

Pre-marital Counseling for Same-sex Couples: Highlights for Rabbis and Cantors

By Rabbi Nancy H. Wiener

In 1991, my life partner and I asked our dear friend, a rabbi, to help us prepare for our wedding. She met with us to discuss our feelings for each other, our desire to get married, and details about our ceremony. During our meetings it became clear that we were teaching her more about our lives, as lesbian Jews preparing for a wedding, then she was teaching us about marriage or ourselves. Our wedding was wonderful. But we wondered how it might have been different if she had been able to anticipate some of our specific needs.

Later that year, I selected the creation and implementation of a pre-marital counseling model for same sex couples as the topic for my doctoral project in Pastoral Counseling. I wanted to find a way to help rabbis and cantors prepare themselves to provide meaningful pre-marital counseling for same sex couples. Little did I know at the time, that I would come to use the model with all couples and that I would teach it to rabbinic and cantorial students in a life-cycle counseling course at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, in New York City. What follows are some highlights of the model.

Highlights of the Counseling Model for Rabbis and Cantors

Before the First Meeting — Preparing ourselves for the counseling

Assessing the limits of our own experience and knowledge: Before engaging in pastoral counseling, we should always consider the pre-conceived notions we have about the people we will counsel, the fears and anxieties they evoke in us, and the expectations we have for our interactions with them.

When it comes to working with same sex couples, we must recognize that we are all products of a Jewish world that, for millennia, said: Jewish weddings are for men and women only. We are products of a Jewish world that could not even conceive of a same-sex Jewish wedding.

Only in recent decades have some of our communities begun to learn, and perhaps teach others, that people of all sexual orientations can have loving, committed and enduring relationships. Only in recent decades have some of our communities seriously challenged their assumptions about the nature of Jewish marriage and pondered the very real possibility that it is the content of a relationship, rather than its form (sexual orientation of its members) that we gather as a community to celebrate and sanctify.

Setting Goals: Every time a couple asks us to meet with them prior to their wedding, we receive an invitation to participate in a potentially transformative process. Couples generally arrive



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prepared to plan their weddings: intellectually, emotionally and pragmatically. As misadrei kiddushin, we can facilitate much more than the ceremony. We can guide a holy process that leads to a wedding filled with emotional, interpersonal, spiritual and religious meaning.

Our responsibilities as misadrei kiddushin are to:

1. create a safe space for couples to explore their strengths and weaknesses
2. hear and respect varied personal histories
3. validate personal experience
4. encourage couples to express concerns and issues they may have about each other, their families, their futures, etc.
5. teach couples about Jewish wedding options and assist them in creating a personally and religiously meaningful ceremony
6. help couples acknowledge the changes inherent in their new status: from single to married; from member of one family to member of a newly formed family
7. provide appropriate referrals for further counseling, when necessary

Having articulated these responsibilities, I developed a five pre-marital counseling goals for all couples. Given the legal and social realities of the world, I include one additional goal that is specific for same sex couples.

All of these will be explored in the following pages.

Working with the Couple

Goal I: Reviewing the Relationship

A wedding is not an end point, but a high point in a relationship that has both a history and a future. Many couples, swept up in the pre-marriage whirl, lose sight of this truth. The relationship time line is designed to help a couple move beyond simple recitation of “their story,” by contextualizing their relationship on a continuum with prior relationships and future expectations. As our study of Midrash has taught us, in the telling and retelling of our stories we develop a changing understanding of ourselves.

As couples narrate their relationship history, I literally map it out on paper, indicating who is speaking (by keeping parallel lines) and when the event mentioned took place. The oral recitation and the graphic depiction often jog long forgotten milestones, large and small, that have dropped out of the “official story.”

I then ask them to work backwards, providing information about past relationships. If they have had other significant relationships, this process can help them gain insights into the



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distinctiveness of this one and into their desire to build a future with this particular person. If this is a first serious relationship, they can reflect on how they have reached this point in their lives.

Finally, I ask couples to share their future expectations. This projective piece can reveal important information about the compatibility of their short and long term expectations, serving as a catalyst to address any discrepancies that exist.

When working with same-sex couples, this time line may contain data that does not come up regularly with heterosexual couples. Gay men and lesbians tend to be more open about and accepting of previous periods of promiscuity and experimentation than their heterosexual counterparts. They may share information about periods of heterosexual dating or marriage, or even periods of dating members of both sexes, while they struggled to determine their sexual orientation. They may have had previous relationships that they hid from family, friends or co-workers. It is the sharing of this type of information that challenges us to remember our responsibility to maintain a safe space and validate personal experiences.

Goal II: Understanding the Relationship in a Jewish Framework;

Goal III: Fostering a Sense of Belonging to the Jewish Community:

Couples come to us believing that their relationship is special and different from all others they have had. However, they usually do not arrive able to express this idea in uniquely Jewish language. Therefore, I find that couples generally respond with a sense of profound recognition to the notion of kedushah. They can readily identify ways in which they have set each other apart and treated each other in ways that they treat no others. They then can understand their Jewish wedding, their kiddushin, as a ritual celebrating the ever-increasing kedushah of their relationship.

As the couple reviews their relationship, highlighting moments that contributed to its kedushah, I create another time line. I then ask the couple to discuss how their families, friends and co-workers have responded to and supported the growing kedushah of their relationship. This is often an opening to explore potentially difficult or painful relationships, such as with their future in-laws. Helping the members of a couple hear each other's experiences and perceptions and encouraging them to acknowledge the ways they have offered and received support from each other can contribute greatly to their understanding of themselves as individuals and as a couple.

