

## Jewish Stars and Pink Triangles

By Lawrence Bush

**In 1989, five years into my 12-year stint** as speechwriter for Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler, then president of the Reform synagogue movement, I had the opportunity to collaborate with him on a sermon in support of people living with AIDS. The sermon was delivered at a groundbreaking service at the Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles that was designed, as we wrote, to motivate the Jewish community to “cross the boundaries of Otherness” and become a true ally of gay and lesbian Jews.

As we began collaborating on the sermon, Rabbi Schindler admitted to me that he was having to struggle with his own deep ambivalence about homosexuality in order to make a strong statement of outreach and inclusion. Only recently, he said, had he come to understand that sexual orientation may be less a matter of choice than an innate aspect of personality. For him, therefore, Judaism’s emphasis on compassion was beginning to outweigh his personal discomfort — and to outweigh the Torah’s outright condemnation of male homosexuality as an “abomination.”

I replied that his acceptance of gay men and lesbians who “can’t help themselves” was an improvement over outright loathing of them, but was nevertheless a condescending position that fell short of real solidarity. He was still viewing homosexuality as pitiable if not abominable. Did he really think most gay men and lesbians (or bisexuals or transgendered people) shared his view? The goal, I argued, was less for straight people to adjust their opinions of homosexuality and feel “tolerant” than for us to understand that sexuality (expressed consensually between adults) simply should not be grounds for disqualifying people from full civil rights or full participation in the Jewish community. We are *all* sexually comprised of some complex mixture of chemistry and taste, I said, and *none* of us would want our civil rights or Jewish legitimacy to be dependent upon other people’s judgments of those mixtures.

**Alex Schindler was my senior by nearly 20 years** and had gone through none of the “unlearning homophobia” experiences from which I had benefited during years of activism in New Jewish Agenda and other pro-feminist political settings. Yet he was able to identify with my descriptions of my struggles to overcome my own prejudices towards gay people — and he soon emerged as an outspoken religious advocate for gay and lesbian rights.

The central symbol that we used in the sermon was the Star of David, which, we wrote, as “any Jewish child with a crayon can tell you . . . contains, within it, the triangle.” This was a reference to the pink triangle, used by the Nazis as “a badge of shame and a mark of death” in their



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concentration camps, and transformed into a symbol of gay liberation for the past three decades. “For those of us,” Rabbi Schindler said, “who would keep invisible the presence of the triangle within the Shield of David: It is time to complete the outline of our Jewish star.” He continued:

I, a leader of this movement for Reform Judaism; I, a refugee from Hitler’s Germany . . . I declare myself your ally today, and ally to all those whose Star of David needs completion. . . . I declare myself a rabbi for all Jews, at every moment of life, not only for heterosexual Jews, or for gay Jews only at their funerals.

**During the current outbreak of activism on behalf** of gay and lesbian marriage rights, I have thought both proudly and critically about that 1989 sermon. It was especially on my mind on March 6th, when my wife Susan and I were honored to serve as witnesses for our friends, Chaia Lehrer and Amanda Meglio, as they got married — one of thirteen lesbian couples joined together that day by Unitarian ministers, both women, in New Paltz, New York.

For the town, which is only 15 minutes from my home, this event was an expansion of a protest movement begun by the young mayor, Jason West, a member of the Green Party, who is facing legal charges for solemnizing marriages without a license. New Paltz is now buzzing from its sudden celebrity, and many local residents, business people, and students from the local SUNY campus were on hand to show support.

(In a letter to the New York Times two days later, Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum rightly noted that many clergymen and women have been officiating at same-sex weddings for years, always without a license, since no license has been available to gay or lesbian couples. “If Mayor Jason West is to be charged and prosecuted,” Rabbi Kleinbaum declared, “then prosecute all of us who are doing the same.” Rabbi Kleinbaum’s words proved prophetic as the two Unitarian ministers officiating on March 6th were hit with the same charges as Mayor West on March 15th.)

For my marrying friends, who have been together for more than twenty years and have a 15-year-old son, this was a third effort to have their union recognized as a legal marriage. In 1987, Chaia and Amanda were among many hundreds of gay and lesbian couples married at a demonstration in Washington, D.C. Two years ago, they had a civil union ceremony in Vermont.

For all the happy couples, the day was a fantasy-almost-come-true — “almost” because their joy could not be shielded from a score of journalists, photographers and videographers who intruded on the ceremonies — or from the likelihood that legal action will soon quash their married status.



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March 6th, New Paltz, New York L'Chaim! Photo by Zoë Griss-Bush

As for the lone protester, he needed no court ruling to know that homosexuals must not be permitted to marry. A middle-aged man, he held a hand-printed sign quoting Leviticus 20:13: “If a man lies with a male as one lies with a woman, the two of them have done an abhorrent thing; they shall be put to death . . .” (oddly enough, since the marrying couples were women).

