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GAY AND LESBIAN INCLUSION  
AT UNION TEMPLE OF BROOKLYN

RABBI LINDA HENRY GOODMAN

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Doctor of Ministry Degree

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
Graduate Studies Program  
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so that he might grow into adulthood with intellectual open-mindedness and human sensitivity.

Finally, I remember my parents, Jeanette and Philip Henry,  $\text{נ"י}$ , who loved me unconditionally, imparted to me a love for Judaism and the Jewish People, and set for me the highest standards of ethical behavior.

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## INTRODUCTION

For too long in our society, gay and lesbian people have been excluded from life in the mainstream, and forced to carve out life on the fringes, due to the ignorance, fear, and prejudice of most of our citizens. This exclusion, of course, has extended to synagogue life as well. For a variety of reasons, many of which I will discuss in the body of this paper, synagogues have closed their doors to gay and lesbian Jews, leaving them bereft of the spiritual comfort and fulfillment which has been afforded to other Jews. One listens to story after story of gay and lesbian Jews who, once they came out of the closet, were ostracized from the very congregations in which they grew up; where they attended services and became *b'nai* and *b'not mitzvah*, where they were active in the youth group and endeavors of community service, and generally emerged in every area as devoted young Jews.

Along with the revolutionary changes that affected American society in so many areas during the late 1960's and early 1970's, the push for emotional acceptance and legal civil rights on the part of gays and lesbians gathered significant momentum. 1973 was a watershed year, in that it was at this time that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its previous classification as a psychiatric disorder in its *Diagnostic and Statistical*

*Manual of Psychiatric Disorders*.<sup>1</sup> In addition, there were a few Jewish congregations established around the country at that time specifically for gay and lesbian Jews.

During the 1980's, under the bold and forceful leadership of Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler as President, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations began taking definitive positions and specific steps to begin the process of total inclusion of gay and lesbian Jews within the synagogues and institutions of the Reform Movement of Judaism.

During the 1960's and 1970's, as I will describe further in Chapter I, the demographics of the Prospect Heights community were changing to the detriment of Union Temple. The membership was dwindling and the finances were deteriorating. At the same time, a significant gay and lesbian community was growing rapidly in the Park Slope community, which is situated just across Eastern Parkway from Union Temple. During this time, however, Union Temple effectively took no steps to respond to the changing needs of the community that it served, particularly with regard to gay and lesbian Jews. If anything, there was an antipathy at the temple that was communicated to the community with regard to gay and lesbian inclusion. When I arrived at the

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Bayer, *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981), Introduction.

Temple in July of 1992, it became clear to me that this lack of response to communal needs and realities had to be addressed and changed. Thus gay and lesbian inclusion into the life of Union Temple became one of the goals that I set for myself as I began my service to the temple as its rabbi. My commitment to gay and lesbian inclusion in Jewish life in general, however, had begun long before.

My own experience, growing up in a traditional Jewish home, taught me nothing about homosexuality. My parents never mentioned it, neither for good nor for ill. Here and there I would hear the word "faygele"<sup>2</sup> bandied about, particularly in reference to one or two boys I played with who exhibited some characteristics that some people might characterize as "effeminate." However, I had no understanding of any sexual connotations to this. As a serious pianist, deeply immersed in the world of classical music, I had teachers and friends along the way who were gay. In the music world, however, homosexuality tends to be a non-issue in light of the loftier pursuits of artistic perfection and aesthetic beauty. As I grew into young adulthood and became fully aware of what homosexuality meant, I realized that it was simply irrelevant in my circle of friends and colleagues. Similarly, as I became increasingly immersed in the

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"Faygele" is a Yiddish expression which literally means "little bird," but which is colloquially adapted to connote the epithet of "faggot."

Reform Jewish community of New York City, I became quite close with a number of gay people, several rabbis and cantors among them. My relationships with them, and with my musical friends as well, were loving and affectionate, characterized by mutual trust, devotion, respect and admiration. As I drew closer to several friends in particular, we discussed the issue of their being gay often, and at some length. At the time (the mid-1970's) most of my friends in the Jewish world were still in the closet. They felt they could not risk coming out, lest they cause pain and anguish to their families, and put their own professional careers at risk. As a result of these relationships, which I still value above most others in my life, and in light of the kind of love and trust I have shared with these friends, it increasingly began to hurt and offend me personally when people around me would make derogatory and mean-spirited remarks about gays and lesbians. Even people I considered to be intelligent and liberal in most other areas would say things that were so hateful that they themselves should have felt ashamed at speaking in such terms about other human beings. I became increasingly determined to stand up for the rights of my friends in ways that they as yet could not do for themselves.

As a rabbi I resolved within myself to play an active role in contributing whatever I could toward the cessation of such bigotry and narrow-mindedness within the Jewish community toward gay and lesbian Jews. One of the most

significant manifestations of this would be to engage my own congregation in the process of opening itself to full inclusion of gay and lesbian Jews. Insofar as Union Temple had not participated in the UAHC's progression toward inclusion, I made this one of my most specific goals when I arrived there in July of 1992. Thus when faced with having to choose a focus for this Demonstration Project, the goal of gay and lesbian inclusion seemed the most natural.

The process of embracing gay and lesbian Jews into a congregation like Union Temple is a complex and delicate matter, requiring considerable care and thought. It involves a number of issues that may seem irrelevant to the actual focus of this project. Yet, in order for a congregation to become truly open to gay and lesbian Jews, the congregation must effect substantial structural changes. These changes include both administrative technicalities, like rewriting by-laws, and more deeply-rooted changes in attitudes and programming. For a long-established congregation like Union Temple, with its socially and politically conservative history, such changes are difficult. Nevertheless, change can and does occur within this sort of context, if it is effected judiciously, and with a great deal of consensus building. I am certain that unilateral and arbitrary actions on the part of the rabbi would derail the process of change.

During the past seven years of my service as rabbi of the congregation, significant changes have been effected incrementally, in order to create an

inclusive congregation. It is critical to understand the need for this incremental process as I describe the strategies in this project, so that my goal of gay and lesbian inclusion might ultimately be realized.

## CHAPTER I: CONGREGATIONAL HISTORY

Union Temple is the first Jewish congregation to have been established in Brooklyn and Long Island. Its official year of establishment is 1848. As this paper is being written, the congregation is engaged in a year-long 150th anniversary celebration.

The congregation originated in what was known as the Village of Williamsburgh - one of a number of municipalities which, at the time, comprised what we now know as the Borough of Brooklyn.<sup>3</sup> Other such municipalities included: the City of Brooklyn, the Town of Bushwick, the Town of Flatbush, the Town of New Utrecht, the Town of Flatlands, the Town of New Lots, and others. Communication between the towns was difficult; in fact, it was easier to cross the East River to Manhattan than to travel on land through the villages of Brooklyn.

Though Jews had been living in New York since 1654, the polls show that by 1848 the Jewish population was still relatively small. The census of 1850 showed about 50,000 Jews in the United States, out of a total population of

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For this historical overview I have consulted a book published for congregational use during the centennial anniversary of Union Temple in 1948. The book is called, *A Century of Service: Union Temple of Brooklyn*. Though no author is identified, it was published in New York by Hemisphere Press. The book is essentially a bound version of a massive journal that the congregation put together for the purpose of the centennial celebration.



about 23 million. The first Jewish inhabitant of Williamsburgh, one Adolph Baker, settled there in 1837. A handful of Jews followed in subsequent years, crossing over the East River from Manhattan, and settling in the vicinity of lower Grand Street. According to the oral tradition of the congregation, some of the more pious of these early Jewish residents of Williamsburgh would row across the river on Friday afternoons, in order to attend their synagogues and spend Shabbat with their families in Lower Manhattan, and then row back across the river after dark on Saturday evening. By 1846, however, the Jews of Williamsburgh had established themselves as a community, and took to holding Shabbat Services in various private homes. These Jews were of German and Alsatian descent.

Although the official date of Union Temple's founding is 1848, the earliest documentation of the congregation on record only dates back to 1851. At that time, the congregants designated as their "synagogue" the home of Moses Kessel on North Second Street, now known as Marcy Avenue. They named the synagogue "Kahal Kodesh Beth Elohim," and elected as their first officiating minister, David Barnard, who had previously been listed in the Village Directory as a Hebrew teacher. Nathan Klotz was elected the first president. The congregation at first worshiped according to Orthodox ritual.

In 1860, the congregation purchased and remodeled a church building on



South First Street, and subsequently opened a Day School. The Day School offered elementary education in English and German, and included both secular and religious subjects. The school closed when free public education was established in Brooklyn.

Soon K.K. Beth Elohim had outgrown its building, and a new synagogue was built on Keap Street in 1876. For many years it was the largest synagogue in Brooklyn, acquiring the nickname of "The Keap Street Temple." In 1921 the building was sold to another Orthodox congregation.

While K.K. Beth Elohim was growing, a number of Jews in central Brooklyn established a congregation in keeping with the Reform Movement, brought to America by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise. This congregation was founded in 1869, and incorporated the following year under the name of Temple Israel. It worshiped in the Y.M.C.A. building on the corner of Fulton Street and Galatin Place until 1872, when it purchased a former church building on Greene Avenue. In 1891, a magnificent new building was consecrated at the corner of Bedford and Lafayette Avenues, and, in 1901, an additional building for school and youth activities was added. Temple Israel built a reputation as one of the finest synagogues in the Eastern United States. It flourished under the rabbinic leadership of such giants as Rabbi Leon Harrison, later of St. Louis, and Rabbi Martin A. Meyer, later of San Francisco. Also among the congregation's rabbis

were Rabbi Nathan Krass and Rabbi Judah Leon Magnes, each of whom subsequently was called to the pulpit of Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York. Dr. Magnes ultimately went on to become the founder and president of Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

As Temple Israel grew in size and stature, K.K. Beth Elohim continued to flourish as well, eventually adopting the reforms introduced into American Jewry by Isaac Mayer Wise. During the tenure of Rabbi Isaac Schwab in the mid-1870's, and in response to the wishes of many of the younger congregants, K.K. Beth Elohim adopted as its official prayer book, *Minhag America*, authored by Dr. Wise, who by that time had established himself in Cincinnati as a giant in the building of the Reform Movement of Judaism. He became the founding rabbi of the Isaac Mayer Wise Temple on Plum Street, the founder and first president of the Hebrew Union College, for the training of Reform rabbis in America, and the founder of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which is the congregational brain trust of the Reform Movement in North America.

Both congregations, Temple Israel and K.K. Beth Elohim, had prominent and active memberships. They were active in all areas of communal endeavor. They created various agencies of Jewish philanthropy in Brooklyn, such as: the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, the Jewish Hospital, the Brooklyn Federation of

Jewish Charities (which later merged with the Federation of Jewish of Jewish Philanthropies), the Hebrew Educational Society, the Hebrew Free Loan Society, and the Ladies' Hebrew Benevolent Society.

In 1921 Temple Israel and K.K. Beth Elohim decided to merge into a single Reform congregation, and incorporated into what is now known as "Union Temple of Brooklyn." By that time, the center of Brooklyn Jewry had shifted away from Williamsburgh, and moved westward toward Flatbush. The newly-merged congregation decided to build a new home at 17 Eastern Parkway. The newly-built eleven-story community house was dedicated on the eve of Sukkot in 1929. It was also in 1929 that Dr. Sidney S. Tedesche began his long and distinguished ministry as rabbi of Union Temple. Once the community house was dedicated, a grand-scale sanctuary had been planned for the corner of Eastern Parkway and Plaza Street. Unfortunately, the stock market crash in 1929 necessitated cancellation of those plans, and a parking lot for use by Temple members was built instead. Thus, a theater on the lobby level of the existing building was converted into a sanctuary in 1942, and modeled after the Temple in Essen, Germany.

The temple is situated in what used to be considered a prime location in Brooklyn. Across the street from the temple is the Brooklyn Library, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. The Grand Army

Plaza is a large traffic circle, built around an impressive arch, branching off into numerous boulevards and Prospect Park from its various directions. The planners of the entire Plaza area intended for the scheme to be reminiscent of the Champs Elysees in Paris. They succeeded.

During the Second World War, Union Temple continued its tradition of community service by transforming the Sisterhood Sewing Group into the Red Cross Workshop, which produced thousands of surgical dressings. The community house opened its doors to over 5,000 men and women in the armed services. There was also a Red Cross Blood Bank Station. Throughout the war years, the temple held itself in a state of readiness as an Emergency Disaster Relief Center. In addition, a number of congregants served in the armed forces, nine of whom made the supreme sacrifice.

Until approximately the 1960's Union Temple enjoyed a large and flourishing membership. Because of its prime location, that area of Eastern Parkway was, at the time, home to the wealthy and powerful of Brooklyn society. The street was lined with numerous physicians' offices, and the like. Most of the Jews in this social elite belonged to Union Temple, including a number of professionally and politically prominent individuals. For instance, two of the former presidents were Colonel Arthur Levitt and Judge Emil Baar. Colonel David Marcus, who was instrumental in mounting the offensive toward

Jerusalem during the War of Independence, was also a member, and his funeral was held at the temple in 1948. In 1964, a distinguished scholar and leader of the Reform rabbinate, Rabbi A. Stanley Dreyfus, was called to the pulpit, where he served with distinction until 1980. At the time of Dr. Dreyfus's arrival, the temple's coffers were full, and a sizable endowment seemed to secure the congregation's future.

