

Burning In Hell, Conservative Movement Style

Judith Plaskow

In the late 1970s, I spent three years in the “buckle of the Bible belt” teaching religion at Wichita State University. During my time there, several students told me I was going to burn in Hell because I had not “accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.” They did not say this with any malice. On the contrary, they were simply telling me how the world works. It was because they liked and respected me that they wanted me to save myself before it was too late.

I had mixed feelings about being the recipient of such tidings. Part of me was condescendingly amused that they could believe such nonsense. Part of me sympathized with the fundamental conflict that being taught by a Jew caused them. But mainly, I was angry that the students chose to hold onto the narrow tenets of their faith against the evidence of their own feelings. I was offended that they would rather squeeze me into an anti-Semitic system than let my reality as a person serve as the starting point for rethinking their religious assumptions.

I am reminded of this experience and the feelings it evoked as I reflect on the Conservative movement’s year-old decision to condemn homosexual behavior. In March 1992, the Rabbinical Assembly Law Committee voted thirteen to seven (with three abstentions) to support Joel Roth’s long *tshuvah* (decision) arguing that traditional proscriptions against homosexuality remain valid and compelling. Fourteen months later, Roth has resigned as dean of the Jewish Theological Seminary’s Rabbinical School, and the issue of homosexuality deeply

divides the seminary’s faculty and student body as well as the Rabbinical Assembly. Still, the *tshuvah* remains the official teaching of the Conservative movement, and the chancellor of the seminary insists on reading all dissent as the product of external political pressure.

The movement’s stance calls to mind my Wichita experience because Roth’s *tshuvah* is as confident about the place of “homosexuals” in the divine economy as my students were about the place of Jews. Homosexuality is not innately abominable, Roth assures gay and lesbian Jews. It is just that God has defined it as such! The Torah’s blanket prohibition of homosexuality as *toevah* (an abomination) is so clear and binding that the force of extra-legal considerations would have to be overwhelming to compel rabbis to rethink the law. In Roth’s judgment, none of the available theories concerning the origins or nature of homosexuality constitutes cogent or compelling reason to overturn precedent. The “responsible halachist,” therefore, is constrained not only to oppose the acceptance of gay and lesbian rabbis and cantors, and refrain from recognizing or participating in gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies, but to counsel gay and lesbian Jews that “Jewish law would have you be celibate.”

I see a number of analogies between this *tshuvah* and the stance of my former students at Wichita State. Both affirm a traditional understanding of religious authority and teaching. Both see themselves as doing so not on grounds of prejudice, anti-Semitism, or homophobia, but of religious necessity. And both choose religious doctrine above human beings.

By claiming that no contemporary evidence is strong enough to outweigh the words of Torah—not psychoanalytic or scientific theory, and certainly not the testimony and real-

ity of gay and lesbian Jews—the Rabbinical Assembly Law Committee avoids having to examine the presuppositions of its religious system. Were it to begin with people rather than Torah, on the other hand, were it to entertain the possibility that homosexuality is not an abomination—that it is simply a mode of sexual expression, as loving or as alienated, as much or as little a vehicle for turning toward God as heterosexuality—then it might be forced to surrender its certainty that God’s will is identical with the words of Torah. While the Conservative movement has generally rejected a fundamentalist stance, in this case it is certain that it knows the mind of God.

There is another layer to my analogy as well. Both the Conservative movement and my former students ignore the history and context of the actual power relationships between the groups in question. Thus Roth argues that his decision does not support intolerance because the Jewish community should be no more intolerant of violations of sexual prohibitions than it is of violations of other halachic norms. But in the real world, being gay or lesbian is not equivalent to other halachic violations. Sabbath desecrators are not the victims of hate crimes in every city in this country. No state has yet put a referendum on its ballot abrogating the civil rights of the religiously intermarried.

The *tshuvah*’s inattention to political context is precisely analogous to that of my students. Jews are people, they said; we are welcome in the universities; we should have civil rights; we should just know that God says we are going to burn in Hell. And regardless of the benign intent with which the students say it, every Jew knows full well that they are reflecting and supporting two thousand years of anti-Semitism. If the Rabbinical Assembly Law Committee cannot see that it is reflecting and sup-

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porting a long history of religious homophobia (Jewish and otherwise), then it is either willfully blind or patently dishonest. The fact is that, despite its protestations to the contrary, with this *tsbuwah* the Conservative movement allies itself with the anti-gay hate that is sweeping the country.

I do not have the space here to explore the halachic, religious, ethical, and communal implications of the full acceptance of gay and lesbian Jews. But enough has been written in the pages of *TIKKUN* and elsewhere to make it clear that the question is not simply one of Halacha—there are halachic arguments for acceptance of homosexuality—but of religious authority and power. Why did the law committee vote in a way that closes off discussion of this issue, and what would make it change? Why is Chancellor Schorsch choosing to attribute deeply held moral convictions to the influence of outside agitators, and how can he be convinced he is wrong? My interest as a lesbian Jew with ties to the Conservative movement is how lesbians, gays, and our allies can seize the opportunity provided by the present debate to bring about lasting change.

