Series. It seemed unnecessarily lengthy.

In its place, we devoted one of our customary Friday Night Forums to the issue. Our panel of speakers included Rabbi Schwartz, a gay member of our congregation, several prospective members from the gay and lesbian communities, and the mother of a gay man who had died of AIDS. Sixty people showed up, despite frigid weather, and the discussion that followed was lively.

Most who spoke sounded supportive; in fact, only one congregant voiced reservations. By singling out one group for “special mention” in our by-laws, he said, we’d be setting a “dangerous precedent.” He was also worried that we’d become known as the “gay shul” — that gay and lesbian Jews would flock to our congregation, upsetting our companionable equilibrium and irrevocably altering the social chemistry that had been established over the years. As it turned out, these were the two most common objections to formalizing a welcoming policy.

Few other members seconded his objections, however, and by the evening’s end we had formed a committee of six to draft the policy statement. One committee member was a gay man, and two were lesbians, including a prospective member of our congregation who worked in human resources for a large corporation and devoted much of her time to promoting diversity. I served as chair.

The man who spoke up at the Forum attended our first meeting with a friend to voice in greater depth their problems with our proposed policy statement. Then they listened as the gay and lesbian members of the committee asked why they should be denied what was granted to all other Jews: the right to show up at a Shabbat service with family, to exchange a Shabbat kiss, to be married under a huppah. They talked about the extent to which they had felt excluded from synagogue life and Jewish life because of their sexual orientation.

I saw in the eyes of the two men a moment of what psychologists call “softening”. Previously stony positions became surprisingly porous. One man changed his position; the other still objected to gay and lesbian marriages taking place within the sanctuary. Both seemed to realize that our bond as Jews was much greater than what divided us.

“We need more programs just like this one,” said the human resources expert as we walked together to our cars. “I have lots of material and know many speakers. We need to listen to each other. People need to feel as if they can say whatever they’re feeling. We need to build a consensus. These kinds of changes are best accomplished over time.”

But I was impatient. As heartened as I was by the process I had witnessed, I respectfully rejected her recommendation. “Let’s get the by-laws amended,” I said, “and then we can



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schedule programs.” The folly of this decision didn’t haunt me right away, as the board meeting at which we first presented our amendment went smoothly. A majority was amenable to adopting the statement, and affirmed this in a motion before returning it to committee for some minor tweaking. A month later, however, when the newly-worded proposal was presented to the trustees, it was as if the issue were being raised for the first time. A very heated debate arose; halahic objections were raised. “I don’t mind having gay members, but I’ll never countenance having a commitment ceremony taking place on the bimah.”

“That’s like inviting someone into your home but refusing to serve them a meal.”

“Why do we need an official statement? It’s already policy that everyone’s welcome.”

In the past, gay and lesbian Jews weren’t welcome. We need to send a message that things have changed.”

“Why don’t we extend to gay couples the same rights as interfaith couples?”

“Because a gay Jew is a Jew! There should be no restrictions.”

“This is nothing short of a civil rights issue!” I heard myself proclaiming, my voice more self-righteous than I meant it to be. “How can we Jews persecute other Jews?”

Rabbi Schwartz wisely intervened, withdrawing the proposal without a vote.

Driving home in a blind fury, I realized that we had made yet another mistake. We should have enlisted the services of a facilitator to see us through this process: someone who would give people permission to speak from their hearts and ultimately bring us together. That was the role I had foreseen for myself, but I was clearly having difficulty separating people from their opinions.

When our sorely disheartened committee reconvened, all of us knew, none better than I, that we had to backtrack. Now I welcomed input from the human resources expert. She and Rabbi Schwartz suggested that instead of focusing on the policy statement itself, we plan two or three educational programs for the membership and place a series of articles in the congregational newsletter about the process in which we were engaged.

After a period of time, the phone started ringing. People who long supported this issue were offering their help and expertise. Their eagerness made me realize that we should have tapped the resources in our own community months earlier. Sure, we had advertised the Friday Night Forum and placed an article in the newsletter, but that wasn’t enough. We hadn’t cast our net wide enough, hadn’t asked enough times.