By the early 1960's, however, the neighborhood of Prospect Heights began to "change." A sizable Haitian community began to move in, and the American black community of Bedford Stuyvesant also began to expand in the direction of Eastern Parkway. As is the classic story, once this transformation of the neighborhood took hold, many of the wealthy Jews who had belonged to Union Temple began to leave the area. Many moved eastward onto Long Island, some of them even naming their new temples and communities with derivatives of the ones they had left behind in Brooklyn. Many moved to other areas in the tri-state area. There is now also a sizable community of former Union Temple members living in Florida. In a relatively short period of time, the Union Temple community was decimated. From a membership of almost a thousand families, its ranks diminished to a few hundred. A small membership now had to shoulder the increasing burdens of a large and aging building. Expenses were mounting. During the 1970's the decision was made to

relinquish control of the upper three floors of the building to the Eastern Athletic Club, giving club membership discounts to temple members. Also, the fifth floor of the building has continuously been rented out to a series of nursery schools. During this protracted crisis, the leaders of the congregation, feeling that they had no other choice, continued to invade the principal of the temple's endowment, and by now have exhausted virtually the entire amount.

During the past twenty years, the temple has endured further insults to its stability. Since 1980, there has been an unduly rapid turnover in rabbinic leadership. When I arrived in 1992, I was the sixth rabbi in twelve years. Some of the rabbinic departures caused further losses in membership, as a number of members left in anger.

The temple's position is further compromised by its location. Once a prime location in Brooklyn, the area has now become a liability. First of all, during the 1980's, as the Prospect Heights community continued to deteriorate, the community of Park Slope underwent massive gentrification and repopulation, mostly to the benefit of Congregation Beth Elohim, a Reform temple located on Garfield Place and 8th Avenue, in the heart of Park Slope.<sup>4</sup> That temple is now flourishing under stable and aggressive rabbinic leadership.

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<sup>4</sup> This temple is not related to the original K.K. Beth Elohim that merged with Temple Israel to form Union Temple.



Secondly, a considerable number of Park Slope residents have expressed anxiety and reluctance about crossing the Grand Army Plaza over to Eastern Parkway; and indeed, the Plaza is an extremely dangerous traffic circle, for pedestrians and vehicular traffic alike. In addition, the arrangements made with the nursery school that now occupies the fifth floor of the building are hanging by a thread, further threatening the financial stability of the congregation.

It is easy to see, then, that Union Temple, once the jewel of Brooklyn Jewry, is engaged in a struggle for its very survival, and ought to be as open and creative as possible, in my estimation, to ideas and methods of attaining a more substantial membership base.

With all of these factors present, I have found one additional factor to be perhaps the most difficult in the equation from my vantage point as the rabbi. That is the way in which the lay leadership is structured. In the generations of affluence for the temple, power tended to be concentrated in the hands of a small group of individuals, with strong and characteristically dictatorial presidents at the helm. There are no restrictions in the by-laws about the length of time that one may serve as president, and typically the presidents served for a minimum of four or five years, and frequently more. These terms were determined solely by their own desires, or, in two recent cases, until their deaths in the middle of their terms of office.

There were a number of expectations placed upon the members of the Board of Trustees as well. First of all, the trustees were expected to shoulder substantial financial responsibilities over and above their membership dues. Secondly, congregants were only given the opportunity to join the board after "proving" themselves to those in power by working their way up the ranks for many years. In addition, because the temple is now in such financial straits, it has existed for the past two decades without the support of a temple administrator. Thus, the existing power bloc has created the myth that the president must also effectively become the administrator. According to this mythology, the president must be a retiree, because only such a person would have the time that would be necessary to do "everything."

After a very short time of service to the temple, I became convinced that the system of leadership I have described was no longer functioning effectively. First of all, the existing power bloc was essentially the same one that had existed for at least thirty years, with no desire to relinquish its power. In fact, various individuals within this bloc had expressed negativity about "younger people coming in and taking over." Secondly, this power bloc still spoke longingly of the temple's "glory days," and envisioned a good future for the temple as being one which will return it to "its former glory." A group of younger people had begun to emerge, largely through my coaxing and courting, and they indeed are



my supporters as well. Thus I found myself walking a tightrope between my conviction, on the one hand, that these younger people had to begin to participate in an expanded leadership structure, and my understanding, on the other, that the older group of power brokers must not be alienated, either from a political or moral point of view. In other words, there had been, to borrow a familiar phrase of contemporary coinage, a serious "generation gap" at the temple. Nevertheless, over the past few years, there has been a significant transition in leadership, both in style and in personnel. Many in this younger generation have now succeeded in positioning themselves to assume roles of greater responsibility, as they simultaneously endeavor to create an atmosphere in which responsibility is more easily shared by a larger number of people. The most recent installation of officers and trustees represents the most significant shift in the leadership of the temple since the post-War period. The Board of Trustees now more fully reflects the cross-section of constituencies and age groups, both in the temple, and out in the community whose residents we seek to attract.

## CHAPTER II: THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

### A. Biblical Material

For the religious community that takes the Bible seriously, the issue of homosexuality is one of the most disturbing and persistent in all of Scripture.

Gomes describes the conflict as one which:

“engages us at our most fundamental level of existence and raises disturbing questions about our own sense of identity, of morality, and of the nature of settled truth.”<sup>5</sup>

Gomes further observes:

“Given the appeal to the Bible in the case against homosexuality, one would assume that Bible has much to say on the subject. It has not. The subject of homosexuality is not mentioned in the Ten Commandments, nor in the Summary of the Law. No prophet discourses on the subject... One has to look rather hard, and with a user-friendly concordance, to find any mention of homosexuality at all. This should come as no surprise, because the word *homosexuality* itself is an invention of the late nineteenth century and does not occur in any of the original manuscripts from which the English Bible is descended.”<sup>6</sup>

John Boswell, in his study, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, provides further justification for Gomes' observation:

“In spite of misleading English translations which may imply the contrary, the word ‘homosexual’ does not occur in the Bible; no extant text or manuscript, Hebrew, Greek, Syrian or Aramaic, contains such a word. In fact none of these languages ever contained a word corresponding to

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<sup>5</sup> Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book* (Avon Books: New York, 1996), 144.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 147-8.

the English 'homosexual,' nor did any language have such a term before the late nineteenth century."<sup>7</sup>

In light of this fact, we are obliged to look more closely at the text in order that we might understand what it is really saying.<sup>8</sup>

The two verses regarding homosexuality which are most volatile, and most often quoted, come from Leviticus.<sup>9</sup> They are as follows:

Leviticus 18.22

"Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence."

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 - their bloodguilt is upon them."

It is sadly ironic that Reform Jews, who generally do not accept the Torah as the literal word of God, often point to these two verses nevertheless, as one of their justifications for wanting to keep gay and lesbian Jews out of their congregations.

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John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1980), 92.

8

For this comparison of terms I have used the Mandelkern Concordance: R/Shlomo Mandelkern, *Concordantia L'Tanakh* (Jerusalem: Schukan, 1972).

9

The English translations of all biblical excerpts in this paper are taken from *The Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

Reform Jews, for whom the laws of *kashruth*<sup>10</sup> are irrelevant, for whom the ban on *shatnez*<sup>11</sup> is absurd, for whom slavery is outmoded and immoral, are the very same Jews who turn around and quote these verses in Leviticus as immutable and beyond questioning! This is unacceptable within the Reform community. If our adherents are going to reject divine authorship of the Torah, and thus absolute literal acceptance thereof, they cannot invoke the very same document as the literal word of God in order to rationalize their fear and bigotry with regard to gay and lesbian people. If we are going to base our study of Torah upon a critical understanding of the times and settings in which it was written, in our attempt to distinguish the spirit of the law from the letter of the law, then we are obliged to be consistent in that approach. That is why it is imperative for myself and my colleagues, as rabbis and teachers, to be able to address the arguments that our people will present to us. This argument over “abominations” is a popular one indeed. Our problem as Reform Jews, however, is to understand the precise meaning of the original verses themselves,

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*Kashruth* is an umbrella term referring to dietary laws observed by Jews. In the Torah specifically there are prohibitions on eating the meat of certain types of animals and fish, as well as the way in which the meat may be cooked. See Exodus 22.30, Leviticus 11.1-44ff, Deuteronomy 14.3-20.

11

*Shatnez* means “mixture.” This refers to the prohibition on sowing one’s field with mixed seeds, and wearing clothing made of mixed threads; most commonly, linen and wool. See Leviticus 19.19; Deuteronomy 22.11.

and place them into the context of the time and milieu in which they were written.

The Hebrew word in question in these two verses is תועבה. Though the new Jewish Publication Society translation<sup>12</sup> renders it as “abhorrence,” or “abhorrent thing,” is most commonly translated as “abomination.”<sup>13</sup> In order for us to understand the true meaning of תועבה, we must examine its usage in other Biblical contexts, in addition to the context of the original verses of Leviticus themselves.

Remember that the first statement, in Leviticus 18.22, immediately follows an injunction in 18.21 regarding Molech worship. Molech was one of the prominent gods in the ancient Canaanite pantheon, of which Baal was the highest. Apparently his worshipers called him “Melech,” which is a Hebrew word meaning “king.” In Jewish Scripture, however, his name is vocalized so as to render the pronunciation identical with *boshet*, meaning “shame.” Molech worshipers would sacrifice children by passing them through fire as an offering to the god. The verse immediately preceding the ban on men lying with men reads as follows:

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<sup>12</sup> See Note 8 above.

<sup>13</sup>

*The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1966).

Leviticus 18.21

"Do not allow any of your offspring to be offered up to Molech, and do not profane the name of your God: I am the Lord."

Clearly the issue here in verse 21 with which the author of Leviticus is concerned is worship of foreign gods; in this case, Molech. Further on in the chapter we read the following:

Leviticus 18.24-30

"24) Do not defile yourselves in any of those ways, for it is by such that the nations that I am casting out before you defiled themselves. 25) Thus the land became defiled; and I called it to account for its iniquity, and the land spewed out its inhabitants. 26) But you must keep My laws and My rules, and you must not do any of those abhorrent things (תועבות), neither the citizen nor the stranger who resides among you; 27) for all those abhorrent things (תועבות) were done by the people who were in the land before you, and the land became defiled. 28) So let not the land spew you out for defiling it, as it spewed out the nation the came before you. 29) All who do any of those abhorrent things (תועבות), - such persons shall be cut off from their people. 30) You shall keep My charge not to engage in any of the abhorrent practices (תועבות) that were carried on before you, and you shall not defile yourselves through them: I the Lord am your God."

Deuteronomy 12.31 states that the Canaanites burned their children as an offering to their gods, but does not mention Molech.<sup>14</sup> Neither does the name appear in Deuteronomy 18.10, which forbids the Israelites to make their

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<sup>14</sup>

W. Gunther Plaut, ed. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: UAHC Press, 1981), 883.



sons and daughters 'pass through the fire.'<sup>15</sup> In Jeremiah we read the following:

Jeremiah 7.30-31

"30) For the people of Judah have done what displeases Me - declares the Lord. They have set up their abominations (תועבות) in the House which is called by My name, and they have defiled it. 31) And they have built the shrines of Topheth in the Valley of Ben-hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in fire - which I never commanded, which never came to My mind."

It is imperative, then, that we view the word תועבה in the original Leviticus passage, which follows directly after an injunction against Molech worship, as one in a list of injunctions against behavior that imitates the non-Israelite nations which surrounded Israel in the Ancient Near East. All these behaviors are characterized as תועבות.

Further evidence of this can be found in Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 23.18-19:

"18) No Israelite woman shall be a cult prostitute, nor shall any Israelite man be a cult prostitute. 19) You shall not bring the fee of a whore or the pay of a dog<sup>16</sup> into the house of the Lord your God in fulfillment of any vow, for both are abhorrent to the Lord your God."

In this case the pagan practice of cultic prostitution is referred to as a תועבה, "abhorrent,"<sup>15</sup> or "abomination." The same term is used throughout the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>

The word כלב does mean "dog" in the literal sense. In this context, however, it becomes synonymous with "whore."

Holiness Code<sup>17</sup> with regard to such practices as: trimming the corners of one's beard,<sup>18</sup> incest,<sup>19</sup> the mixed planting of seeds, wearing clothing made of mixed threads,<sup>20</sup> eating the meat of swine,<sup>21</sup> and the like. Furthermore, there are two additional words in this passage from Deuteronomy that make it clear that the subject is cultic prostitution. The first of these words is קדש (m) or קדשה (f). This word is used in the Biblical period to describe a ritual prostitute identified with the Canaanite cult.<sup>22</sup> Most probably this practice of cultic prostitution seeped into the Israelite population from the surrounding Canaanite culture during the early monarchy.<sup>23</sup> This practice was most likely tolerated during the reign of King Rehoboam, the son of an Ammonite mother,<sup>24</sup> though his grandson Asa sought to purge the Israelite cult of the practice, as did his great-

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<sup>17</sup> The "Holiness Code" begins with Chapter 17 of Leviticus.

