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## **The Religious Case FOR Gay Marriage**

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Last Sunday I was speaking with a rabbinic colleague who lives in New Jersey, who told me that he would be heading out to Asbury Park that night, to be at the courthouse, in case any same-sex Jewish couples happened by, looking for a rabbi to marry them. For at 12:01 Monday morning, same sex marriage became legal in New Jersey. Two days later, on Tuesday, 3,000 protestors stood at the Capital in Springfield, and called on the Illinois House to pass a bill that has already passed in the Senate granting Illinois citizens the same rights that were granted on Monday in New Jersey, and have now been embraced by 14 States and the District of Columbia. On Wednesday a counter demonstration took place as 2,500 people assembled and called on the Illinois legislature to take no action (a stand that unfortunately our legislature has a great deal of experience with).

In its pair of page 4 articles on the two demonstrations, the Chicago Tribune made clear that those opposing a change in the law were speaking out with a clear sense of religious conviction, The Tribune cited the opposition of Springfield Bishop Thomas John Paprocki in its coverage of the Gay Marriage Supporters Rally; and the following day it highlighted speakers at the Opposing Rally who called on lawmakers to “uphold the tenants of Christian teaching and keep marriage between one man and one woman.” The article went on to speak of Cardinal Francis George, and of the coalition of African American clergy members, who said “upholding traditional marriage is about protecting the country’s ‘moral fiber’ and called on Christians to ‘report for duty’ in the effort to prevent gay marriage from becoming a reality in Illinois... for it is very clear,” they said, “that what could happen in this place is definitely against the word of God and the will of God.”

Now as much as I reject the conclusions of some of my fellow members of the clergy, I am obligated to begin my comments by calling on us to reflect on how this issue is portrayed in the press. The easiest way to present any conflict is to pit two sides against each other: Democrats oppose Republicans, Israelis oppose Palestinians, and Religion opposes Liberal Values. While we can all find facts to support these conclusions, one who wishes to **gain understanding** would do well to recognize that if we were to accept these propositions as Truth, we would inevitably be led to false conclusions.

Viewing the world as a duality creates a polarized perspective. It suggests that if one side wins, then the other necessarily loses. It creates a world without subtlety or compromise. It creates a palate of black and white; a world without gray, resulting in a harsh, inaccurate picture of reality. Unfortunately, this is the very image that our country sees today, a stark vision of black and white – and we are all suffering from it. Our country is suffering greatly.

Just as it is a fallacy to suggest that every issue in this country should be viewed through the lens of a Democratic victory equaling a Republican loss – or vice versa – or that the Israelis can only win at the expense of the Palestinians, so too is it wrong to teach that liberal values are in opposition to religion. Not only is this untrue, it also serves to delegitimize the value of religion to those who champion liberal causes, suggesting to large segments of our population that Religion is their enemy, and depriving them of the opportunity to be embraced and supported by religious teachings.

Thus, when I read accounts in the press that reinforce this stereotype, which give the impression that

religion is in opposition to diversity, and that one who values tradition rejects choice, I have to strongly object. The world we live in is not black and white. It is not even gray. We are surrounded by a multitude of colors. And those who present monotone images deprive us of seeing both complexity as well as beauty.

I understand how difficult it is to describe a colorful world – and how short people’s attention spans are – but those who seek to enlighten us about the issues of the day have an obligation to teach rather than divide, to enlighten rather than reinforce old stereotypes, to inform and educate, and not simply to indoctrinate preconceived beliefs.

With all that being said, it is true that much of the opposition to gay marriage stems from religious groups, particularly those who see their view of the Bible as infallible. For there can be no doubt that in the story of creation, the Torah (Bible) teaches that man and women are two halves of a whole, and that man and woman are commanded to be fruitful and multiply.

And yet, we find in the very same Torah that while the “marriage” of Adam and Eve may be the ideal, it didn’t stop our patriarch Abraham from having children with a wife **and** a concubine, or prevent his grandson Jacob from marrying two sisters and having children with both of them and their handmaidens – children who are not only accepted, but become the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus, if one wishes to be bound by a literal understanding of the Torah (Bible), one would have to accept, not that marriage must only be between a man and a woman. But rather we would have to say that the Mormons are correct (and how many of you thought that you would hear me say those words on this pulpit?) and that the Torah teaches polygamy.

