

History of Gay Marriage in the Reconstructionist Movement

Rabbi Joshua Lesser

The Reconstructionist movement has been on the forefront of embracing gay and lesbians unions and marriages ritually, liturgically, and politically. With the characteristic trademarks of the Reconstructionist movement, the approach to gay and lesbian marriage could be characterized as a hybrid of values-based, thoughtful democratic process with decision-making change from the bottom up. There have been moments where these two approaches have created tension, but they ultimately have propelled the Reconstructionist movement into the forefront of many conversations about gay marriage and have served as an example to all faith groups.

From a policy perspective, the watershed moment occurred when the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College adopted an official policy admitting gay and lesbian students into its rabbinic program in 1984. The issue of gay marriage was raised as a ripple effect of this decision.

When the college made this decision, the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (then the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot) — the congregational arm of the Reconstructionist movement — officially went on record in support of full equality of rights for lesbians and gay men. Despite this progress, what these decisions meant practically had not yet been explored, and the minority that was opposed to these decisions was not opposed to the decision in theory, but in what it perceived as the lack of process and thoughtfulness regarding the complications of these proclamations.

Soon after the policy was adopted, a group of students and faculty recognized that work needed to be done to explore the implication of these decisions, and they formed “What Now,” an organization to address many of the ancillary issues including the array of issues related to gay and lesbian marriage. This led to the creation of some of the earliest ceremonies for gay and lesbian unions, which built on organic ceremonies that can be traced back to the late 1970s and early 1980s. The debate between modifying the language of kiddushin or creating a completely separate ceremony began and, to a lesser degree, continues today. Both options were explored fully.

On the organic front, rabbis like Rebecca Alpert and Linda Holtzman were working on liturgy as early as 1983. Rabbi Holtzman, who in the early 1980s taught at RRC and soon after began teach a practical rabbinic course on life cycles, offered the approach of using the traditional Jewish wedding ceremony as a backbone and modifying on a case-by-case basis to fit the needs of the couple. The second same-sex wedding she created was her own, where she used much of the traditional liturgy but also added rituals to connect the elements of earth, air, fire, and water. For years, as the Dean of Practical Rabbinics, she continued to teach life cycles, with a session solely dedicated to gay and lesbian weddings. Many of the ceremonies created have been housed in the RRC liturgy files since the mid-1980s. A good number of them have been updated and are housed on www.ritualwell.org.

As people in the movement began to think about this methodically and to step into their own empowerment during the latter part of the 1980s, the Reconstructionist Movement was challenged to take on the issue of homosexuality and Judaism more significantly and systematically, helping prepare its congregations to become “welcoming synagogues” that integrated and honored the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. A part of this process was the expectation that congregations would offer opportunities for gay and lesbian people to ritualize their unions in the synagogue. In the early 1990s, a task force was commissioned to accomplish this goal. A combination of lay leaders, rabbis, and administrators issued the commission report “Homosexuality and Judaism: The Reconstructionist Position” in 1993. This pioneering report stated that “We [Reconstructionists] regard the Jewish values that affirm the inherent dignity, integrity, and equality of human beings as having primacy over historically conditioned attitudes.... It is our duty to correct the misunderstandings and resulting injustice of the past and to fulfill the Jewish obligation to seek justice.”

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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.” A workshop series was developed in which life cycles, including marriage, were addressed. A congregation that went through the education process and adopted a statement of inclusion could take on the label *kehilah mekabelet* (welcoming community). This education process usually meant the acceptance of gay unions on the bimah, which for some communities was a sticking point for many years. In the 21st century, the overwhelming majority of Reconstructionist congregations have embraced both the ritual and political rights of LGBT people with regard to marriage. The gap between the congregations that had lagged behind the faculty and students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College has begun to narrow significantly.

In 1998, a group of students became aware of the disparity between the progressive education embodied in the curriculum of the College, its advocacy positions on gay and lesbian civil inclusion, the embracing of LGBT issues within the movement, and the discomfort of many of the congregations. An organization of students and faculty called “What Next” was formed to help students address the issues they would be facing within congregations in addressing the needs of LGBT congregants. One outcome of this group was the proposal of a mini-course preparing students on inclusion work from a systematic place in which marriage for gays and lesbians would play a key role. The student body voted to make this course mandatory for all students, and it continues to exist to this day, although it has evolved and changed some of its focus.

While individual Reconstructionist congregations and prominent individuals have been active in the political arena advocating for local and countrywide acceptance of gay and lesbian marriage, it was only in 2004 that the JRF unanimously adopted a resolution in support of full legal equality for same-sex couples. The JRF has signed on in support of all amicus briefs that we have been invited to join in support of same-sex marriage in state legal actions since that time. At this time, all arms of the movement are in harmony, as are most of the Reconstructionist congregations in affirming the celebration of gay and lesbian life cycles as an integral part of Jewish life for everyone. This is done both politically and liturgically, and there are now dozens of examples of ceremonies, as well as a clear process for rabbis and lay people to create their own unique Jewish ceremonies. The Reconstructionist-founded RitualWell.org contains many ceremonies, rituals, readings, and articles that everyone can access to support liturgical innovation.

Today the key struggle in the Reconstructionist movement is a widely held debate among its rabbis on whether to be agents of the state in civil marriage for straight marriage. This debate has changed in the few states where gay marriage or civil unions exist, but where it does not, there are gay and lesbian rabbis and allies who have chosen to officiate and participate only at the Jewish ritual aspect of the wedding ceremony and reject the privilege that is inherent in signing marriage licenses for heterosexual couples. This has felt radical to some, but to others it is an important step in affirming true equality and does not place too much of an extra burden on straight couples who receive an incredible number of privileges and rights denied to gay and lesbian couples. Many Reconstructionist rabbis advocate that straight couples add rituals into their ceremonies — like one printed in *Lilith* magazine — where the couple removes drops of wine, as on Passover, recognizing that our joy is diminished in that we have not yet reached a day where all couples can rejoice and be honored equally. There are still others who consciously use some of their marriage honorarium to support the fight for marriage equality. The majority of members of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association actively are engaged in exploring how to navigate these set of issues in a way that has integrity, consistency, and honors the inclusion of all Jews and their loved ones.

Overall, the Reconstructionist movement has combined its strength as a thoughtful, process-oriented body with its smaller organic experimentations as a way to lead the Jewish community in some groundbreaking discussion on inclusion, equality, distinctiveness, and privilege — and it continues to do so today.



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