<sup>18</sup> Leviticus 19.27

<sup>19</sup> Leviticus 18.6-17

<sup>20</sup> See note 10 above.

<sup>21</sup> See note 9 above.

<sup>22</sup>

Norman Lamm, "Judaism and the Modern Attitude to Homosexuality," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica Yearbook* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1974), 196.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> I Kings 14.24



grandson Jehoshaphat.<sup>25</sup> However it was not until the Josianic reforms of the seventh century that the קדש and קדשה were successfully removed from the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>26</sup> Returning to the Deuteronomy passage (21.18-19), the words תועבה and קדשה(ה) also appear in context with the word זונה, or “whore,” which is blatantly indicative that the subject here was prostitution. It is through word comparison, then, in numerous contexts throughout the Tanakh, that the term תועבה emerges clearly as an “abomination” in the sense of any practice which imitates the idolatrous practices of surrounding nations.

Jeremiah, the last major prophet in Judah before the Babylonian Destruction, warns his people against following in the ways of other peoples, and worshiping their gods:

Jeremiah 7.9-11

“9)Will you steal and murder and commit adultery and swear falsely, and sacrifice to Baal, and follow other gods whom you have not experienced, 10)and then come and stand before Me in this House which bears My name and say, ‘We are safe?’ - [Safe] to do all these abhorrent things (תועבות)! 11)Do you consider this House, which bears My name, to be a den of thieves? As for Me, I have been watching - declares the Lord.”

Clearly the use of the term תועבה in this context is directly related to Israel's idolatry, and mimicry of non-Israelite practices in general, and to Canaanite cultic practices most specifically, but not to anything having to do with

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<sup>25</sup> I Kings 15.12

<sup>26</sup> II Kings 23.7

homosexuality.

The use of the term תועבה in the context of non-Israelite practices is particularly stark in the metaphorical language of Ezekiel. In condemning Israel for its idolatrous practices the prophet delivers the following condemnation:

Ezekiel 16.45-50

“45) You are the daughter of your mother, who rejected her husband and children. And you are the sister of your sisters, who rejected their husbands and children; for you are daughters of a Hittite mother and an Amorite father. 46) Your elder sister was Samaria, who lived with her daughters to the north of you; your younger sister was Sodom, who lived with her daughters to the south of you. 47) Did you not walk in their ways and practice their abominations (תועבות)? 48) Why, you were almost more corrupt than they in all your ways. As I live - declares the Lord God - your sister Sodom and her daughters did not do what you and your daughters did. 49) Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy. 50) In their haughtiness, they committed abomination (תועבה) before Me; and so I removed them, as you saw. “

The second verse in Leviticus (20.13) is also contained within the Holiness Code.

Gomes says:

“It is clear that this so-called Holiness Code is designed to provide a standard of moral behavior that will distinguish the Jews from the Canaanites, whose land they have been given by God. The price of the land, as it were, is a new standard of behavior. The Jews are not to worship the Canaanite god Molech, nor to adopt any of the practices of the people who do. The sentence to be carried out when this Holiness Code is violated is death...

"These rules are designed for a very particular purpose and in a very particular setting. Their purpose is nation building; their setting is the entry into a promised by very foreign land."<sup>27</sup>

What ought to be clear to us, as members of contemporary society as well as followers of Reform Judaism, is that homosexuality, as we now understand it, was unknown in the Biblical period. Homosexuality as a way of being; as an inherent sexual identity, was unknown to the Ancient Israelite world, as was the concept of a homosexual loving relationship. The primary concern for the biblical authors was the behavior of individuals they believed to be heterosexual - the performance of certain acts by these individuals which mimicked the ways of the idolatrous Canaanites and other surrounding nations. If we can examine dispassionately laws of *kashruth*, *shatnez*, slavery, and the like, then we must examine just as dispassionately the laws condemning acts of a sexual nature between men.

Gomes:

"The biblical writers never contemplated a form of homosexuality in which loving, monogamous, and faithful persons sought to live out the implications of the gospel with as much fidelity to it as any heterosexual believer."<sup>28</sup> All they knew of homosexuality was prostitution, pederasty, lasciviousness, and exploitation. These vices, as we know, are not unknown among heterosexuals, and to define contemporary homosexuals only in these terms is a cultural slander of the highest order, reflecting not

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<sup>27</sup> Gomes, op. cit., 153.

<sup>28</sup> Although Gomes is speaking as a Christian theologian, the parallel is clear.

so much prejudice, which it surely does, but what the Roman Catholic Church calls 'invincible ignorance,' which all of the Christian piety and charity in the world can do little to conceal. The 'problem,' of course, is not the Bible, it is the Christians who read it."<sup>29</sup>

## B. Rabbinic Material

Post-biblical halakhic literature contains relatively few references to male homosexual acts. The talmudic term generally used for sodomy is **משכב זכר**. The Torah uses this term to connote heterosexual intercourse.<sup>30</sup> And, of course, the original passage, Leviticus 18.22, uses the term **משכב אישה** to connote homosexual intercourse.

The Mishnah teaches that R. Judah forbade two bachelors from sleeping under the same blanket, lest this lead to homosexual temptation.<sup>31</sup> In the Talmud, however, two males under the blanket was permitted, because it was thought that homosexuality was so rare among Jews that such legislation was unnecessary.<sup>32</sup> The Rambam codified this into the Mishneh Torah as law.<sup>33</sup> Some four centuries later, R. Joseph Caro did not codify this law regarding

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>30</sup> Numbers 31.17, 35

<sup>31</sup> Kiddushin 4.14

<sup>32</sup> *Kiddushin* 82a

<sup>33</sup> *Yad, Issurei Bi'ah* 22:2

sodomy in the Shulchan Arukh, but did caution against one male's being alone with another, in light of the lewdness that prevailed in those times.<sup>34</sup> In the Tur however, some 100 years later, R. Joel Sirkes reverted back to the original ruling, suspending the prohibition on the grounds that "such obscene acts were unheard of amongst Polish Jewry."<sup>35</sup>

On the subject of homosexual acts among women the *halakha* tends to be more lenient. It classified lesbianism in the category of אִסּוּרֵי נִסְיָא, ordinary religious violations, rather than עֲרִיּוֹת, which are specifically sexual transgressions. Male homosexual behavior falls into the category of עֲרִיּוֹת.<sup>36</sup> A lesbian is even permitted to marry a priest!<sup>37</sup> The issue at hand for the *halakha* is that there is no specific biblical injunction against lesbian sexual relations, since these relations do not entail intercourse.<sup>38</sup>

In considering material from the early Rabbinic period, we also must remember that the sages of the Tannaitic period lived against the backdrop of the Greco-Roman

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<sup>34</sup> *Even ha-Ezer* 24

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*Bayit Chadash* to Tur, *Even ha-Ezer* 24; see also: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, op.cit., 197.

<sup>36</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, op.cit., 197.

<sup>37</sup> Sifra 9:8, *Shab.* 65a, *Yev.* 76a.

<sup>38</sup> Maimonides, *Yad, Issurei Bi'ah* 21.8).

world, which recognized homosexual relationships as part of its own social fabric. This teaches us that we cannot view any cultural phenomenon outside of the historical context of which it is a part. This of course applies to every period of history, including our own time.

### **C. Reform Perspective**

Since its inception, the Reform Movement has sought to harmonize our ancient Jewish tradition with the ever-changing world of modernity. We do not view the Torah as the literal word of God; but rather, as the product of human hands, written over approximately a 600-year period, and redacted at the beginning of the 5th century B.C.E. Consequently, we have to understand it as being reflective of rituals, mores, and institutions of the times and places in which it was written. We seek to understand those commandments of the Torah which are eternal and binding in their morality upon all generations. In addition, we evaluate those rituals and concepts which no longer have any direct bearing upon the society and time in which we live. In addition, we welcome knowledge from the secular sphere that will enhance our understanding of our responsibilities as human beings and as Jews.

In light of the studies, personal experiences, and attitudinal changes that have transpired over the past three decades in our society, we as Reform Jews



can no longer justify the vilification, fear, and ostracism of those men and women in our community who are gay and lesbian. Our developing knowledge has taught us that sexual orientation is natural and normal to each person, whether heterosexual or homosexual. Our developing theology, therefore, leads us to an understanding and appreciation of each human being as having been created by God. Therefore it would be arrogant and misguided for us to pass judgment upon anyone who does not conform to prior generations' understanding of sexual normality. on the contrary, it is our responsibility to embrace all Jews within our midst, regardless of their sexual orientation, as together we discover the ways in which we can live out our mission on this earth as Jews, in order to bring to fruition our vision of a more just and compassionate society for all of God's children.

As Jews we have always been concerned with the commandment of procreation.<sup>39</sup> This is one of the arguments that many have used in trying to justify discrimination against gays and lesbians. Clearly this argument is specious. As Reform Jews we do not deny a place in our congregations to those who are unable to bear children. We do not deny a place for those who have adopted children, or who have entered into parenthood through various

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According to Genesis 1.28, the first instruction that God gave to humankind was to "be fruitful and multiply."

alternative means. The same standard ought to apply to gay and lesbian Jews who create families within their lives; and, in many instances, find ways to become parents, and raise their children with love, responsibility, and a devotion to Judaism and the Jewish People. Martha Ackelsberg observes:

"I look specifically at the politics of families - the nature and consequences of the ideological use of family in the Jewish community, and what it might mean to open up that definition, and the potential contribution gay and lesbian families make to strengthening the Jewish community."<sup>40</sup>

Ackelsberg continues:

"Judaism has long recognized that generativity comes in many forms and guises. As Susan Handelman has noted, 'Jewish tradition holds that one who teaches another's child is as if s/he gave birth to that child.' Teachers, community leaders, those who care for the young, the old, the sick, all make their contribution to the vitality and continuity of the community. Gays and lesbians have long been active (although all-too-often closeted!), both in the Jewish community and in the larger secular world, as teachers, social service workers, and community supporters. They have made major contributions to culture and to religious life as rabbis, cantors, artists, songwriters, poets, writers and critics. All of these are models for contributing to the continuity of the community - models that could be followed by heterosexual as well as nonheterosexual people, with or without children. Expanding our notion of what constitutes generativity can only benefit all of us."<sup>41</sup>

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Martha Ackelsberg, "Redefining Family," in *Twice Blessed*, eds. Christie Balka & Andy Rose (Beacon Press: Boston, 1989) 115.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.



Traditional sources have concentrated on issues of idolatry, abomination, and procreation, in condemning homosexual behavior. However, a more liberal perspective may justifiably look to other concepts in the Torah in order to support gay and lesbian inclusion in Jewish life. The first of those is the admonition which is repeated numerous times throughout the Torah: "You shall not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, the experience of a stranger is one which has been foisted upon the gay and lesbian community by heterosexual Jews. Lev Raphael describes this experience:

"Alienated for so long from other Jews, deeply divided about my own homosexuality, I have felt myself twice strange: Jewish in the gay community, gay in the Jewish community. In each, different, lesser, ashamed. But living with and loving a Jewish man, exploring our Jewishness and gayness together, have made it possible for me to do what Evelyn Beck has called exceeding 'the limits of what was permitted to the marginal.'"<sup>43</sup>

Certainly the experience of the stranger is one which Jewish people have endured in every generation of our history. As the objects of fear, prejudice, hatred, persecution, ostracism, and death, we, of all people, ought to be sensitive and vigilant in trying to prevent that experience from victimizing

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<sup>42</sup> Leviticus 19.33-34, and elsewhere.

<sup>43</sup>

Lev Raphael, "To Be A Jew," in *Wrestling With Angels*, ed. Brian Bouldrey. (Riverhead Books: New York, 1995), 47.

anyone else, especially those among our own people.<sup>44</sup>

The second concept is found virtually at the beginning of the Torah. That is that notion that we human beings were created **בצלם אלהים**, in the divine image.<sup>45</sup> As such, we are obligated to live out our lives in the way that is truest to the way in which God created us. To deny the sexual orientation; our own or anyone else's, is to deny God's creative power itself.

One of the voices of modern theology I find to be most compelling on issues of homosexual inclusion, and of egalitarianism in general, is that of Dr. Judith Plaskow. Plaskow writes:

"If we see sexuality as part of what enables us to reach out beyond ourselves, and thus as a fundamental ingredient in our spirituality, then the issue of homosexuality must be placed in a different context from those in which it is most often discussed. The question of the morality of homosexuality becomes one not of Jewish law, or the right to privacy, or freedom of choice, but a question of the affirmation of the value to the individual and society of each of us being able to find that place within ourselves where sexuality and spirituality come together. It is possible that some or many of us for whom the connections between sexuality and deeper sources of personal and spiritual power emerge most richly, or only, with those of the same sex could choose to lead heterosexual lives for the sake of conformity to Jewish law or wider social pressures and values. But this choice would then be a violation of the deeper vision offered by the Jewish tradition that sexuality can be a medium for the experience and reunification of God.