And in truth, if we look to see how marriage is defined in both the Torah (Bible) and the Talmud, we find that the idealized image of Adam and Eve does not supplant the real. Polygamous marriages occurred in the Bible, and in the Ashkenazic Jewish world, they occurred up into the 16th Century when Rabbenu Gershom ruled that husbands should only take one wife. And what was the rationale for this decision? Rabbenu Gershom believed that having more than one wife was unseemly to our Christian neighbors. Indeed, Jews who lived in the Moslem world, where polygamy continues to be accepted, were not forbidden from taking more than one wife until the 1950’s when a ruling was made by the Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel.

My point here is not that we should begin to fight for polygamous marriage, but rather that the objection to deviating from the idealized concept of the Torah (Bible) – that marriage is between one man and one woman, is not a matter of religious teaching grounded in sacred texts. Rather it is a longstanding **cultural** value. And as such, when our culture evolves and changes, it is appropriate for our understanding of cultural norms to evolve and change as well – as Rabbenu Gershom demonstrated five centuries ago.

A second religious objection that is often raised, one that was cited in the article in the Tribune, is that allowing gay marriage will destroy the moral fabric of our country. Really?! This is the same rationale that the Boy Scouts use to keep gay adults from serving as scout leaders. In all honesty, if one is concerned with the moral fabric of our country, we would be far better served to conduct a campaign against Internet pornography than to outlaw gay marriage. And if our concern is really about protecting our youth, we might be better served to outlaw celibacy, than to worry about keeping two people who love, support and care for each other from making a commitment that they will continue to do so as long as they both should live.

Keeping people apart does nothing to reinforce a moral fabric; it is a false idol, a distraction from the

issue of sexual immorality. Unfortunately, there is no known predictor of who will become a sexual predator. It is not a matter of identifying who is gay or straight. Rather it is an issue of defining and teaching a moral use of power. One who is more powerful cannot use force to coerce another into a sexual relationship. It is immoral and unethical. Sexual morality has nothing to do with gender, and everything to do with using power in an ethical way.

A final argument that is often brought against gay marriage is that the Torah (Bible) teaches that the purpose of marriage is *Puru u'rvu* – to be fruitful and multiply, to propagate the species, a text that also comes from the story of creation in Genesis. And once again, this story presents us with an ideal; an ideal to which the Torah (Bible) itself raises objections. After all, if the only reason for marriage is procreation, then Abraham and Sarah would have been required to divorce – for Sarah was barren till the age of 90 when obviously, only a miracle could enable her to have a child. Their son Isaac married another woman, Rebekah, who also had great difficulty conceiving. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah remained together, not because they were filling the world with children, but because they loved and cared for each other. And in our world, who would deprive an infertile couple or an older couple from the opportunity to marry and the blessing of love and companionship. The truth is, children are a blessing, we live in an era when gender no longer creates an obstacle to loving, caring parents who wish to have a family and raise children.

No, it seems clear to me that the greatest objections to gay marriage have little to do with sacred scriptures or moral fiber, and much more to do with fear; fear of that with which we are uncomfortable; fear of the unknown. Tradition can add beauty, meaning and depth to life, but it can also be used to suppress that which we are afraid of, simply because it is different than what we are used to.

But friends, with all my words critiquing the case against gay marriage, I have yet to lay out a religious case for it. And so permit me to take us back a third time to that story of creation, to Genesis, Chapter 2, verse 18, where the Lord God said, “It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him.”

The story of Adam is an existential story about human beings. It is a story in which Adam finds himself on a big planet, teeming with life, and yet, he still feels terribly alone. Adam is surrounded by creatures of all different shapes and sizes, and yet he still craves companionship. He craves a partner. He craves one who will be with him in times of pain and distress, one with whom he can share his joy in times of gladness. He craves a fitting helpmate, so that he will no longer be alone.

Friends, when one who is lonely is able to find a fitting helpmate, someone to be by their side, someone who will love, honor and cherish, support and sustain, embrace and uphold them, then we should rejoice. We should be glad. When two individuals come together to go through life as lovers and friends, we need not be afraid. Rather we should celebrate with them. For it's a big world we live in, and it's so very easy to get lost in it. And as God knows – *Lo Tov y'heyeh Adam l'vado* – it's not good for one to live alone.

So when someone finds another who completes them, and makes them whole, we need not be afraid. Rather we should remember that the world we live in is not black and white, it is multi-colored; and that blessings come in many different ways. So we should thank God that one who once felt all alone can now feel whole – can now feel at peace, can now have *Shalom*.

May this blessing of wholeness, contentment, and peace come soon for all the residents of Illinois. And may we be partners with God in bringing this day to fruition. Amen.