As they reflect on the kedushah of their relationship, same sex couples may mention moments not commonly part of the experiences of heterosexual couples, including: going out together in public for the first time; showing physical affection in front of friends or family, or in public;



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establishing joint bank accounts; “going public” about their relationship in the context of daily life or in anticipation of their wedding—speaking with caterers, florists and bands; arranging for wills, powers of attorney, health care proxies, etc.

Same sex couples often need extra time to explore the ways in which others have responded to their relationship’s kedushah. Often long-buried wounds inflicted during early stages of “coming out,” surface when they encounter hostility, rejection or incredulity as they plan for their wedding.

It is important to remember that tensions and resistance are not always external.

Members of same sex couples are often not “out” to the same extent or have not found similar degrees of acceptance in their individual family and social circles. The disparities that exist affect their wedding plans: who they inform, who they invite, and, perhaps, even, how they plan their ceremony and reception. We can help the couple acknowledge and process tensions that may arise.

Every couple anticipates their wedding differently. For same-sex couples, this truth is heightened. The absence of public and religious ritual was a reality with which same-sex couples lived until very recently. As a result, most members of same-sex couples over the age of 35 or 40 never anticipated getting married to the person they loved. These couples will need time to marvel at the changes that have occurred and to process them. Members of same sex couples under the age of 35 have often had radically different life experiences. They may have come out to themselves and others in their teens, they came of age in a world saturated with media coverage of same sex couples, weddings and adoptions, and many have even fantasized about and mentally planned their same sex ceremonies. We need to be open to every couple’s experiences and help each one continue the journeys they have lived.

Finally, same-sex couples come to us personally motivated to sanctify their relationship in a Jewish context; they rarely come because of external pressures imposed by family. When we welcome them, acknowledge the kedushah in their relationships and affirm it in a ceremony, we can counter some of their negative preconceptions of or personal experiences with the established Jewish community.

Goal IV: Creating a Ceremony that is Personally and Religiously Meaningful;

Goal V: Affirming Their Change of Status

Prior to any discussion about their ceremony, I ask couples three questions. What do you know about Jewish weddings? Why do you want a “Jewish wedding”? What will make the wedding



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Jewish for you? I then recommend books for them to read so that we can have an informed discussion about their ritual and liturgical options.

As a rule, I keep my wedding discussions focused upon the details of the ceremony. Most heterosexual couples are helped through the process of planning a wedding and reception by family and friends and I make it clear that this is not my bailiwick.

I have learned that with same-sex couples I cannot distance myself from discussions about wedding and reception plans as I tend to do with heterosexual couples. Many same-sex couples come to us with little or no knowledge about weddings and without family or experienced friends lending support and advice as they plan. We can be of particular help if we recommend books on same sex weddings, ♦'gay friendly' caterers etc., and if we put them in contact with other couples who have already celebrated their same-sex ceremonies.

When working with same-sex couples, language has a heightened importance. Same sex couples often use the word ♦'wedding' to establish parity, validation and rapid understanding of the meaning this event has for them. Others intentionally avoid "wedding" and "marriage" because of their heterosexual connotations. We should be ready to hear and consider the couple's preferred language, and to explore the meaning it holds for them.

In our own conversations about the ceremonies we do, we must remember that the language we use, both English and Hebrew, conveys powerful messages for the couple and for the larger community.

In addition, we must discuss the language of the ceremony itself: the words used in the exchange of rings, the blessings offered at the time of the sheva berakhot, the type of pronouncement we make at the end of the ceremony. Many of us already consider these issues in our discussions with heterosexual sex couples. It is essential for us to do so with same sex couples — particularly if we find ourselves considering a change that does not imply or assume parity.

The ketubah holds special significance for same-sex couples. It is the only documentation that validates their change of status. They want its wording and art work to be both aesthetically pleasing, personally expressive, and religiously meaningful. We should respect its heightened importance for the couple and to discuss at length its particulars.

For same-sex couples the ceremony's choreography and their own attire often become very significant. Until recent decades, certain aspects of Jewish weddings (arriving first at the chuppah, breaking the glass) had been rigidly gender-bound. Many couples need time to articulate and deal with their fears that guests might incorrectly make gender and role assumptions about their relationship based on the choreographic and sartorial decisions they



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have made for their ceremony. There is no single solution. Each couple must resolve these issues for themselves.

All couples deserve a ritual that establishes them as a new family and facilitates the reorganization of family and friendship structures. The rituals we help create need to clearly convey the message that their new family is holy and valid in the eyes of God and the community. Families, both accepting and rejecting, remain tremendously significant players in the lives of same-sex couples. Ritual and aesthetic decisions are often made with them in mind. Their absence need to be mourned, their support and rejoicing celebrated. Flexibility in allocating counseling time to process these issues is important.

Goal VI (Unique to Same-Sex Couples): Creating Legal Protections

When a heterosexual couple marries, the government extends to them 1,049 rights and privileges, as next of kin, that are effective until death or legal divorce severs the relationship. These include: inheritance, pension benefits, power of attorney, joint ownership, ability to file joint tax returns, options for family plan insurance, joint adoption rights. A heterosexual couple married for one minute enjoys all of these rights; a same-sex couple together twenty-five years enjoys none.

We must articulate this reality clearly to each same-sex couple that we counsel. While we and those in attendance will respect and honor their relationship, the civil authorities will not. Their union will have no official legal status. Therefore, we should raise the issue of legal protections with them. If they have not made any arrangements, we can refer them to experienced lawyers. The laws are different in each state, city and municipality; the couple should contact their local office of Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, a national gay and lesbian legal advocacy group, to get appropriate information.

A Final Word The success of the counseling we do depends upon our own supportive and positive attitudes. We must be open, empathic and available. We, misadrei kiddushin, teach, guide and officiate. Our counseling and ceremonies contribute to Tikkun olam.

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