"Thus what calls itself the Jewish path to holiness in sexual relations is for

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<sup>44</sup> See my High Holy Day Sermon, "The Fruits of Bigotry," Appendix B

<sup>45</sup> Genesis 1.26-28

some a cutting off of holiness - a sacrifice that comes a high cost for both the individual and community."<sup>46</sup>

Those of us in the Reform Movement of Judaism owe it to those among our people who are gay and lesbian to right the wrongs of past generations. We owe it not only to them, but to ourselves, and to God. That is the theology of inclusion upon which we have acted for almost two decades. But there is still much to be done.

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<sup>46</sup>

Judith Plaskow, "Toward A New Theology of Sexuality," in Balka & Rose, *op. cit.*, 150.

### CHAPTER III: PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES

Jewish tradition, both in its biblical foundations and rabbinic development, is generally interpreted as being quite negative with regard to homosexuality. Thus religion tends to become a convenient excuse for many Jews in their reluctance to open their congregations to gay and lesbian Jews. As a rabbi I am obligated to address the tradition, which I have done at Union Temple in the contexts of sermons, adult education seminars, Torah discussion groups, and the like. I have addressed some of the most salient legal issues in the previous chapter of this paper. Nevertheless, I believe that there are more deeply-seated issues, psychological in origin, which are more difficult to address than the religious ones, particularly within the context of a Reform congregation.<sup>47</sup> These issues are frequently sources of intense fear and apprehension on the part of congregants; and of course, of the society at large. I believe it is valid for me to summarize the whole constellation of fears, false beliefs, apprehensions, and misconceptions, as symptoms of the *real* problem, homophobia. I believe that it is homophobia which ultimately drives members

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As I have already stated, the Reform movement, after all, does not view the Bible as the literal word of God, but as a product of human development, reflective of mores, customs, and institutions of the times and places in which it was written. Furthermore, halakhic development is peripheral at best in the minds of most members of Reform congregations, as Reform Judaism does not govern itself through the halakhic system.

of congregations to resist taking the necessary steps to make their congregations truly inclusive and "safe" for gay and lesbian Jews. Nevertheless, when confronted with the accusation of homophobia, most ordinary Jewish congregants tend to become defensive, and their own denial comes to the fore. At Union Temple, it has been important for me to remember that, for the most part, I am dealing with highly educated, highly intelligent, professionally accomplished individuals, who would not, and do not, take kindly to being characterized as "homophobic." That is the primary reason that I have found it necessary to deepen my own understanding of the dynamics of homophobia, in order to understand its manifestations in ordinary daily behavior, as well as in discussions about the prospect of gay and lesbian inclusiveness within our congregation. What I have discovered in the course of my readings on the subject, is that while even I thought myself to be fairly "enlightened" in this arena, in fact I too, as someone who is basically an outsider to the gay community, have been laboring under my own misconceptions and prejudices about the lives of gay and lesbian people. This realization has only reinforced my belief that one of the keys to opening any congregation is education; through personal testimony, readings, courses and discussions, and indeed, incremental exposure to, and relationships with, people who are gay and lesbian.

The person who is credited with coining the term "homophobia" is Dr. George Weinberg, in his book, *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*.<sup>48</sup> Weinberg says, "I am describing a clear-cut but prevalent form of phobia."<sup>49</sup> He defines the phenomenon as "the revulsion toward homosexuals and often the desire to inflict punishment as retribution."<sup>50</sup> Weinberg thinks of homophobia as "a disease... an attitude held by many non-homosexuals and perhaps by the majority of homosexuals in countries where there is discrimination against homosexuals."<sup>51</sup> But this particular "disease," as Weinberg views it, is destructive not only to homosexuals, but to the heterosexuals who suffer from it: "I would never consider a patient healthy unless he had overcome his prejudice against homosexuality."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Weinberg continues, a person's "repugnance at homosexuality is certain to be harmful to him."<sup>53</sup> Weinberg describes a case in which a father whose son has

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<sup>48</sup>

George Weinberg, *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1992).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>51</sup> Weinberg, op. cit., Preface.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



just "come out" to him begins to assault his son physically.<sup>54</sup> But Weinberg observes an inconsistency with this reaction if one is to accept most experts' opinions that homosexuals are disturbed:

"If we liken homosexuality to an illness, the father's distress looks reasonable. We expect despair and hair-pulling when someone close to us is desperately ill. But why his assault? One does not assault someone merely because he is ill. One assaults him because one is mortally afraid of him."<sup>55</sup>

I find this observation fascinating, because it bears unmistakable parallels to the ways in which people often behave in the face of physical illness. In my pastoral role as a rabbi, as in my personal experiences with illness, I have often heard and seen people express and manifest fear of the person who is ill. I remember one incident in particular in which I was visiting a congregant in her 30's who was dying of cancer. One of her family members, also in her 30's, could not bring herself to be in the room with this young woman by herself. She needed an additional person in there with her, almost as though she needed protection. I wondered what it was, exactly, that she felt she needed to be protected from. Was it the illness itself? Was it the dying woman, who had suddenly been transformed in the mind of her cousin into someone who was dangerous in some way? Was it that the sight of someone so much like herself

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 4.

in age, family relationship, and experience, who was now about to die from a fatal disease, was too powerful a reminder of her own mortality? "After all," she may have thought on some level, "if this young woman could get cancer, perhaps *I* could get cancer as well."

In an unrelated incident, I once had the experience of actually being scolded by a colleague of mine (another rabbi, about my age) during the course of a conversation, for even *mentioning* the word "cancer" in front of his wife, who was pregnant at the time. It was as though even the mere mention of the word carried with it some powerful demonic force that potentially could have harmed his wife or his unborn child!

In fact the shunning of people from ordinary social intercourse with family and friends does not end at physical illness. For instance, it is commonplace for a newly-divorced or widowed woman, slowly but surely, to be inched out of her social circle. Such a person reminds people of sadness and loss. In addition, such a woman herself is often perceived to be a *threat* to the stability of her friends' marriages. Furthermore, groups generally establish their own patterns of socialization. Married couples tend to socialize with other married couples. A single woman is now perceived not to "fit in" with the established patterns, and is thus intentionally excluded.

How much the more so then, does this phenomenon manifest itself in the face of gay and lesbian people trying to live ordinary lives in a predominantly heterosexual world! The mythical belief that homosexuality could potentially "rub off" on a straight person, simply through personal contact, or even the mere mention of the word, indicates the level of fear and misinformation that all too many heterosexuals harbor about gays.

Furthermore, people who are shunned by their friends, family, or society in general for any reason, are often inclined to internalize the very prejudices which victimize them. Thus they begin to view themselves as outcasts in one way or another. Thus homophobia, to be specific, is not restricted to the heterosexual world.

Weinberg observes:

"It is not surprising that homosexuals themselves often suffer from the conventional attitude of revulsion and anger toward things homosexual... a condemnation of self."<sup>56</sup>

What I find most important about Weinberg's thesis is that generally in America it is homosexuality that is considered the problem. Weinberg, however, redirects our thinking toward an understanding that it is not homosexuality; but rather, homophobia that is the *real* problem. Weinberg illustrates various ways in which the problem of homophobia permeates all areas

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<sup>56</sup> Weinberg, op.cit., Preface.

of our lives. He describes:

“a certain cost in suffering from any phobia, and that is that the inhibition spreads to a whole circle of acts related to the feared activity, in reality or symbolically.”<sup>57</sup>

I have had my own personal experience as someone who, from childhood, has experienced a phobia with regard to dogs. While this may seem amusing to some at first blush, I can testify to the intrusiveness of a phobia upon the life of the one who experiences it. I have often refrained from visiting certain people in their homes because I know that they have dogs. Sometimes I will not enter a home until the dog is locked away, thus exacerbating my own feelings of embarrassment and guilt, and hampering my ability to function comfortably in certain social situations. When I was younger I would take long detours, often crossing the street in dangerous situations, just to avoid having to walk past a dog coming in my direction. Even the jingle of keys has sometimes produced a weakness in my knees or caused me to hyperventilate, because I associate this sound with the jingle of a dog's chain. Clearly, a phobia like this can affect so many areas of one's life; and in extreme cases, become an obsessive preoccupation. Weinberg reinforces this observation:

“When a phobia incapacitates a person from engaging in activities considered decent by a society, the person himself is the sufferer. He loses out on the chance to go skiing perhaps, if it is acrophobia, or the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 5.

chance to take the elevator to the street each day if it is claustrophobia.<sup>58</sup> With regard to homophobia, Weinberg explains, "Here the phobia appears as antagonism directed toward a particular group of people. Inevitably, it leads to disdain of those people, and to mistreatment of them."<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore:

"acts imagined to be conducive to homosexual feelings, or that are reminiscent of homosexual acts, are shunned."<sup>60</sup>

There is an often imperceptible dividing line between fear and prejudice. I am convinced that people who exhibit what society would most commonly identify as "prejudice" against people of any given group, are actually motivated by fear. The fear eventually tends to take on a life all its own, leading to staunch belief. In light of the self-destructive nature of such a fear, I was particularly moved by a personal account of the experience of slavery during the 1820's, by Frederick Douglass. As an abolitionist and former slave himself, Douglass wrote this in 1845 about his former mistress, one Mrs. Sophia Auld of Baltimore. Of Mrs. Auld, Douglass wrote:

"My new mistress proved to be...a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings. She had never had a slave under her control previously to myself... But, alas! This kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hand, and soon commenced.... Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me.

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<sup>58</sup> Weinberg, op. cit., 8.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 6.

When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness."<sup>61</sup>

The analogy is clear. Harper observes:

"Douglass's point was that slavery had a *dehumanizing* effect on those whites who held slaves (and, by extension, on those who might not have held slaves but who, by action or inaction, supported the institution of slavery)."<sup>62</sup>

Harper continues:

"If we characterize racist oppression as an attempt by the dominant group to prove its superiority over the dominated group, then we can see the ironic power of Douglass's analysis since he shows us that, by exercising unjust power, the dominant group actually demonstrates its moral inferiority. Thus, what white racists try to identify as traits that are external to themselves - in this case, brutal, inhuman qualities - are actually shown to exist within their own personalities."<sup>63</sup>

Harper describes the way in which homophobia is more often than not a manifestation of internal fears of one's own homosexual inclinations, or their own sexual anxieties in general:

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<sup>61</sup>

Phillip Brian Harper, "Racism and Homophobia as Reflections on Their Perpetrators." In Warren J. Blumenfeld, *Homophobia: How We All Pay The Price* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 57.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



"Homophobic activity - violent or otherwise - operates according to a similar, but almost inverse, logic. If it is true (and I think it is) that homophobia derives, in part, from heterosexuals' fear and anxiety about their own sexuality - fear about the homosexual desire that might exist within their own psyches - then homophobic activity represents the homophobe's impulse to externalize those homosexual tendencies, to emphasize to the world that 'these other people are *sick*, but I'm not, and I'm proving it to you by demonstrating my hostility toward them.'"<sup>64</sup>

Harper further explains the deleterious qualities of any phobia, and particularly homophobia in this discussion:

"If we understand part of the nature of homophobic sentiment in this way, then we will understand, as well, that homophobic activity - although clearly most detrimental, on all levels, to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals themselves - actually represents the homophobe's self-hatred, his hostility toward something that lies within himself. (I use the masculine pronoun here because I take young males to represent the most dangerously homophobic element in our society.)"<sup>65</sup>

In addition to suffering the results of fear and prejudice, it is a sad reality for most minority groups that all too many people belonging to them tend to internalize the very fear and prejudice which victimize them. However, self-hatred inevitably has effects which are deleterious to one's emotional well-being, and leads to personality problems for the person who suffers from it. "If the person is himself homosexual, the prejudice he holds is barring the way to easy

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

expression of his own desires.”<sup>66</sup>

At its Seattle Convention in June of 1990, the Central Conference of American Rabbis voted in the affirmative to admit openly-avowed gay and lesbian rabbis into its membership. For several years prior to the vote, however, there were numerous discussions and debates within the ranks of the CCAR membership; both at national conventions, and at regional *kallot*. During the course of those discussions, I recall being struck by a phenomenon that emerged over and over again. By 1990 there were approximately 130 women who had been ordained by the Hebrew Union College, most of whom were members of the CCAR. In my recollection, there was not a single voice of resistance or negativity within the ranks of the women of the CCAR. The entire camp of those who disagreed with the proposal of gay and lesbian admittance to CCAR membership consisted of our male colleagues. While there has certainly been congregational resistance coming from both men and women; and, to be sure, homophobia exists among both men and women, I believe the experience of the CCAR is revealing in very significant ways. First, the women of the CCAR could most assuredly relate to the experience of being marginalized, as it is with homosexuals. After all, it was only in 1972 that the first woman was ordained a rabbi. Even then, this ordination occurred over 50 years after the initial vote

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 1.

was taken amongst the faculty of the Hebrew Union College which resulted in the removal of any obstacles to the ordination of women, in principle. I believe that it was as a result of the women's movement in the late 1960's and early 1970's that finally brought about the actualization of this principle. Secondly, a primary psychological origin of homophobia seems to be more deeply rooted in the male psyche than in the female. This stems directly from the fear on the part of many men of having homosexual feelings and/or tendencies themselves.

