

Tradition & Change

The motto of the Conservative Movement has always been *Tradition and Change*. This motto accurately reflects the historical development of Judaism. We clearly don't live our lives as Biblical Jews, or as Rabbinical Jews of the Talmudic period, or as Shtetl Jews of pre-WWII Europe. We have continued to live a life of *tradition* moderated by a changing society. Nor is this the sole claim of the liberal movements in Judaism! If so, there would never exist Orthodox Responsum that permit such things as Shabbat elevators and Shabbat telephones for emergency use. Of course, there has always been a struggle to maintain a balance of tradition within the process of change. The latest such struggle was the subject of an article in the November 28, 2011 issue of the *Daily Forward: Conservatives Grapple With Issues of Gay Wedding Rite*.

Having recognized gay rights with their 2006 acceptance of gay unions, Conservative rabbis are now wrestling with the issue of gay rites. The recent efforts of three leading rabbis to construct a kosher wedding ceremony for same-sex couples hews closely to the traditional Jewish heterosexual ceremony, in an effort, they say, to ensure that same-sex couples suffer no inequality in the sacred standards governing their vows. But these efforts, ironically, are now drawing criticism from some activists for replicating aspects of the Jewish wedding rite that they consider sexist.

In response to the Forward article, "Conservatives Grapple with Gay Wedding Rite," Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, the Executive Vice President of the Rabbinical Assembly wrote the following letter to the editor that the Forward published:

We wish to clarify our position on the draft of a new ceremony for gay and lesbian couples in discussion before the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. The drafting of these model ceremonies of commitment and separation, in addition to including several careful readings by committee members and other rabbis, also involved gay rabbinical students...

The committee took care to bring the full weight of tradition to bear in ensuring that these rituals convey their sacred purpose: the consecration of a "*bayit neeman b'yisrael*," a true and faithful Jewish home, for same-sex couples seeking to build a Jewish home and family.

At the same time, they took care to distinguish the marriage ceremony from *kiddushin*, which Jewish tradition explicitly stipulates is intended for a union between a man and a woman. Jewish tradition's framing of *kiddushin* raises other issues that trouble many couples today. The ritual of *kiddushin* is technically a special type of "acquisition." While such "acquisition" attempts to describe the way in which people in loving, committed relationships "belong" to each other, the modern sensibility bristles at this framing.

We hew to the traditional framework where we inherit it, and strive to bring contemporary understanding. But where we have the opportunity to craft a new

ritual, we seek to frame it in an idiom that captures our understanding of Judaism's intentions.

The deliberations of the CJLS, both at its last meeting and in the process leading up to it, are testament to the profound ways in which Conservative Judaism brings forward the best intentions of our tradition to recognize the divine spark in every member of our community and nurture it to grow.

There are times when the hoary practice of *Tradition and Change* leads us to an ever more inclusive community.

Rabbi Mark Mallach

