

Rabbi Takes Stand on Gay Marriage

Temple Kol Emeth's Steven Lebow declares his willingness to officiate at same-sex weddings.

• October 13, 2011

Rabbi Steven Lebow of Temple Kol Emeth in East Cobb delivered the following sermon on Friday night at the start of the holiday of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, establishing his position as a Reform rabbi on the question of same-sex marriage.

Everybody knows the story of the very first love affair, the very first wedding, the very first marriage ever held in the Bible.

Genesis 3 tells the story that Adam was lonely, living by himself in the Garden of Eden. And so God cast a deep sleep upon him. God took the rib from Adam. He fashioned the rib into an entire person. And out of Adam's rib God made Eve. And this is the myth or legend of how the institution of marriage was born.

Adam and Eve were forever attracted to one another, the story goes, because they felt complete whenever they were together. They had two bodies but just one soul. What a great marriage and what a great romance—this is the lesson of the story of Adam and Eve.

But flash-forward a few thousand years to right now, and unfortunately the story only works well if the characters are named Adam and Eve.

It doesn't have quite the same happy ending if the characters happen to be named Adam and Steve, or Susie and Sally, or Jim and Russell, or Gail and Jessica, or—well, you're starting to get the point.

Most societies treasure everything in marriage until, well, until things aren't quite so easy. As soon as there is a variation from the norm, things fall apart, and the center will not hold.

So here is the problem, and here, as Shakespeare says, here is the rub: Some people think that marriage should be a beautiful, permanent, sacred and honorable institution—as long as it's not between two people who love each other.

Like gay men or women.

I know some will question how I can preach on a political topic. But how can I not address the greatest civil rights issue of our generation: Should gays and lesbians have the same civil rights, the same rights to property, the same rights to inheritance, the same rights to making medical decisions for a loved one, the same rights to marry as the rest of us do?

At the end of the day, what really is wrong in granting gays the same rights to marry as we have? No matter what you may have heard, there is absolutely no proof that gay marriage spells the end of society as we know it!

You will want to know the Jewish or the biblical background to these questions. It is true that a few parts of the Bible criticize gay sexual activity.

But as Reform Jews, we are bound to read the Bible critically and scientifically. In other words, what the Bible says for the year 2000 B.C.E. is not necessarily true 4,000 years later.

The only major condemnation of male homosexuality in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) comes from Leviticus, Chapter 18, Verse 22. The Bible says, “If two men have sexual relations, it is an abomination.”

An abomination? That is pretty strong language and presumably condemns homosexual activity for all time.

Or does it? Not having read the entire Bible puts you at a disadvantage. The term “abomination,” which sounds so indisputable in English, is actually very ambiguous in the original Hebrew.

Calling something an abomination doesn’t mean the same thing in Hebrew as the translation implies. The word in Hebrew is actually *toevah*, and *toevah* in the Bible simply means things that our tribe does not accept.

Would you like to know what else is described as a *toevah* or abomination in the Bible? Of course you do.

Toevah in the Bible also describes working on the Sabbath, witchcraft, many types of sexual relations, and, of course, my favorite abomination, or *toevah*, in the Torah—if you eat oysters, lobsters, clams, crabs or particularly shrimp cocktail, you are an abomination.

Oh, my gosh, just forget about gay marriage. Apparently those of us who have ever dined at Red Lobster are in really big trouble!

In any case, you get my drift. In order to understand obscure biblical passages, you have to understand their context.

Let me be perfectly clear about gay marriage. The leader of the Reform movement, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, stated a decade ago that it is time for us to recognize committed gay marriages in the same way that we honor heterosexual marriages.

This is where I stand. There is no other place to be.

No other Jewish movement—not the [Orthodox](#) and not even the [Conservative down the street](#)—is prepared to recognize gay marriage.

No other Jewish movement than the [Union for Reform Judaism](#), the movement of Reform and progressive Jewish men and women, will support the stand that I support tonight.

This is where I stand. I have no other place to be.

We are not talking about abstractions now. This is not a contemplative sermon about theoretical men or imaginary women. This is a declaration of intent, a sermon about real things and about real people.

This is where I stand. Where else could I be?

The right for gays and lesbians to marry is about you and me because, you see, maybe this is about your child, or maybe it's about mine. Maybe the right to gay marriage relates to your grandchild, to your sibling or to your best friend.

So if your son or daughter is gay and comes to you and asks, "Will our rabbi welcome me and my partner into the presumed and supposed open gates of this synagogue?" the answer is simply yes. I am prepared to officiate, from this night forward, at the wedding of gays and lesbians.

Because this is where I stand. I have no other place where I can go.

You see, the answer to full equality for gays and lesbians, the answer to gay marriage, at least from this pulpit, is yes.

Yes to complete equality and equal rights for gays and lesbians today. Yes to equality tomorrow. And yes, even the day after that.

This is where I stand.

I have no fear of disappointment or dispute. I have no other choice than the one I offer to you now.

Just 40 years ago it was against the law in Georgia for a black person to marry someone white. And yet today, at this High Holiday season, today we look back upon the days when interracial marriage was against the law in Georgia, and we wonder what planet those people lived on to deny the love that dare not speak its name.

So this is where I stand.

I have no other choice than the choice I speak tonight.

To forbid complete equality to gays and lesbians is to plant one's feet firmly on the wrong side of history.

One day, 50 years from now, your children or your grandchildren will ask themselves why it was even necessary to give a sermon like this.

And I suspect that as soon as 20 years from now, those who will remember and those who will reflect upon the sermon that I give tonight will give pause because for our children and our grandchildren the right for gay marriage will be commonplace in complete acceptance.

This is the direction that history will take us. As Dr. Martin Luther King once taught, "The

arc of history is long, but it always bends upwards, towards justice.”

This is where I stand. I have no other place to go.

I hope that at the end of the day you will choose to stand with me.

This is where I stand, and I can do no more.

I hope in days and nights to come, you will choose to walk down the lonely road of justice and of civil rights with me.

I hope that at the end of the day you will choose to stand with me.

About this column: An exploration of issues and events involving spirituality and the East Cobb religious community. Taken from <http://eastcobb.patch.com/>