Sigmund Freud first identified the phenomenon of "reaction formation," a process by which an individual tries to manifest outward behavior that would specifically belie his/her true feelings at any given time. In addition, that individual might attempt to take a stand against the expression of that feeling in other people as well.<sup>67</sup> Two particularly colorful examples of this in American society were the attorney Roy Cohn, and the former FBI director, Edgar J. Hoover. Though both were known and practicing homosexuals themselves, both went to great lengths nevertheless to expose and persecute others for being homosexual.

Weinberg notes a greater freedom among women than among men in outward behavior. He describes some of the manifestations of homophobia, particularly in men:

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<sup>67</sup> Weinberg, *op. cit.*, 12.

"A great many men refrain from embracing each other or kissing each other, and women do not. Moreover, men do not as a rule express fondness for each other, or long for each other's company, as openly as women do. Men tend not to permit themselves to see beauty in the physical forms of other men, or enjoy it, whereas women may openly express admiration for the beauty of other women. Men, even lifetime friends, will not sit as close together on a couch while talking earnestly as women may...they will not look into each other's faces as steadily or as fondly."<sup>68</sup>

Weinberg continues:

"Ramifications of this phobic fear extend even to parent-child relationships. Millions of fathers feel that it would not befit them to kiss their sons affectionately or embrace them, whereas mothers can kiss and embrace their daughters as well as their sons."<sup>69</sup>

The etiology of homosexuality is a potential minefield. The problem centers around the issue of volition. If homosexuality is acknowledged as a state of being that is not a matter of personal choice, then it is easier for many people to deal with it. Nevertheless, even this can turn into a belief system that is unhelpful at best to gays and lesbians. The reason for this is that all too often homosexuality is viewed as an illness. Weinberg observes:

"The homosexual is not told like the black that he is stupid. He is not told like the Jew that he is mercenary. The almost invariable expression of disdain for homosexuals is that they are neurotic, 'sick' - that the homosexual has a malformed psyche."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 22.

The woman who was president of Union Temple during the deliberations of the By-Laws Committee, in doing her best to present an "enlightened" exterior, claimed that "these people" could not be held responsible for "their affliction."

During the course of this project, and my readings associated with it, I discovered that I myself was not as enlightened as I thought myself to be. Previously I had been operating under the assumption that, because gays and lesbians are in the minority, and because their sexual orientation often causes them serious conflict and pain, and because their sexual orientation is different from what history has generally characterized as "normal" and even "natural," and "morally correct," that therefore if given a choice, they would most certainly have chosen to be heterosexual. What I have come to understand better by now is the fallaciousness of this assumption. In fact great numbers of gay and lesbian people are quite happy in life, and contented with who and what they are. Whatever inner conflicts they may have had to work out in growing into adulthood are probably quite similar to the conflicts that we all have to deal with as we endeavor to become well-adjusted, integrated personalities, striving to achieve some happiness and inner peace in this life. What is still somewhat beyond my grasp is the whole concept of choice. While I can understand that we all exist along a spectrum of sexuality, each of us with the capacity for various kinds of love, I still tend to think along the lines that our basic sexual

orientation manifests itself not through choice, but through the uniqueness of who and what we are. From virtually every discipline studying the etiology of homosexuality comes the general acknowledgment of that to which most homosexuals attest: that sexual orientation is set from the very earliest time of consciousness, and perhaps even earlier. Being gay or straight is not a choice. The choice we do have, however, all of us, is whether, and how, to act upon our sexuality. We can choose whether to realize our truest inclinations, or try to deny them and live the kind of lives that we think society expects us to live. It would seem to be the case, in any area of human existence, that choosing to live out our truest, most authentic inclinations, is the path that will bring us the greatest personal happiness and fulfillment, thus enabling us to contribute most fully our talents and abilities to the society in turn.



## CHAPTER IV: THE PROJECT ITSELF

I began serving as rabbi of Union Temple in July of 1992. Shortly before the High Holy Days of that year I received a call one Friday afternoon from the then president of the congregation, in which he told me that he had just turned away a lesbian couple who had come to the temple asking to join the congregation under the terms of a family membership. According to the by-laws as they existed at that time, two adults who were not living together as a legally married couple were required to join the temple under two single memberships. This applied to both gay and straight couples. Nevertheless, the wording of the by-laws was designed specifically to discourage gay and lesbian Jews from joining the congregation. I know that because it was told to me by one of the members of the Board of Trustees, in answer to my query about the language in place. This person is an attorney, and was among those who crafted the language in question. When I received the telephone call from the president that Friday afternoon, I was distressed at what had transpired. The reason the president called me in the first place was that he knew that I wanted to begin encouraging gay and lesbian Jews to come to Union Temple; and for the temple, in turn, to begin to re-evaluate, and eventually change, its position on gay and lesbian couple memberships. During the course of a number of workshops I attended at two successive biennial conventions of the Union of American

Hebrew Congregations, it became clear to me that one of the most important steps in opening a congregation had to be a change in the by-laws that would allow for family memberships for gay and lesbian couples. In fact, as the facilitators of these workshops stated, the by-laws issue had grown into one of the most important litmus tests within the gay and lesbian community in its perceptions of any given congregation.

I realized then that the most immediate and focused goal of this Demonstration Project would have to be to effect a change in the by-laws of Union Temple, in order to open family membership opportunities to gay and lesbian couples, thus paving the way toward my more long-range goal of making the congregation an open and inclusive one. In our congregation's case, family membership specifically means:

1) education for their children in our Religious School; 2) benefits at the Eastern Athletic Club, which occupies the top two floors of our temple building; 3) tickets for the High Holy Days; 4) the right to my services at life-cycle events for themselves and members of their immediate families.

I am pleased to say that this change in by-laws was accomplished; first in committee in November of 1996, next through approval of the Board of Trustees one month later, and eventually through congregational ratification at the annual meeting in the spring of 1997. What I will state now, and reiterate

several times later, is that this never could have been accomplished without careful and deliberate consensus-building over a period of several years. If I had attempted to push this through without appropriate process, the whole effort surely would have failed, and my tenure as rabbi of the congregation would have come to a premature end. In this chapter I will describe the process as it has unfolded since my arrival at Union Temple.

Part of my own education in implementing these changes consisted of a number of conversations with my colleagues and some of their congregants about how the process went in their own synagogues. One of the people with whom I conferred on numerous occasions was Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson, of Temple Beth El of Great Neck. Rabbi Davidson enjoys a long history of mutual respect and affection with his congregants, which is well-deserved. I myself have great respect for Rabbi Davidson's judgment, and also for the bold stands he has taken in many areas of public life during his rabbinate. Rabbi Davidson had spent many hours in conversation with a number of gay and lesbian Jews in the general vicinity of Temple Beth El, some of whom had even belonged to the synagogue as children with their parents. Before the process of creating openness and inclusiveness begins to unfold, straight congregants generally tend to express fears of being "overrun," by gays and lesbians. Other fears are expressed as well, some of which I have addressed Chapter III on homophobia.

Nevertheless, Rabbi Davidson told me that he had concluded from his conversations with gay and lesbian Jews that they, in fact, were the ones who were more afraid of coming to mainstream synagogues, because of their earlier experiences of scorn and exclusion, prejudice and ostracism. Thus Rabbi Davidson's approach was to take bold steps in a very public way. As I have already indicated, however, Rabbi Davidson has served as spiritual leader of Beth El for many years, and enjoys the clout that generally comes from a long history of mutual trust, and an ongoing process of advice and consent that he has established with his congregants. This is a factor which was quite crucial for me to take into consideration in my own journey along this path, as my own track record with the congregation of Union Temple was, at the time, in a somewhat introductory phase. In effect, Rabbi Davidson could operate with greater confidence than I felt I could at the time, and his congregation was more primed to listen openly to his thoughts and proposals.

Two key members of Temple Beth El are Herbert Leiman, and his partner, Dr. John Hirsch, who chairs the UAHC Task Force on Lesbian and Gay Inclusion. The initial step that the congregation took was to schedule a series of Saturday night dances at the temple for gay and lesbian Jews. These dances were advertised boldly in the local newspapers. The response from the community was overwhelmingly positive. The message that Rabbi Davidson

was determined to send to the gay and lesbian community was that Beth El was a "safe" place for them, and that they were welcome there to live their lives as Jews, without scorn or ostracism. He succeeded in communicating that message.

In addition to the dances, Beth El had developed a group called "GLIC," the "Gay and Lesbian Inreach Committee."<sup>71</sup> Dr. Hirsch eventually became a member of the Temple Board of Trustees.

Similarly, the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in Manhattan has a Gay and Lesbian Concerns Committee, which sponsors everything from seminars about AIDS to brunches in the morning before the Gay and Lesbian Pride parades in New York, and everything in between. Again, however, the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue, from its very inception, has had a long and proud history of social activism, haven taking bold and very public positions in the forefront of social change. Rabbi Stephen Wise was himself a proponent of change par excellence. His successors, Rabbi Herbert Klein, Rabbi Balfour Brickner, and now Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor, have followed in this tradition. For instance, Rabbi Klein brought to the synagogue the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi, Rabbi Sally Priesand, to serve as assistant rabbi of the congregation until Rabbi Klein's

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In Yiddish, the word "glick" means "happy," or, if you will, "gay," in the original sense of the English word.

health necessitated his retirement. Thus this congregation was also primed for change in a way that Union Temple never had been.

I had also had several long conversations with Rabbi Bernard Mehlman, of Temple Israel in Boston. Temple Israel traveled a slightly different route, in that the gay and lesbian community that had begun to assemble in the congregation did so most notably through a *chavurah* within its own ranks.<sup>72</sup> But most crucially for me was the knowledge that here again, Rabbi Mehlman had established a strong seniority over decades of strong service to that congregation.

The process of inclusion at Union Temple took place slowly and incrementally. The following is a rough chronological account of how things happened there, since I first assumed the pulpit.

When I first arrived, the then president, "Jack," was an intelligent and fair-minded individual, whom I knew to be quite liberal in his political leanings.<sup>73</sup> From the very beginning, I had made it clear to him on numerous

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A "chavurah" is a small group, often within the larger the context of a synagogue congregation, but not always, which meets in people's homes, and establishes a close connection of common ground.

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I have used substitute names for all of my congregants who are mentioned in the body of this paper. The first time each of the names is used I have placed it in quotation marks. Every time the name is used thereafter it will appear without quotation marks.



occasions, that one of my goals at the temple was to actualize my belief that gay and lesbian Jews must be welcomed into the Temple from a moral and ethical point of view. During my first summer, the summer of 1992, I was invited to a number of little get-togethers in various congregants' homes, at which I articulated this goal quite openly. Though several congregants representing the "old guard" expressed fear and resistance to this goal, the overwhelming majority of people at these meetings were solidly behind me. During my second year at the temple I conducted a semester-long course in Jewish sexual values. At the time I was serving on the Central Conference of American Rabbis' Ad Hoc Committee on Jewish Sexual Values, and I brought some of the material to the congregants for input and feedback. My primary agenda in this course was to address the issue of homosexuality; from the standpoint of Jewish tradition, as well as within the present social context, and our approach to such context as Reform Jews. A major discussion ensued, and continued over several weeks, during which most of the participants in the course agreed that it was about time that Union Temple begin to open its doors to the gay and lesbian community. What was not articulated quite so specifically was the range of steps that needed to be taken in order to make the congregation truly open and welcoming to gay and lesbian Jews.

I also used the pulpit to communicate my opinions. During my third year at the temple I delivered a sermon that was primarily concerned with the Religious Right's then most recent attack on the National Endowment for the Arts. Within the body of that sermon I included several remarks about the Religious Right's deliberate juxtaposition of gay artists and their work with accusations of obscenity. Those remarks were duly noted by my congregants; and, by and large, met with a positive response. I deliberately chose to "cushion" them, if you will, within the context of an issue with which I knew my congregants would be sympathetic. It was a conscious and deliberate attempt on my part to give them a little bit at a time, yet in a consistent and ongoing manner.

During the spring of 1996 I was asked to be one of the speakers on a program at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue on West 68th Street in Manhattan. The program was a commemoration of another program, convened ten years earlier by the then associate rabbi of SWFS, Rabbi Helene Ferris. This earlier program included liberal congregations from all over Manhattan, in addition to other Jewish organizations. The purpose of the program was to discuss the possibilities and problems of greater inclusion of gay and lesbian Jews within the liberal mainstream congregations of New York City. The purpose of the second convocation was to assess the progress over the ten-year

period between 1986 and 1996, and to outline the challenges that still lay ahead. My topic at the 1996 program was, "Homosexuality in Hebrew Scripture," which I have also addressed in Chapter II of this paper. I did my best to publicize this program within my congregation, which included devoting my bulletin article for that month to the conference. Several members of my congregation did indeed attend the conference. The text of that particular bulletin article appears in Appendix C.

