

Holiness in All of Our Relationships
Rabbi Rebecca Shinder – Temple Beth Shalom
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Whereas this High Holiday season begins my 6th year as serving as the spiritual leader of this congregation, I understand that there is another Rebecca that has taught valuable lessons to our children, parents, and even some grandparents, as well. Who is this extra educator? She's none other than Rebecca Rubin – “a lively girl with dramatic flair growing up in early 20th c. NY City!”

Rebecca is not a rabbi, but a character in the much celebrated American Girl doll collection. Several years ago, some students introduced me to the doll and the book that tells her story, and my softie-of-a-dad husband and my beguiling daughter brought Rebecca to **our** home this summer. I tease Larry, as our 4-year-old Hannah is still a bit too young to take proper care of such a special doll, and moreover, thanks to her Jewish pre-school, she could never understand and relate to Rebecca's problematic homework assignment to make Christmas decorations during Hannukah.

The book, *Candlelight for Rebecca*, is a lovely tale, but I learned the best story of all when a student told me with great pride that her non-Jewish grandparents bought her the Rebecca Shabbes set for Christmas!
 How fabulous! How I would love to bottle this child's enthusiasm and pride!

What a great example of how a family's Jewish identity can blossom regardless of the mixed roots of the extended family tree. Of course, many of my Reform Rabbinic colleagues have witnessed such success stories within their own congregations; and there is broad agreement that the most important issue for Jewish continuity is the engagement of intermarried families in meaningful Jewish living, and yet some of my colleagues still cannot bring themselves to perform a Marriage ceremony for an interfaith couple.

In 1973, the membership of the CCAR - the Central Conference of American Rabbis voted that the issues of such a decision must be left to the autonomy of the individual rabbi. There were some caveats in a Code of Ethics put forth, as well as policies against officiating on Shabbat and co-officiating with non-Jewish clergy. It's been nearly 40 years, and in that time many of our communities have changed, and the conversations continue. They continue in the work of a CCAR Task Force which explores:
 The “Challenges of Intermarriage for the Reform Rabbi.” I had the opportunity to participate in a professional development workshop on this topic at the CCAR convention last March.

I found that all of my colleagues agreed to the importance of embracing the interfaith family, yet some still cannot get beyond the struggle with their role as the exemplar of Jewish faith and heritage. Although pained by regrets of having to say no – some rabbis could not get beyond the fact that the Jewish wedding ceremony connects Jewish couples to generations past/ with liturgy reserved for two Jews who choose to be consecrated to one another according to the laws of Moses and Israel.

I countered this point with my colleagues by reminding them that our liturgy, especially in the Reform Movement has been evolving, changing, reforming since the 19th century! It is my job as Rav b'yisrael, a Rabbi in Israel, to create a ceremony that is authentic in which the commitment of two people who will build a Jewish family together, is sanctified, the Hebrew word is *kaddosh* - elevated for a holy purpose. Many of you know my position on Intermarriage, and have been touched by my embrace of who I call “Heroes in our Midst,” non-Jewish spouses and parents who are members of our congregation. I have been working with such heroes since I was a student Rabbi. Yet recently, I’ve had the honor to meet and work with another kind of hero, as well.

Another story – this one not from a glossy children’s book.

Once upon a time two people fell in love, started a beautiful life together, and blended their families, including their grown children. Once upon a time the two were denied the right to marry each other legally, and then once upon a time the State of New York changed its laws and granted Dawn and Gloria the right to marry. They asked me to officiate, became spouses, and continued their journey so as to live happily ever after. My guiding principle to compose an authentic ceremony for Gloria and Dawn was the same as what guides me in interfaith weddings. The words of our faith remain, as ever, fluid, powerful and adaptable. I must confess that I added an extra *Shehechyanu*, as I thanked God for enabling us all to come to this joyous time, and participate in my first same-sex LEGAL marriage ceremony!

And yet Dawn and Gloria’s legal marriage could not have taken place in all states of our country. Sadly, we live in a society that prejudice, fear, and hatred are still expressed to homosexuals. We now live in a society when gay bashing can be done digitally in cyberspace //and young people still commit suicide simply because they are gay. Moreover, we’ve been debating publically the issue of gays in the military since the early 1990’s, and yet the landmark repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell is still being debated.

In fact, in last week’s Republican debate, while introducing a question about this issue, the video of a gay soldier currently serving in Iraq was booed by members of the audience. He was Booed! And not 1 of the 8 candidates rebuked them and showed leadership by calling for respect for a member of our military.

The reaction made me think of a book that clearly no one in that room had read. In his 1996 book, *Virtually Normal*, Andrew Sullivan wrote of his identity as a young gay man. He answered the hypothetical question of who is gay by stating that:

WE are your military and have fought your wars and protected you homes. We are you businessmen and women, who built and sustained this economy for homosexual and heterosexual alike. We are your teachers; we have built your universities and trained your scholars. We have created your art and designed and built your buildings. We are your civic leaders, your priests and rabbis, your writers and inventors, your sports idols and entrepreneurs.

There are those who would counter Sullivan by employing the Bible as a shield, stating that the Bible prohibits two men from lying together as with a woman. They would also argue that the text calls homosexuality an abomination. It does indeed, and yet how shall we then deal with *these* texts?

The Bible also states that: he who curses his father or mother shall be put to death; and that a man who touches a menstruating woman, even his wife, shall be cut off from his people. The Bible also states that a divorced woman is doomed to a status of defilement, and that a suspected adulteress is required to drink poison as a test of guilt. But what Bible thumping members of the Christian right, moral majority, or other celebrated Christian clubs are taught **these** passages? People need to know that as Judaism matured, interpretations of biblical laws based on superstition and ignorance were revised, and often altogether suspended.

Regarding homosexuality, the Torah's prohibitions were of homosexual acts done by males who were presumed to be heterosexuals. According to biblical scholars, what it called an abomination, was the illicit sexual behavior that was part of cultic prostitution, or of pagan fertility rites. That is to say, they were rituals that nice, monotheistic Israelite boys did not do. Rabbi Jerome Davidson teaches, "that the Bible knew of these acts in the context of war, coercion, and idolatry -- not in the context of loving, and caring relationships. The concept of a homosexual orientation, part of a person's constitutional make-up, was of course totally unknown."

How logical is it to employ a 3,000 year old understanding of homosexuality, when it was only 40 years ago when the Board of THE American Psychiatric Association voted that "homosexuality is not a psychiatric disorder!" We don't have the empirical formula needed to prove scientifically why someone is homosexual, we just have the personal testimonies, the simple declarations that homosexuality is no choice & is often discovered with great pain. It is not a matter of free will, but of innate irreversible identity.

This morning our congregants chanted the first Biblical account of creation. In it we are told how every man and woman were created in the spiritual image of God. This is an eternal teaching of the Bible, not simply one law cherry picked by the many who now control a significant portion of the current political landscape, and who continue to relegate the gay and lesbian community into the camp of the unclean.

Once upon a time African Americans were not permitted to serve in combat roles in our Armed Forces, and once they were allowed, they served in segregated units. As a country, we have evolved from that archaic, hateful, and bigoted policy. Thankfully, the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell has moved our nation toward that same evolution, and yet sadly some people still don't believe in any kind of evolution at all.

Adonai Eloheinu, O Lord our God, may it be your will for you and us all to see the sanctity in **all** of our relationships, may we all have the courage to see that holiness, as well. And finally, may we all possess the character to see the image of the Divine in each other.

Amen