

Pastoral Issues for Marriage and Premarital Counseling

Rabbi Ayelet Cohen

Working with a couple towards their chuppah is an opportunity to celebrate their relationship and affirm their role as full members of their Jewish community and the Jewish world at large. This is our chance as rabbis to communicate how welcome the couple is and that it is possible for them to engage and thrive as a Jewish family within your community. Be aware that the couple may have approached you with trepidation; afraid of experiencing the rejection they may have felt from other rabbis or shuls around coming out or being gay. The premarital counseling process is a tremendous opportunity to heal past brokenness that either member of the couple may have with Jewish life or Jewish community.

In preparing a couple for marriage we engage in conversations exploring the couple's relationship with each other as well as with family of origin, money, sex, children and parenting, Judaism and Jewish life. As the couple's rabbi you need to be able to discuss these issues with a same-sex couple as you would with an opposite-sex couple. If you have outstanding questions or if you are still ambivalent about officiating, find a colleague with whom to discuss this. It is important not to put the couple in the position of being the sounding board for your concerns or anxieties about officiating at a same-sex wedding or negotiating the reaction within your community. The couple is coming to you for pastoral guidance. If you are processing these issues it can be very helpful to find a chevruta, a colleague or friend outside of the shul with whom you can speak honestly.

Similarly, be aware that the couple probably does not want to be in the role of educating the community about same-sex families. If this is the first or one of the first same-sex weddings in your congregation they are probably feeling conspicuous enough already. Think through the various shul issues, consult with the Board if necessary, and educate yourself and the congregation about policies. You may need to do some work to prepare the congregation; you can do this yourself or bring someone in to do some education within the shul.

Some questions to consider: What is the history of LGBT people in your community? Have there been past conflicts, with you or other rabbis, about the role of LGBT people or rituals for LGBT people within the shul? Is there a shul policy on marriage? Does it distinguish between weddings in the sanctuary or the rabbi officiating in another venue? What about the Aufruf? Does your shul allow for joint aliyot? How does the shul acknowledge *smachot* in the newsletter or through Kiddush sponsorships? Think about all of the things that you do for opposite-sex couples around engagement and marriage and make sure you and your congregation are prepared for the equivalent celebrations and announcements for same-sex couples.

It is our responsibility as rabbis to educate ourselves as to the legal status of same-sex relationships in our home state. Know that even in states where marriage is legal it is only binding on the state level. No federal marriage benefits are available to any same-sex couple (anything regarding taxes, Social Security, inheritance law, etc.). Know if your state or city offers civil union or domestic partnership and what that entails. Know of a well-informed lawyer to whom to refer couples for help drafting wills, powers of attorney, health care proxy, hospital visitation authorization, and other necessary documents. Just as you would encourage a couple to include a Lieberman Clause in their ketubah for their own future protection, it is appropriate to encourage a couple to obtain these documents of legal protection.

Similarly, don't be afraid to ask about previous relationship history. Was one or both of the partners in a previous relationship that requires a *get*? Think about how you would proceed with obtaining a *get* from a previous same-sex relationship.

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Brian and David

Brian and David are in their thirties. They grew up going to day school and Jewish summer camp and are thrilled to begin their life together. They are eager to raise children.

Brian has been a devoted uncle to his nieces and nephews. His sister is concerned that if her daughter serves as flower girl in Brian's wedding that she will always remember that the first wedding she attended was a gay wedding.

David grew up in a tight-knit community with close relationships to family friends. David always imagined these friends dancing at his wedding, as they did at every major simchah in his life. His parents have not told most of their friends that David is gay and are not inviting them to the wedding.

Unfortunately, we cannot take for granted that the couple's family of origin will be rejoicing that their child has found a Jewish partner with whom to share his or her life. Even for parents who have adjusted fairly well to their child's coming out, a wedding can bring up new anxieties and awaken old ones. A celebration as public as a wedding can feel like a second coming out for the parents. Parents may feel afraid and conflicted about inviting or even talking about the wedding with professional colleagues, friends, shul acquaintances, and relatives with whom they have not previously discussed their child's sexual orientation. The child may feel betrayed by his parents' lack of enthusiasm. He may experience deep pain and loss at the prospect of family friends or relatives, even grandparents, to whom he feels close, not being present at the wedding. This can be all the more poignant if the family has celebrated the wedding of a heterosexual sibling in a much more open and unambivalent way. All of this can rekindle unresolved feelings of grief and anger from the initial coming out. Tread very delicately around the question of parental involvement in the wedding. For some families, the question of whether the parents will even attend is a major one.

Diane and Helen

Diane and Helen have been together for almost twenty years. To mark that significant anniversary they want to have a ceremony, something they did not think was possible for them when they first began their life together. They want to make sure their ceremony honors their history together and reflects the fact that they have been together for many years. Each has adult children from previous relationships. Diane's son has become Orthodox and refuses to attend the wedding; he does not want his children to know that it is happening.

While more and more young gay and lesbian couples are marrying, you may encounter couples that have been together for many years seeking to have a wedding ceremony. Couples who have been together since long before Jewish or legal marriage for same sex couples seemed like a possibility may decide to plan a wedding ceremony around a significant anniversary or if the civil laws change in their state. In these cases it is usually important to the couple that the language of the ceremony reflect that this is not the beginning of a new partnership but the affirmation of a long-standing commitment, a new step in a lifelong journey. Some of the issues that arise are those that may be familiar from other later-in-life marriages: the possibility that the couple has children, either from their relationship or from previous relationships. Often those children have their own judgments and discomforts about the wedding and may themselves be ambivalent about participating or attending. Additionally, there is the likelihood that the relationship will not produce future children, and the desire to reflect that truth in the language of the ceremony.

Tamar and Julie

Tamar and Julie are excited to craft a ceremony that reflects their deep connection to Jewish text and tradition. Tamar grew up in an observant community, attended Orthodox day school, and watched her brothers study for their b'nai mitzvah. She became deeply alienated from religious Judaism, feeling that there was no place for her unless she married a man and lived a frum life. With Julie she is considering coming back to engaged Jewish life. She is not sure if there is any place for her in the traditional Jewish wedding ceremony.

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Elsewhere in this resource guide, the rituals and liturgy of the ceremony are discussed in detail. Be aware that working with the couple on the ceremony and the ketubah is a pastoral issue as well as a ritual one. Empowering couples to see themselves and their experience in the rituals and liturgy may be a profound moment of return after years of alienation from Judaism: this may be the first time they feel that they have a place in Judaism after a lifetime of seeing only heterosexual individuals and families reflected and celebrated in Jewish life.

As rabbis, when we are approached by same-sex couples to officiate at their weddings, we are being given a tremendous gift: the opportunity to greet Jews seeking a connection to Jewish life with love, affirmation, and enthusiasm.



Rabbi Ayelet S. Cohen served for ten years at New York City's Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, the world's largest LGBT synagogue serving people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Passionately committed to progressive and feminist Judaism, she is an activist and an advocate for full inclusion and celebration of LGBT Jews in the Jewish world and for LGBT civil rights. A scholar, teacher, translator, and writer, Rabbi Cohen is an editor of *Siddur Bichol Levavcha*, a prayerbook featuring queer and feminist liturgy. Her articles and essays on Jewish and LGBT issues appear in numerous books and periodicals. She lectures and facilitates workshops on Jewish, feminist, and LGBT issues. She is a member of the Rabbinical Assembly and the New York Board of Rabbis, and serves on the board of Rabbis for Human Rights—North America.

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