The examples of these various congregational experiences were very helpful and instructive for me, as were the seminars, workshops, and personal conversations with people from the UAHC and CCAR. Nevertheless, each congregation does possess its own history and its own internal set of dynamics. Consequently, what works in one place is not necessarily transferable to another. In his book *Congregations in Conflict*, the journalist Keith Hartman underscores this point, as he poses the basic questions of strategically effective administration:

"How can a congregation best handle a dispute over gay and lesbian issues? How can it debate a subject without opening a rift? How can its members struggle with each other while continuing to function as a community of faith?"<sup>74</sup>

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Keith Hartman, *Congregations in Conflict: The Battle Over Homosexuality* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 170-171.

In considering this question, which Hartman poses so succinctly, I was also obliged to remember the differences between my own situation and those of Rabbis Davidson and Mehlman, and the Rabbis at Stephen Wise. Hartman reinforces the differences between my situation and theirs:

"The best indicator of a pastor's ability to survive a crisis is the length of time he or she has served at the church. I am not saying that a recently-appointed minister should run from every conflict. After all, there is more to being a pastor than job security. Still, you should know what chances you're taking before you pick your fights."<sup>75</sup>

Hartman continues:

"I want to stress that this is not a matter of one's experience as a pastor, but of one's experience with a particular congregation. When Jimmy Creech<sup>76</sup> came into conflict with the older members of his church, he had been at Fairmont for only a year. That meant that those who opposed him didn't know him very well - they would form their entire opinion of him based on his handling of this one issue. Similarly, Linda Jordan<sup>77</sup> had been at Binkley for only two years when the conflict...began. By

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 171.

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Reverend Jimmy Creech became the pastor of the Fairmont United Methodist Church in Raleigh, NC in 1987. His rapid confrontation of the issue of homosexuals in the church brought about a great deal of congregational strife. Different factions of the congregation squared off against one another. His position as pastor was in jeopardy, and the very stability of the congregation was threatened. His story is instructive for any rabbi or pastor contemplating significant change in a congregational setting.

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Reverend Linda Jordan was senior minister of the Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, NC in 1992, when a crisis similar to Creech's arose (see note 71 above).

contrast, Mahan Siler<sup>78</sup> had been at Pullen for eight years. The congregation already held strong opinions of him before the issue of Kevin and Steven's marriage ever came up. He had prayed with those people, baptized them, married them, and buried their relatives. They had a sort of family history together. As a result, it was possible for them to disagree with him on a single issue while still preserving their respect for him. Because there was already an established relationship, the issue did not become the relationship."<sup>79</sup>

The woman who succeeded Jack as president of Union Temple, "Ernestine," was an entirely different personality from Jack, with an entirely different agenda. She assumed the presidency in June of 1995, the beginning of my fourth year at the temple. She was in her early 80's, and had spent many years working very hard for the temple in every way. However, in addition to her devotion to the temple, she was also always looking for ways to position herself close to the center of power, and to the rabbis of the congregation. She was very much a part of the old guard of the temple, and was among those who longed for the "glory days" of its history. She is not a particularly intelligent person, and really lacks the ability to think critically and creatively. From the instant she assumed the<sup>80</sup> presidency, she jealously guarded her power, and

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Reverend Mahan Siler became one of the founding members of the Raleigh Religious Network for Gay and Lesbian Equality, along with Jimmy Creech (see note 71 above). At the time he held a position at the Southeastern Baptist Seminary in North Carolina, and also paid a heavy price for his high profile activism.

79 Hartman, op.cit., 171-172.

attempted to push away anyone or anything she perceived as a threat to that power. There were only a few people whom she considered to be more powerful than herself, because of their stature in the world outside the temple. She listened to their advice, and to no one else's. I was virtually a non-entity for her, and whenever I expressed any opinion, or plan, or thought, that implied the implementation of change of any sort at the temple, her defenses shot up. Needless to say, this created a dreadful set of circumstances under which to work as the rabbi of a congregation. My salvation came from the fact that eventually she succeeded in driving everyone crazy as well, so that her term of office was cut short (three years), and she finally stepped down in June of 1998.

At the Executive Board meeting held at Ernestine's home during the summer of 1996, some six weeks before the Holy Days, I conveyed a request that had come to me and the congregation from John Hirsch. Under the auspices of the Jewish Community Center of the Upper West Side, Dr. Hirsch and his partner were putting together a New Year's greeting in *The Jewish Week*, a paper delivered to anyone who has ever contributed to the UJA-Federation. The greeting was specifically addressed to gay and lesbian Jews in the city. Dr. Hirsch's request was for our congregation to place its name along with numerous others in the Metropolitan Area in the greeting, and to make a contribution of \$100 toward the purchase of this ad. This request was discussed



at the Executive Board Meeting, and eventually agreed upon. When it came time to authorize the check from the temple, Ernestine refused. I wrote the check from my discretionary fund. When the ad appeared, Ernestine called the office of Rabbi Julie Spitzer, who is the Director of the Greater New York Council of Reform Synagogues, the regional office of the UAHC. Ernestine proceeded to insist that she had not authorized Union Temple's inclusion in that ad, and demanded to know if Temple Emanu-El and Central Synagogue had participated in this. (Ernestine has always deluded herself into believing that Union Temple was still very much a "sister" congregation to the two giants in Manhattan which I mentioned, and that she as president was indeed a very important woman.) The whole fuss eventually fizzled, because the officers' decision one month earlier had been recorded by the secretary. This is somewhat indicative, however, of the type of crazy-making energy that was expended in the synagogue, and how the president and I were seriously at odds with one another. Her need to assert her own importance within the UAHC did, however, work to my advantage in one way in particular. That is in the relationship that the congregation has had with the immediate past president of the Union, Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler. It was, of course, during Rabbi Schindler's administration that the movement of gay and lesbian inclusion in the synagogues and institutions of Reform Judaism took place. The relationship

between Union Temple and Rabbi Schindler evolved in the following way. In the days when the membership of Union Temple was pushing 1,000 families, the congregation had to conduct two simultaneous services during the High Holy Days, because the main sanctuary could not accommodate all the people who would attend at that time. The rabbi of the congregation would conduct services in the main sanctuary, along with the cantor and choir. Because of the close connection between the UAHC and one of our former presidents, Judge Emil Baar, the president of the Union would come to conduct the additional simultaneous service up in the social hall, with a second cantor and choir. As the congregation's membership dwindled, the necessity for these two services diminished. Eventually only one service was conducted. However, by that time, Rabbi Schindler had already established a close and loyal friendship with Rabbi Dreyfus, who was rabbi of the congregation during this period. Although his presence was no longer logistically necessary, Rabbi Schindler continued to participate year after year in the High Holy Day services at Union Temple, as the co-officiant at the service which took place now only in the sanctuary of the temple. This arrangement continued up until two years ago, during the Holy Days of 1997, which coincided with Rabbi Schindler's retirement from the presidency of the Union. Until that time, Rabbi Schindler would read part of the service, as would Rabbi Dreyfus and myself. Rabbi Schindler would preach

the morning sermons on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and I would preach the evening sermons. In addition, Rabbi Schindler would conduct an open forum for questions, responses, and discussion, during the hour-long break between intermediate prayer and the afternoon service on Yom Kippur. Before the High Holy Days of 1995, I called Rabbi Schindler on the telephone in an effort to enlist his help in my efforts to open the congregation to gay and lesbian Jews. I requested that he either direct one of his sermons, or devote part of his forum to this issue. He thought it would be helpful during the forum to "plant" someone in the congregation who would pose the question of gay and lesbian inclusiveness, from which he could state and expound upon his advocacy clearly and definitively. This is precisely what we did. Morton, a vice-president of the congregation, posed the question, and Rabbi Schindler spoke eloquently as always. I now had established "protection," if you will, from no less than the president of the Union, who commanded great respect on the part of all our congregants. In addition, Ernestine and I both attended the biennial convention of the UAHC in November of 1995 in Atlanta, GA. I prevailed upon her to attend several workshops with me on gay and lesbian inclusion, in order to hear the personal testimonies of representatives of congregations all around the country with regard to the success and the importance of such an initiative. Ernestine sat in the back of the room at each seminar, but at least she was there.

During that summer of 1996, I was invited up to Jack's summer home in upstate New York. The pastor of the local church in that town is away during the summer, so the elders invite guest ministers to preach on Sunday mornings. At the suggestion of Jack's wife, the elders invited me for this particular Sunday to deliver the sermon. Following the church service Jack and his wife hosted a garden party at their home. During the course of the afternoon I "caucused" informally with Jack, and three of the other officers of Union Temple, who also had been invited for the day. I asked their advice with regard to a program I wanted to run that fall at the temple. The program I was suggesting was a dinner for gay and lesbian Jews and their families, to take place during the week-long celebration of Sukkot. I explained to this small group that after four years of our talking about gay and lesbian inclusion, it was now time to act in a more decisive and tangible way. But with this conversation began my *real* education with regard to consensus building.

This handful of leaders was solidly behind me in their commitment to gay and lesbian inclusion. Though their levels of understanding of gay and lesbian life differed, as did their agendas for wanting to see this venture succeed at the temple, they were united nevertheless in their commitment to promote inclusion. However, their understanding of how this process should take place

was different from mine. Jack was in his early 70's, and the others, in their 60's. Thus they had friends in the synagogue who were older than the circle of friends which I had formed to that point. In addition, they were all longtime members of the temple. This gave them the advantages of institutional memory and greater familiarity with the way things worked at the temple. They were convinced that the sudden appearance of an announcement in the bulletin regarding a dinner for gay and lesbian Jews would have done more harm than good. They advised me to go along with them in putting together a committee to look into the issue, so that various constituencies within the temple family could feel that they were included in the process; in effect, that they had some degree of "ownership" of the process.

Hartman underscores the necessity of advice and consent:

"Whenever possible, a minister considering a controversial action should ask for the congregation's advice. This has two benefits: first, it forces the congregation to become involved in the debate, to educate themselves and study the issue; second, it shows respect for those members who may end up on the losing side or who disagree with the pastor's stand. That respect is the key to keeping them in the church. They must feel that their voice is still listened to - that while they may not have prevailed on this one issue, they are not being dismissed as irrelevant."<sup>80</sup>

In addition to the issue of advice and consent, the parties to this caucus all understood the importance of dealing with Ernestine in the most judicious

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 172.

manner, as she was clearly opposed to gay and lesbian inclusion. She was filled with free-floating anxiety about the whole issue. She saw it as controversial; and thus, by definition, potentially threatening to the congregation's stability. Since some of her immediate friends and fellow power brokers in the temple were basically against this proposal, she became an obstructionist. She was convinced that longtime members would leave the temple in droves. She even "rewrote" a bit of history of the congregation in telling me that there was a split in the 1960's when the then Rabbi went down to Alabama to participate in the march from Selma to Montgomery. She was unable to think critically, and reacted to each new suggestion by knee-jerk. As we talked, we eventually concluded that the first step that the congregation would need to take was to effect an official change in the by-laws of the congregation, so that any policies that might be instituted would not stand in violation of our by-laws. In addition, they made it a point to acknowledge my perspective of the by-laws as being an important indicator to prospective new members insofar as gay and lesbian couples are concerned.

This little caucus then proceeded to discuss the procedure for effecting this change in the by-laws in a way that would allow the various constituencies of the temple to feel included in this process. They understood the necessity of having a few people present who would not necessarily begin in our corner, and



who would most probably challenge us with lively discussion. In addition, these particular "adversarial" members had to be people whom Ernestine perceived as being "important," and as having some degree of power. These things were very important to this woman; and consequently, to all of us. Since her abilities were quite limited at best, she tended to be influenced by those people whose opinions she felt she could respect, out of her own very unique criteria. Thus we decided upon a member of the congregation who had been on the Board of Trustees in previous years, and who has connections in city government and the field of real estate. He is generally considered to be conservative on various issues, and Ernestine would undoubtedly see him as her main spokesperson to obstruct this endeavor. Thus this particular gentleman was the lynchpin in the proceedings.

The committee was constituted as follows:

"Bob" - the "lynchpin." In his late 50's, Bob is the former Commissioner of Human Resources for New York City, and is currently the New York City Commissioner of Planning.

"Lesley" & "Hal" - She is a teacher and he is a scientist. They have an adult daughter who is a lesbian. Both are in their mid-late-50's.

"Diane" - A member of the Board of Trustees (as of 1998-99 an officer of the congregation), Diane is a liberal-minded person in her late 50's. She is

a retired assistant principal. Divorced once, her present husband had a son from his first marriage who was gay, and died of AIDS about six months before my arrival at Union Temple.

