

Gay Marriage- What's the Fuss?

By Susan Saxe

The right of gay and lesbian couples to marry is hot on the political agenda right now. Interest is high and the opposition is frenzied. For some of us, the “marriage question” boils down to a simple matter of fairness. Why then, for so many others is it loaded with such powerful emotional energy?

The answer lies partly in the nature of homophobia, an entrenched “ism” that, like other forms of prejudice, is rooted in misinformation forcefully and repeatedly conveyed to us at an impressionable age. But there is more to it.

Marriage embodies the intersection of sexuality and the sacred. This juxtaposition alone evokes powerful irrational feelings. Marriage is also a repository of privilege, a screen for our irrational romantic projections and the field on which we play out our most intimate core dramas.

The instability of traditional marriage has become a symbol for perceived wrongs in contemporary society. Families are under siege by cultural and economic forces that most people are hard pressed to understand much less cope with successfully. Expectations have never been higher as people enter marriages demanding intimacy and self-realization, security and autonomy in a society that bombards us with messages of having it all. And yet perceived resources are scarce in the scramble for time and money, inner peace and outer prosperity.

In these turbulent waters, people are thrashing about, frustrated, angry and in pain, alternately looking for a lifeboat and a scapegoat. It is too threatening to look at the real causes of family distress including the commodification of our time, our energy, our very souls, the prevailing ethos of selfishness, corporate greed, and the relentless concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands. How much easier to focus all that fear and rage on a convenient “other” than to fight for a living wage, decent childcare, universal health coverage or trade policies that don’t savage workers at home and abroad.

Politicians who would not dare antagonize their corporate patrons feel free to score political points by whipping up hatred against the last group that it is socially acceptable to defame. When this most despised group lays claim to a profoundly sacred but deeply troubled institution, it is no wonder that powerful resistance is felt. And yet, often where there is the greatest pain and dissonance, there is also the greatest opportunity for healing and shalom.



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This past year, The Philadelphia city Council held hearings on a series of “Domestic Partnership” bills. Leading the charge against passage was a coalition of Christian religious leaders spearheaded by Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua, and cheered on by dozens of well orchestrated supporters who thronged Council chambers with identical placards demanding that council members “Save Marriage” by voting against the bills (which, I am happy to say, passed nevertheless).

Sitting in the gallery on the “other side,” I could not help but notice two interesting phenomena. First, the Cardinal felt compelled to preface his speech in opposition to the bills with the statement that hatred and abuse of homosexuals is a sin. This pronouncement was received with visible shock by his constituents. Nevertheless, I can only attribute it to the gains made by the gay rights movement of the past two decades that the Cardinal felt it necessary to qualify and distance himself from his own hate speech. (This was not the case with some of his colleagues who literally assured council members of a hotseat in Hell if they voted for the legislation... as if they were calling the shots.)

The other interesting phenomenon was the use of the word “family” by the opposition. They all consistently and unconsciously used the word “family” to describe our families as well as theirs, even when they were disparaging our families and arguing that our families should not have the same rights as their families. Even if in their minds “family” should be narrowly defined as a married heterosexual couple and their children, in their hearts they know that is not and never has been all there is.

The best remedy against homophobia or any irrational hatred is getting to know a real live “other.” The more visible gay people are in the community, the more we are perceived to have the support of highly regarded community leaders, and the better people get to know us and experience our lives, the more homophobia is challenged and gives way to acceptance and even affirmation.

The family, however battered by social changes and economic stress, is still the core unit of society. Marriage and childrearing are common ground where heterosexuals can experience gay and lesbian people as facing the same joys and challenges of family life and find a way to connect on a practical, human level.

The argument that recognizing gay and lesbian families somehow diminishes the value of all other families is premised on a view of the universe as a hydraulically sealed system (thanks to Rivkah Walton for this image). Fortunately, this is not the case. We live in a world sustained by



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the constant inflow of God-energy. May the day come soon when we will all realize that the blessings of honor and holiness are not limited but flow endlessly and in abundance from the Source of All.

Susan Saxe is the Chief Operating Officer of ALEPH and the editor of ALEPH's practical rabbinic manual on counseling same sex couples for marriage/commitment ceremonies (to order, see ad in this issue).

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