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With this infusion of new energy and commitment, we scheduled two Friday Night Forums on successive months. The first featured the Rev. Robert L. Pierce, executive director of the Long Island Council of Churches and pastor of a neighboring church that had recently adopted a welcoming statement. He assured us that his congregation had voiced many of the same concerns as ours — and none had come to pass. Also speaking was Dr. John E. Hirsch, author of the Reform synagogue movement’s policy statement on homosexuality and Judaism. He spoke movingly of the pain of not being able to celebrate Shabbat in the ways heterosexual Jews can. “I want to kiss my partner ‘gut shabbos,’” he said. “I want to be able to dance with him at congregation dances.” After their talks, they answered many questions.

The second Forum featured a panel of speakers from Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, a New York synagogue with a largely gay and lesbian membership. Eight people shlepped out to Long Island on a Friday night, braving the nightmarish traffic, to share their vastly diverse experiences. We heard from kids just out of college, from grandmothers, from lawyers, doctors, secretaries and social workers, all explaining their journey and the soul-saving solace they had found at their shul. They, too, patiently answered questions.

Eventually, at a board meeting in May of last year, our committee recommended the adoption of a welcoming statement, not as a by-laws amendment but as a freestanding policy statement that would go out to all new members and be printed in all literature about the shul. With a minimum of debate, this motion passed handily. Our jubilation was short-lived. Within days, our gay male committee member resigned, unable to quiet the voices he’d heard during the first board debate. The human resources expert found another shul to join. “I could never feel at home here,” she said.

I wanted to convince them to give us a chance — even as I knew that the words could not be taken back and some attitudes would never be changed. Over the course of the past year, I’ve had plenty of time to reflect on the mistaken assumptions and lapses of judgment outlined in this article. Given the chance, I’d now pursue our goal of becoming a Kehillah Mekabelet very differently — and I hope that other Reconstructionist synagogues can learn from our mistakes.

I keep returning to one error that was mine alone. Many times amid the debate, a congregant would ask me, “Why are you doing this?” Why had I, a heterosexual woman, taken up this particular cause? I never adequately figured out how to respond. Often I grew angry and declaimed that prejudice of any type was abhorrent, and that we Jews should be especially sensitive to its ravages. Too often the person posing the question would shut down, turned off by my self-righteousness.

Other times I told a story about one of my oldest and dearest friends, who is a lesbian. Years earlier she had poured her heart out to me about hating Monday mornings, when everyone in the office reported on their weekend activities. Though she had a long- standing relationship



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and as active a weekend as anyone, she could never join in to talk about what she and her lover had done.

To which I suggested: “Why don’t you just refer to Julie as ‘he’?”

I’ll never forget the mournful look she gave me. I had betrayed her. “And that’s why,” I would explain, “when Rabbi Schwartz asked for help, I volunteered — to atone for the injury I inflicted on my friend. Thanks to her patience, I learned about the rigors of her life, about the pressures and problems I couldn’t even imagine. To change a pronoun, to refrain from touching, to hesitate on the threshold of the shul because you’re not entirely sure that you’re welcome — this all means denying your humanity, your God-given completeness.”

Sometimes, from a look in the listener’s eye, I saw that this story worked; sometimes it didn’t. I never settled on the right approach, even as I persist in believing that each hardened heart is waiting only for an explanation eloquent enough to unlock it.

Maybe that faith is naive. Maybe the process of shucking off thousands of years of prejudice simply takes this long, whatever your tone or anecdote. The work, after all, is about changing hearts, not simply passing resolutions.

There’s much remaining to be done at Kehillath Shalom. We need to find a way to welcome gay and lesbian Jews not only on paper, but through programs and outreach. It won’t be a smooth ride, and it won’t happen overnight. Still, I am intermittently hopeful.

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Roberta Israeloff is the author of *Kindling the Flame: Reflections on Ritual, Faith, and Family*, published by Simon & Schuster.



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