"Morton" - In his mid-60's. Morton has a law degree and a Ph.D. in Ethics. He is an intellect and a scholar, and works in the field of medical ethics. He has been a longtime power player in the congregation, though cut from a different mold from the formal snobbishness of previous generations. Liberal and progressive, he has been a major supporter and helper of mine all the way along the line, to the present. He is currently a vice-president of the congregation. Morton was one of the parties to the caucus at Jack's house. He was also the "plant" in Rabbi Schindler's Yom Kippur forum in 1995.

Jack - In his early 70's, the former president of the congregation, to whom I referred earlier. Very liberal, he too has been a staunch supporter and helper of mine. He is currently the treasurer of the congregation.

"Pete" - Close to 70, he is the current president of the congregation, and was a vice-president at the time. He's a down-to-earth businessman. He has a nephew who is gay. Ernestine appointed him to chair this committee. He was one of the parties to the caucus at Jack's house.

"Ilana" - In her late 30's, Ilana has been an active member of the temple and a trustee for some time. A stock broker, she and her husband have

occasionally expressed to me some feeling that being gay is a less desirable lifestyle than being straight, both from the sociological and theological standpoints. Nevertheless, they have been committed to full equality in the congregation for gays and lesbians. Ilana was one of the two people charged with the actual rewriting of the by-laws, should that be the outcome of the committee's deliberations.

"Lisa" - Exactly my age (mid-40's), Lisa is an attorney, and quite liberal and intelligent. She has always been a good friend to me, and a staunch supporter. Along with Ilana, Lisa was charged with re-writing the actual text of the by-laws.

"Esther" - A good friend of Pete's, Esther hosted this series of meetings in her home. Esther is in her late 50's, and is quite liberal and supportive of full equality for gays and lesbians.

"Blanche" - A businesswoman in her late 60's, Blanche is good-natured, but had not thought much about the issue at all. Her main concern was whether or not gay and lesbian inclusion meant that I would do commitment ceremonies. I basically have always considered her a friend, though I believe that Ernestine viewed her as an ally on this committee, and therefore, an obstructionist regarding any change in by-laws.

Ernestine - The then president of the congregation. She was looking to Bob to bail her out of this change that she did not want to see implemented.

This process took place at the time of the High Holy Days of 1996. The committee asked me to prepare a packet of resolutions on gay and lesbian inclusion that had been passed by the UAHC during the 1980's and 1990's, which I did. This packet, and Rabbi Schindler's advocacy, at the very least, caused Ernestine to experience significant conflict within herself with regard to her own obstructionism.

On the evening of Rosh Hashanah, right in the midst of the committee's series of meetings, I preached a sermon entitled, "The Fruits of Bigotry." The text appears in Appendix B. Ostensibly the sermon was framed around anti-Semitism. My underlying agenda in constructing and delivering the sermon was to draw the analogy between anti-Semitism and homophobia; and ultimately, to sway the committee's vote in favor of changing the by-laws. I believe I was successful on both counts. It is very difficult for Jews to argue with anything that smacks of the same sort of exclusion that is produced by anti-Semitism. In addition, during that Erev Rosh Hashanah Service, Bob was sitting in the third row of the sanctuary. When I sat down after the sermon, I saw him looking straight at me, with a smile on his face. At the next committee meeting, Bob

spoke convincingly in favor of changing the by-laws, much to Ernestine's surprise, and much to my relief, and the relief of my supporters. The question was called. The vote was unanimously in favor of changing the by-laws of the temple. The re-written article in question appears in Appendix A.

Immediately subsequent to this vote, I went into the temple office and, with the agreement of the officers, changed the membership forms. The old forms read, "Husband's Name, Wife's Name." The new ones read, "Member #1, Member #2." In addition, I arranged for an open meeting of PFLAG<sup>81</sup> to take place at the temple in January of 1997. I felt that for the purpose of an opening public forum along this journey, straight people whose children and family members were gay might be, at first, a little less "threatening" to some of the more resistant members of the temple. Unfortunately I could not attend this forum, as I was observing *shiva* for my mother, who had died earlier that week. But two days before the forum I spoke carefully with the president of the PFLAG chapter, and also with a few members of the congregation whom I trusted to help steer the discussion. The reports were all very positive. Ernestine sat in the back of the room. (That was obviously her way of distancing herself emotionally and visibly, as well as physically, from the subject

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PFLAG is a nationwide support group. The acronym stands for: Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

matter at hand. Remember she had done the same thing at the UAHC biennial workshops, and has generally done the same thing at every forum or workshop in which she felt herself not to be directly involved.) At a certain point, as the morning progressed, people spontaneously decided that they wanted to speak individually. One of our newer members in particular spoke quite eloquently. This young man had been raised in a Classical Reform temple in the Deep South. He has lived around the corner from Union Temple for a number of years. He had attended High Holy Day services there for many years, but never joined the temple. When I arrived, he and I became friendly, and talked a great deal. As it happened, he had grown up in the same town as my husband, and knew him quite well. Therefore, he and I had a good opening to a relationship. In the spring of 1996 he finally decided to join the temple, as by that time it showed significant signs of becoming truly "gay friendly." At this PFLAG forum, he came out publicly as a gay man. This began to cement an important element in increasing the understanding of most human beings. Everyone was supportive and loving toward this young man, as they had already formed a personal relationship with him week after week at Shabbat services. This proves that when one puts a human face on an irrational fear, the fear generally tends to dissipate.



## CONCLUSION

When I began serving as Rabbi of Union Temple, the temple was, for all intents and purposes, closed to gay and lesbian Jews. The following is a list of changes that have been effected at Union Temple in the past 6½ years.

1) The by-laws have been officially changed to allow for family memberships for gay and lesbian couples.

2) We have opened the temple to the Brooklyn Chapter of PFLAG for its monthly meeting on the first Sunday afternoon of each month. These meetings are well publicized; both in the PFLAG newsletters and in the Brooklyn newspapers.

3) We list our temple in all Brooklyn publications as "egalitarian and inclusive."

4) Our name now appears each year in that High Holy Day greeting in *The Jewish Week*.

5) We have a growing community of gay and lesbian members who are "out."

The son of one of the lesbian couples was called to the Torah as a Bar Mitzvah in June of 1998. A second such Bar Mitzvah will take place this March of

6) At the beginning of my work at Union Temple, I had formulated as one of my own goals a time when I would be able to call up a gay or lesbian couple unto the *bimah* during Shabbat Services and bless them on the occasion of their anniversary as a couple. This past January, at our Shabbat Service, "Cindy" got

up to speak at the pulpit. She said, "I'm Cindy, and this is my partner 'Marilyn,' and we're celebrating our twelfth anniversary together this week." At this, all those in attendance at the service, who have by now come to know and love both women, applauded, and then sang "*Siman Tov, Mazal Tov.*"

7) Each month we list in our bulletin the names of people who are celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, or some such happy occasion during that month. Without any fudging, we have listed same-sex couples by name in the bulletin in this context, and in others as well.

Though our congregational family still has a long way to go in truly making itself into a "gay-friendly" one, this anniversary of Cindy and Marilyn was a source of great joy and gratification to me. The temple has come a long way since July of 1992, and I admire the courage of those who helped to move it along.

During the course of the past 6½ years I have learned a great deal along this journey toward gay and lesbian inclusion. I have deepened my understanding of the absolute necessity of consensus-building within a congregation, in order for substantial changes to take place. While it is certainly possible to blast into a new congregation with guns blazing, as it were, it is risky at best. Blazing guns can get people killed. Allowing for exceptional

circumstances, of course, it would seem that in general the better way to go is through slow, steady, constant pushing and prodding, along with incremental consensus-building and widening of one's own constituency. In this case, the inclusion of gay and lesbian Jews within the congregational membership also meant the inclusion of the existing members in the process itself. Though a rabbi or pastor must be willing to take bold stands, which I have done, there are generally numerous occasions on which prophetic passion must take a back seat to pastoral patience.

## APPENDIX A

The following is the chapter of our by-laws regarding membership status, including the specific changes in language that were discussed and passed in our congregational by-laws. The brackets indicate those words and phrases that were omitted. The double underlines indicate those words and phrases that were added.

### ARTICLE IV

#### MEMBERSHIP

Section 1. Any person of the Jewish faith eighteen (18) years of age or over ("adult") may be elected to membership in the congregation upon approval of his or her application therefor by the Board of Trustees.

Section 2. [In the case of married persons] For the purpose of the assessment of dues, the unit of membership shall be one of the following:

- (a) individual adult
- (b) husband and wife
- (c) any two adults (regardless of gender) living together in a committed relationship, hereafter "partners," or, individually, "partner."

The unmarried children, who are not self-supporting, of any of the adults in the above categories, shall be included in the membership unit.

[the family. The family shall be construed to mean husband, wife and their unmarried children who are not self-supporting.] A non-Jewish spouse or partner shall be considered a member in good standing and welcome to share in the fellowship of the congregation. [Voting privileges and the holding of office in all facets of congregational life, the Board of Trustees, and congregational meetings shall be reserved to persons of the Jewish faith.]

Section 3. [Members] Each adult Jewish member of any membership unit hereinafter referred to as a "voting member", shall have the right to vote on all matters coming before the congregation, to hold office in all facets of congregational life, and to be appointed to the Board of Trustees. [When the membership unit is the family including both a husband and a wife, the husband and wife, consistent with Section 2 of this Article, shall each have the right to vote.]

Section 4. [Members] All members shall have all the privileges of membership, subject to the rules and regulations established from time to time by the Board of Trustees, including, but not limited to, attending all worship

services, participating in social activities, religious education for their children, adult studies and burial privileges, provided, that interment is in accordance with accepted Jewish practice and custom.

Section 5. In the event of the death of a member, the surviving spouse or partner may continue to be a member, if the spouse or partner so desires [subject to the limitations set forth in Section 2 of this Article.]

Section 6. The Board of Trustees may establish special membership classifications with such provisions as it may deem advisable.

Section 7. Member shall be responsible for the support of the congregation through payment of dues, assessments and other fees as shall be determined by the Board of Trustees. [All members shall be entitled to attend all worship services, adult classes and social activities of the congregation.]

Section 8. Membership dues are payable quarterly in advance. New members shall be required to pay two quarters' dues in advance. A member who fails to pay any financial obligation due to the congregation within six months after such obligation shall become due and payable may be suspended and deprived of all privileges upon vote of the Board of Trustees that is held after such member shall have been notified by certified mail of such impending vote. Notwithstanding the foregoing, the president and the treasurer may



waive, extend or modify any financial obligation due from a member or a prospective member when, in their opinion, such action is appropriate and in accordance with the practices, teachings and principals of Reform Judaism.

Section 9. The resignation of a member shall not relieve that member from the obligation to pay any amount due to the congregation at the time of such resignation.

## APPENDIX B

### "The Fruits of Bigotry"

Erev Rosh Hashanah, 5757 - Friday, September 13, 1996

Union Temple of Brooklyn  
Rabbi Linda Henry Goodman

It was as though we had gone to sleep and awakened 30 years ago. We turned on the T.V., and it was the early '60's all over again. All of a sudden, black churches were burning - one, after another, after another; all across the south, and then into the Midwest. It was as though the violent racism that so characterized the Old South hadn't really disappeared, but had only gone underground to germinate. And suddenly last spring, it erupted once again. And the pastors, and their parishioners, and the children, came to watch the flames of their beloved churches, as in their hearts they wondered why.

These are the fruits of bigotry and hatred.

And as though this were not enough, right on the heels of these burnings came the news, exactly two months ago now, of what appears to be renewed terror in the skies. We watched in mute non-comprehension, the fiery trail of TWA Flight 800, the night it fell from the sky, not very far from here, with 230 souls on board - innocent people - lost. High school kids from Pennsylvania, whose only crime was wanting to study French. A sports reporter and his wife and daughter, who had promised themselves a holiday in Europe - but instead left behind twin boys, now orphans, to pick up the pieces. A young mother who had devoted her life to the rights of victims of street crime, along with her two darling little girls. Random violence - to the rational mind, without rhyme or reason; without predictability. It could happen to any of us. It happened to a distant cousin of mine, in fact, who met his end on Pan Am 103. He left a wife and 2 children, a mother, a sister, a baby nephew, and many, many aunts, uncles, cousins, colleagues, and friends. His crime? A business connection in Frankfurt.

These are the fruits of cowardice and hatred.

Recently a young Serbian soldier gave himself up to Bosnian authorities, because he could no longer live with the crimes he had committed against humanity, during the recent war there. He was only following orders, but now they were haunting him. The crimes of his victims? Their ethnic background was different from his.

These are the fruits of bigotry and hatred.

And for us, the coup de grace: now as we are about to leave the 20th century behind, we carry along with us the scars of the Shoah, some of them even branded into our arms. Twelve million people lost to the world. Their crimes? Some were communists; others, intellectuals or political opponents of the Third Reich. They were gypsies, nuns, partisans and priests. Some had physical disabilities; others were intellectually disadvantaged; some were elderly.

Some of them were gay. And most of them were Jews. In short, they were anybody the Nazis deemed to be "different," and therefore, not worthy of walking the face of the earth.

These are the fruits of blindness, bigotry, and hatred.

