

“The most sensitive part of a man’s anatomy is his pocketbook.”

—Israeli attorney **Sharon Shenhav** on the Jerusalem family-court ruling ordering a man to pay his wife nearly \$100,000 for the “pain, suffering, social isolation” and inability to remarry or have more children after he spent 12 years denying her request for a get [Jewish divorce]. Reported by **Michele Chabin** in New York’s *Jewish Week* newspaper.



Rabbi Ayelet S. Cohen officiating at a commitment ceremony.

Palestinian Women Make Gains

In municipal elections that took place two weeks before Palestinians elected **Mahmoud Abbas** as President of the Palestinian Authority in January, women made out surprisingly well, winning 51 seats in 26 localities. Candidates had to struggle hard against the Arab world’s long-ingrained preconception that women belong at home, not in the public sphere. Teacher **Maisoun Adarneh**, 44, elected to the town council of Yabed, in the West Bank, told the Associated Press that she ran for office “to show support for women and their right to be part of the decision-making process.” She stressed the significance of her and her female colleagues’ victories, in a society where “women are oppressed and have no voice.”

“Gay Rights Are a Natural Extension of Jewish Feminism”

In January, the Conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly (RA) threatened to expel—but in the end only censured—one of its members, **Rabbi Ayelet S. Cohen**. The reason, according to the RA, was Cohen’s violation of a procedure regarding serving synagogues not affiliated with the movement. But the real reason for the threatened expulsion, according to Cohen and some of her Conservative colleagues, is because Cohen has since 2002 served Congregation Beth Simchat Torah (CBST) in New York, the world’s largest gay and lesbian synagogue. The senior rabbi, **Sharon Kleinbaum**, is a highly visible activist for gay rights. CBST is unaffiliated with any movement, although Kleinbaum approached United Synagogue about Conservative affiliation in 2002 after hiring Rabbi Cohen. Kleinbaum

was told, according to news reports, that CBST was not eligible. Openly gay and lesbian Jews cannot be admitted to Conservative rabbinical schools, and the movement does not sanction commitment ceremonies.

Cohen, who is heterosexual, told *Lilith* that her choice to serve CBST in 2002 met with a lot of resistance from those in the Conservative movement who, in Cohen’s words, “don’t want to have this conversation.” But the movement, with a longtime commitment to both tradition and change, is by no means monolithic on this issue. When Cohen was threatened with expulsion, eight prominent Conservative rabbis wrote a letter to the RA in her support, in which they expressed their dismay at how their movement’s

stated position was alienating gays and lesbians and their families. The Conservative committee on Jewish law is scheduled to meet in April specifically to revisit the issue of homosexual Jews for the first time since 1992.

“The Conservative movement and its schools have lost some wonderful people over this,” says Cohen. “Not only gay and lesbian people, but others who don’t want to be associated with the Conservative position.” Whereas, she says, other movements, specifically the Reform and Reconstructionist, both of which condone commitment ceremonies and ordain openly gay and lesbian Jews, “are thriving.” Asked whether she had ever considered ordination in these more liberal denominations, Cohen said that choosing the Jewish Theological Seminary had been a hard decision for her.

“I grew up in the Conservative movement. I connect deeply to its stated values, a Judaism grounded in Jewish law and contemporary historical reality. And I’ve been deeply troubled by their position on gay and lesbian Jews,” said Cohen. “Too often we hear people talk about ‘gay issues,’ but not ‘gay people.’ But this is not a theoretical issue. It’s an issue of social justice and the major civil rights issue of this generation. That’s why I’m so committed to right this wrong.”

Cohen also said that as a woman Conservative rabbi, she sees a lot of parallels between today’s struggle for gay rights within the movement and the fight for the ordination of women 20 years ago.

“I see this issue as a natural extension of Jewish feminism,” Cohen said. “This is the idea that I grew up with: that Judaism should be fully accessible to all of us.”

—Alice Sparberg Alexiou