When I noticed a couple of reporters talking to him, I went over and asked the protester if he had children. Yes, he said, he was a father. I asked him if his children had ever misbehaved or acted insolently towards him. From time to time, he replied. Well, I continued, did he realize that the same chapter in Leviticus calls for death for “anyone [who] insults his father or his mother”? Did he think his children should be put to death — or did he grant the need to approach religious law interpretively? He stared at me blankly. (For an illuminating discussion of the scope of interpretive leeway within the Jewish tradition regarding homosexuality, I recommend *Wrestling with God & Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition*, a new book by Rabbi Steven Greenberg — a gay, Orthodox rabbi — published by the University of Wisconsin Press.)

**It was after this unsatisfying “religious dialogue”** that I suddenly grasped what had been missing from the sermon Rabbi Schindler and I wrote some 15 years ago. Of course, we had included religious affirmations on behalf of gay and lesbian relationships. We had also made



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use of Jewish historical experiences in a way that might please most Jewish secularists: “We who were beaten in the streets of Berlin cannot turn away from the plague of gay-bashing. We who were marranos in Madrid, who clung to the closet of assimilation and conversion in order to live without molestation, cannot deny the demand for gay and lesbian visibility!”

What we had failed to say is that gay rights should not be dependent at all upon religious acceptance of homosexuality — not in the United States of America. While it is all very well to mobilize religious principles in support of, or opposition to, government policies, the right of all people to seek “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” is what serves as America’s creed, not Leviticus 20:13 or any other Biblical passage.

Once America’s civil laws change, religion will, indeed, be the only important institutional source of homophobia left standing in our society. The American psychiatric establishment removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders in 1973. The Supreme Court last year decriminalized gay sex by rejecting as unconstitutional all state “sodomy” laws. Because our Constitution more often facilitates than impedes the extension of civil rights and liberties to minority groups, I fully expect to see my friends Chaia and Amanda going through a fourth marriage ceremony some day that will bring them all the benefits Susan and I share as a married couple. Even then, however, many religious Americans will persist in feeling shocked that the “sacredness of marriage” could be extended to gay and lesbian couples.

I say: Tough.

**There is no denying that, with or without the support of** Biblical passages, homosexuality will seem “unnatural” to most people in our society — including, in some cases, gays and lesbians themselves, who must often struggle long and hard for self-acceptance.

Here’s what they’re up against: Consider that it took a mere two and a half centuries of racially-based slavery in America to foster a widespread view of interracial relations or “miscegenation” as “unnatural” (although obviously tantalizing to many a white Southern slaveowner). In support of this bias and the slavery system that lay behind it, another Biblical passage was invoked: the “Curse of Ham,” Genesis 9: 20-26, in which Noah consigns the mythical progenitor of African peoples to serve as the “lowest of slaves.” Now, compare this 250-year-old process to the many centuries of patriarchal culture the world over, which have imbued us with rigid perceptions of gender and a very fixed sense of heterosexual desire as the only normative form of sexual desire.

Fortunately, democracy is not built upon the principle of defending what seems “natural” to the majority. Democracy, rather, is built upon the principle that all human beings are entitled to equal rights and a chance at self-fulfillment regardless of their race, religion, creed, gender, wealth, social habits, sex lives, language capacities, mobility, artistic sensibilities, conformity or



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nonconformity, etc. — as long as one’s self-fulfillment does not entail injury to the physical integrity or property of others. A democratic society, in other words, is one in which we can disapprove of one another, even be repelled by one another, without being able to deprive one another of rights.

What the 1989 sermon should have included, therefore, is that the triangle is a fundamental part not only of the “geometry of Jewish life,” but of the geometry of American democracy; an element not only of the six-pointed Star of David, but of the five-pointed American star.

**For decades, American Jewish organizations have** understood church-state separation to be critical for Jewish well-being in America and have played a central role in defending this feature of our democracy. My fear is that those organizations may now slacken in that role because their contemporary enthusiasm for spirituality has made it less stylish to defend the virtues of secular society.

Others fear that this new civil rights struggle for gay and lesbian marital rights will polarize the country and result in the disastrous reelection of George W. Bush. I believe, however, that if John Kerry were to firmly oppose constitutional amendments designed to disbar a minority from full citizenship and stand up against the Christian right’s sanctimonious bullying, he would mobilize the appreciation of many Americans — including many deeply religious Americans who nevertheless oppose Taliban-style politics. As a liberal Democrat, Kerry already is anathema to the Christian right. He will gain nothing from pandering to its prejudices or submitting to them in silence — nothing except the scorn of independent voters, who seem to despise nothing so much as a politician who can’t be straightforward about his principles.

The fact is that in San Francisco, Portland, Chicago, Asbury Park (NJ), Nyack (NY), and a number of other towns and cities — including my neighboring town of New Paltz — lesbians and gay men are getting married with or without licenses, and forcing the legal system to contend with its inconsistencies. The horse is out of the barn; the Democrats should mount it and ride.

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