For most of us, it is easy to identify these particular fruits, and this particular brand of hatred. It is extreme - it is evil - it is anathema and obscenity - to us, who are basically good and decent people - peace-loving, law-abiding citizens - we who are here tonight in synagogue, observing our own precious religious heritage. What is not so clear, or easily identifiable, are the seeds of those fruits: the seeds of fear, and blindness; bigotry, and even hatred - which may be germinating within our hearts - even us - good and decent people.

Most of us are, no doubt, familiar with the book by Laura Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement*, made into a movie as well, with Gregory Peck and Dorothy McGuire. In fact I happened to catch it again on television, just last weekend. Remember that Gregory Peck played a journalist named Schuyler Green, whose friends and family called him by his middle-name, Phil; the son of a journalist father and a brave, open-minded, outspokenly crusading mother. A handsome young widower with a young son, Green met and fell in love with a lovely woman named Kathy - a wealthy socialite - from Darien, CT. He had been brought to NY by his magazine to do a story on post-war anti-Semitism in America. But he needed an angle - to give the story some punch. And then, it came to him. He would go "underground" - learn his material first-hand. He

would pretend to be Jewish - for a month, or 6 months, or as long as it took. And from that moment on, the eyes of this already open-minded man were opened wider than he ever could have anticipated.

Remember he began by sending resumes to various corporations, real estate agents, medical schools, employment agencies, and the like; ostensibly from two different people, with two different names, but identical qualifications. The ones from "Schuyler Green" drew promising responses. The ones from "Philip Greenberg" drew letters that said, "Thank you for your interest, but we have nothing open at present."

My mother related to me an incident of her own job-seeking experiences in the early 1940's, right here in Manhattan. She was skilled as a teacher of typing and shorthand, and related skills necessary for secretaries and office managers. At this particular interview, my mother sat in the outer office on a bench with a number of other young women, when a woman in a business suit came out, and said, without even flinching: "I'd like to say right off that this company is not interested in hiring Jews. So any of you who are Jewish can save us all a lot of time by leaving now." At which, my mother, along with virtually the whole group on the bench, got up, and started toward the door. But just then, the woman must have noticed my mother's Hunter College ring, and said to her, "Just a moment... are you a Hunter graduate?" My mother said "Yes..." And the woman said, "Well, why don't you wait out here and I'll be right back with you." To which my mother responded, "You needn't bother. Any company that doesn't want Jews, doesn't want me." And she turned on her heels, and left with great aplomb. I am sûre that many of you have similar stories to tell.

But back to *Gentleman's Agreement*. The "job search" led to more personal and profoundly transforming experiences for our Phil "Greenberg." At one point he stood at the registration desk of the "Pflume Inn" in upstate New York. (It was actually based on an historic inn in Saratoga, where this sort of incident was repeated in real life, many times over.) He stood at the desk, and signed the card as "Philip Green." He was about to receive his room key when he asked the manager, "By the way, is this hotel restricted?" And like THAT - the entire countenance of the man behind the desk changed, and he suddenly had to retreat into the "back office." He returned after a minute and said to Mr. Green, "I'm sorry, sir, there must be some mistake. There are no vacancies this evening." The same man - who just a moment earlier was signing a registration slip as a perfectly "acceptable" guest, was, in a flash, utterly

transformed, in the eyes of the management, into a pariah - an undesirable - one whose presence would have "sullied" the inn somehow, and "disturbed" the other guests - all of whom were, of course, very - nice - people. In that same moment, in Peck's brilliant portrayal, Phil Green seemed to internalize the very prejudice that had victimized him - as he himself was transformed - from a young, capable, tall and handsome journalist, into a man defeated - who turned and walked away, with head bowed, and shoulders bent - completely humiliated.

These are the fruits of ignorance, fear, and bigotry - among law-abiding, productive, educated, charitable, socially refined, "nice" people.

And then came the worst for our dashing young journalist. His young son came home from school in tears. He'd been beaten up, and taunted by the other kids as they called him a "dirty Jew and a rotten kike." At which Kathy - the lovely young socialite from Darien - took the crying boy into her arms and pleaded, "Oh, Tommy, it's not true, not any of it. You're no more Jewish than I am!" And then, Phil exploded. In that instant - he knew - now he really understood: bigotry lives - even within those of us who are basically good and decent people - "nice" people. And the seeds of this bigotry can blossom at a moment's notice into fruit ripe for the picking - a moment of perceived threat - a moment of gut-level, knee-jerk fear - a fear that we learn over time from our parents, our teachers, our political leaders, our neighbors and friends. We are not born with such fear, we are taught. And indeed it is the fruit of unadulterated bigotry. It is insidious. It lurks within us like a shadow, but it is there; and, like a cancer, it is malignant.

And you see, for those of us who are intelligent, and educated to one degree or another - for those of us who consider ourselves "refined" - and who otherwise lead upstanding lives - we are the cleverest of all in finding ways to either deny it altogether, or in fact to rationalize it, by any argument we can build.

Jean-Paul Sartre wrote a fascinating study called *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Sartre observed that anti-Semitism has a life all its own - quite apart from reality. Anti-Semitism exists even in places where there are no Jews, and never have been for that matter! So tell me... if people have never even known a Jew, how can they be anti-Semitic? But they are. In a way, Sartre suggests, the anti-Semite needs the Jew, upon whom to displace his or her own fears of inadequacy and failure....



These are the fruits of bigotry.

We remember that during the epidemic of Bubonic Plague that ravaged the European continent during the 14th century, Jews were blamed for causing the plague by poisoning the wells of Europe with the innards of diseased rats. Never mind the fact that Jews died of the Plague too! Never mind the fact that in many places in which the Plague struck, there were no Jews! The mythology of hatred does not accommodate reason or reality. These are the fruits of bigotry; of fear and ignorance, and cowardice. These are the fruits of hatred. And now, 7 centuries later, they are still alive and thriving, in all varieties and forms.

They still thrive, of course, as anti-Semitism. They thrive as racism and xenophobia. They thrive in the prejudices we Jews hold in turn about those of other faiths. They thrive in our attitudes about people who are gay and lesbian. They thrive in our attitudes about those on different rungs of the socio-economic step-ladder. They have often been, and are still used to keep women out of positions of authority and professional advancement. They even used to thrive about people who were left-handed! In short, they thrive in the face of any individual who, in one way or another, is different from what we perceive to be "the norm." And oh, are we clever in our ability to rationalize. If one argument is discredited, we will quickly find another. Those seeds of bigotry are slippery little things. They keep finding ways to avoid being weeded out. They are bound and determined to ripen - so that they'll be ready for consumption all over again.

Some of us, in our weaker moments, might be tempted to think, "Why should people try to buck the norms of any given group?" If you can find a way to hide, why not keep your difference to yourself? How many of our people changed their names, just to keep the door from slamming - like it did on Mr. "Greenberg?"

Before I took on my husband's family name, my name was Linda Henry. And there have been certain occasions, even for this New Yorker, when it would have been more convenient to just be "Linda Henry," and not bother revealing my religious persuasion. But such a thing is unimaginable to me. Being Jewish is so thoroughly and profoundly who and what I am, that to lie about that would be like cutting out my heart!



Before the Civil Rights Movement there were a number of light-skinned African-Americans who found a way - the only way they could - to "make it" in life, by "passing" for white. We - in White America - forced them to sell their souls and live a lie, just so that they could find a way to feed themselves and their children.

These are the fruits of bigotry and fear.

And speaking of being left-handed... Within this very century, right here in our own city, schoolchildren who came in writing with their left hands were forced to write with their right hands. Left-handedness was considered deviant - the work of the devil!.... Have you ever tried to write with your weaker hand? You can't do it! We are born either left-handed, or right-handed, and that's just the way it is! There's nothing we can do to change it.

Some of us might think, "Why do gays and lesbians have to be what they are? Let them find a good shrink who can "straighten them out." And if they can't do that, then why can't they just keep it quiet - keep it to themselves?" But are we prepared to force a whole community of people, born of God's creation, upstanding and honorable people, to live a lie? - to lie? - to us - and their families? - to their landlords and employers? - - Like we forced black Americans to live a lie? Like the anti-Semites forced us to change our names, and pretend to be something we neither were, nor desired to be? Like the Nazis forced little Jewish children to hide themselves in Catholic schools, and take on completely new and strange identities - to live a lie? - to become experts at duplicity? Like the Church of 15th-century Spain forced the Jews to accept Christ, or be killed, thus forcing many to live underground as Crypto-Jews? - Marranos? Is being different the only crime that one has to commit to be condemned and ostracized in this world that we have created? How many more Marranos do we need in human history?!

On Rosh Hashanah it is time for all of us Jews to consider, very honestly and carefully, what is really in our hearts, and our kishkes - and to consider what kind of people we ought to aspire to be - to consider what our tradition teaches us about honesty, and respect, and loving our neighbors.

In addition, we stand now together on the threshold of a new millennium. Is it not then, particularly urgent - that we refine our thinking about what we want in our hearts and our minds as we cross that threshold together? Will we walk with closed minds and hardened hearts? Or will we

open ourselves to the possibilities of a better way that will allow us to embrace all of God's children as members of our human family. Will we single out some human beings as "acceptable", and slam the doors in the faces of others? Or, will we have the courage to destroy the seeds of fear and ignorance; of bigotry and hatred once and for all - so that their fruits will never ripen again - so that the words we shall read next week on Yom Kippur ring in our ears with meaning: ואהבת לרעך כמוך - "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

אלהינו שבשמים - Our God in Heaven - Open our ears to these words that we may truly hear them; so that we can personally bring nearer the day when peace and justice will reign upon the earth; when we will finally be able to live together in mutual respect and understanding - our messianic hope now for 2,000 years. God has created us with the power to bring that hope to fruition. לו יהי - May it be - speedily, and in our days.

*Amen.*

## APPENDIX C

*The following is the article I wrote for the April, 1996 edition of the Union Temple Bulletin, to announce the Conference at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue on gay and lesbian inclusion. I made it a point to include the names of congregations and Rabbis that were familiar to, and respected by, the members of Union Temple, in order to disabuse anyone of the belief that we would stand alone if we were to take significant steps toward gay and lesbian inclusion.*

For over two decades now, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, with our friend Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler at the helm, has been promoting efforts for the inclusion of gay and lesbian Jews within the congregations of the Reform Movement. As we discussed with Rabbi Schindler last Yom Kippur, while it is true that there are several synagogues around the country that exist primarily to serve gay and lesbian Jews, we need to consider our own responsibilities as so-called "mainstream" congregations, to our Jewish brothers and sisters, daughters and sons, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, teachers, doctors, lawyers, and yes, rabbis and cantors, whom we love, and respect, and admire; and also happen to be gay. We need to do this not only for their sake, but for our own. For surely, if there is any group that knows the sting of exclusion and hatred, it is ours - Jews - we who have been the targets of prejudice and discrimination, fear and shunning, for centuries upon centuries. Our fellow Jews who find themselves in the gay minority still suffer from such bigotry. But let it not be at our hands. It is time for them to come home - to their families, to their friends and colleagues; to the Jewish community, which has been characterized by the attributes of tolerance and respect for differences, for so long.

Ten years ago, the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue of New York spearheaded a conference on the inclusion of gay and lesbian Jews within the mainstream of our community. On **Sunday, April 21st, from 12:00-5:30 p.m.**, the synagogue will sponsor a day-long conference to assess the progress of the past ten years, and consider the goals that remain unmet. The conference will be held at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue, 30 West 68th Street (off Central Park West) in Manhattan. By Board of Trustees decision, Union Temple joins a number of other congregations and organizations in co-sponsoring this conference. Among the other co-sponsors are: Temple Beth-El of Great Neck; Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, Congregation Rodeph Sholom; East End Temple; Temple Israel of Northern Westchester; Congregation Kol Ami (formerly the Jewish Community Center of White Plains); the Garden City Jewish Center; the

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion; Riverside Memorial Chapel; the New Israel Fund; the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues; and many others, too numerous to mention.

It will be my privilege to be among the guest speakers, who include: Rabbi Balfour Brickner, Dr. Martin A. Cohen, Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson, Rabbi Julie Spitzer, Dr. Nancy Weiner, Rabbi Marc Blumenthal, among others. The program will also include a number of lay leaders who have been in the forefront of this issue.

Though I realize that the Religious School does not end until 12:30, I hope that many of you in this category will feel free to come later in the afternoon. **Childcare will be available.** The program that I and Rabbi Spitzer will be conducting will be held at 3:30. Rabbi Davidson's program, which should also be of particular interest to our congregation, will be conducted at the same time.

I hope that many of our members will take the time to join many hundreds of our fellow Jews, both gay and straight, who will be attending this conference. Please make every effort.

In keeping with the spirit of Passover, which we will have celebrated by that time, we remember our theme: "From slavery to freedom, from degradation to glory. This year here, next year in Jerusalem." As we utter our messianic hopes, we remember our own collective experience as societal outcasts. Let us work together to make this a world where all may be truly free, living out our lives in mutual respect, security, and peace.

*A Ziessen Pesach to you all.*

*Rabbi Linda Henry Goodman*

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