It seems important to recognize, first of all, the extent of the divisions within the Conservative movement. The vote of the law committee was not unanimous, and the committee is not elected by the Rabbinical Assembly and does not necessarily represent the views of all the Rabbinical Assembly's members. The committee that passed Roth's *tsbuwah* thirteen to seven also gave eight votes to an alternative *tsbuwah* offered by Elliott Dorff, making it a minority opinion that can be used by congregational rabbis. Dorff provides an excellent critique of Roth's halachic formalism, labels the results of his reasoning "unbelievably cruel," and calls for the establishment of a study commission to look at homosexuality as one aspect of a broader examination of Jewish attitudes toward sexuality. At its meeting in 1992, the Rabbinical Assembly established such a commission and also passed a resolution affirming gay and lesbian rights to rabbinic services. At the 1993 Rabbinical Assembly meeting, Rabbi Harold Shulweiss gave a keynote address calling for the integrations of Halacha and ethics, using homosexuality as a prime example. *B'tsalmeinu* ("in our image"), a group of rabbis formed to discuss gay and lesbian issues in the Conservative move-

ment and to effect positive change, collected well over a hundred signatures on a statement asking (among other things) that the law committee not institutionalize discrimination.

The divided rhetoric of the Conservative movement provides an excellent point of departure for those who would press for change. Soon after the law committee's decision, the United Synagogue and Rabbinical Assembly passed resolutions that, while "affirming [the] tradition's prescription for heterosexuality," supported full civil equality for gays and lesbians and welcomed them as members of synagogues. While such statements mainly seem designed to ease the movement's conscience about its halachic stance, they could provide a mandate for education and real encounter with gays and lesbians that might in turn pave the way for genuine acceptance. If the support expressed in these resolutions is serious, then all Conservative synagogues can be expected to include events on gay and lesbian Jews as a regular part of their educational programs. Women's League might launch a series of lectures and meetings parallel to its efforts on women's issues twenty years ago. Movement camps and youth programs should initiate training programs and workshops to combat the homophobia that is as rampant among their constituents as elsewhere in the youth and adolescent populations.

Meanwhile, individual congregations and Conservative Jews are not waiting for the movement to take action. Forces for transformation were at work before the law committee's vote—which provided the impetus for its consideration of the issue in the first place—and continue despite (or because of) it. Some congregations have written letters to the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Rabbinical Assembly, and United Synagogue, protesting the decision. Individual congregants have withheld from their annual synagogue dues the \$33.50 that goes to the United Synagogue—a form of resistance that is also open to congregations. Education committees have taken the initiative in setting up lectures, workshops, and other programs on gay and lesbian concerns. Some synagogues are reaching out to gay and lesbian Jews in their communities through special programs, through services for people with or touched by AIDS, and through the issues addressed from their pulpits. Since many rabbis may want to explore this issue but are

afraid of lay resistance, congregants can make clear that they want to hear sermons on, and see efforts to include, gays and lesbians in the Jewish community. Congregants can also support individual rabbis who practice "civil disobedience" by participating in gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies.

Two groups of Jews are especially crucial to this process of resistance and transformation: the friends and families of gays and lesbians, and gays and lesbians themselves. Chancellor Schorsch has argued that gays and lesbians are at most 2 to 5 percent of the population, and that homosexuality therefore affects few people and is not of interest to the Conservative laity. Rabbis who have raised the issue with lay people, however, have a different tale to tell. They hear stories of loved ones lost to AIDS who could not be mourned publicly; they are thanked for speaking out by parents, children, brothers and sisters of gays and lesbians who had long felt isolated and invisible. My partner's parents, for example, are long-time, prominent members of a mainstream Conservative congregation. There must be thousands of family members like them, many of whom are kept from sharing both their pain and their celebrations by the movement's homophobia. If these Conservative Jews could find concrete ways to raise with their rabbis and fellow congregants the dilemmas they face as relatives and friends of people whose behavior the movement has labeled "abominable," it would quickly become apparent that many lay people care deeply about an issue that is very close to home.

Families of gay and lesbian Jews are helped to speak out by a strong gay and lesbian witness and presence. Just as my very existence as a Jewish professor was a challenge to my students' unexamined faith, so the visible participation of gays and lesbians in Jewish life is the most effective challenge to those who pretend to accept us while at the same time insisting that God rejects our loving sexual expression. The Conservative movement has available to it solid halachic arguments for new attitudes toward lesbians and gays. Jews—especially gay and lesbian Jews—taking action to create a new reality in our individual communities will either hasten the day when the law committee finds the will to refine and apply these arguments, or they will render its work colossally irrelevant. □