

LGBT Equality Resources for Reform Congregations



Sample Testimony

When LGBT equality legislation has been introduced in state legislatures, Reform Rabbis have been active in testifying on behalf of it. Below is one example. You can find more [here](#).

Rabbi Elissa Sachs-Kohen, January 31st, 2012

Testimony before Senate Judiciary in Favor of Marriage Equality Bill

Thank you Senators, for your service to the State of Maryland and your willingness to confront the difficult issues of our times.

For the past 8 years, I have been one of the Rabbis of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, Maryland's largest Reform Jewish congregation. In my twelve years as a Rabbi, I have been blessed to rejoice with many, many wedding couples. And, though it is difficult, I have also declined to officiate at weddings when my religious values did not accord with those of the couple. Though I respect their right to be married, I could not officiate with religious integrity. As a member of the clergy, I would never support a law which abrogated my right to stay true to the teachings of my religious tradition. The fact that the legislation we are discussing today upholds the right of all clergy and all religious institutions to refuse to sanctify unions they deem religiously inappropriate is essential.

At the same time, I urge you to support this legislation because while people of good faith may disagree over the holiness of gay and lesbian unions that disagreement belongs in the churches, mosques and synagogues, not the State House. Our country, founded on democratic principles of human rights and human dignity, must not continue to deny some of its citizens the rights it approves for others.

More than a decade ago, my partner and I were united in a Jewish ceremony. We were blessed to have 3 different rabbis, a cantor; all of our parents and siblings participate in that ceremony with us and sanctify our love. In our wedding ceremony we affirmed the Jewish values of commitment and dedication that are at the core of every stable, loving family, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, atheist, Hindu, straight or gay. After the ceremony we danced, we laughed and we ate, just like every wedding I have since conducted as a Rabbi.

You will likely hear from (or you have heard from) other Jewish people today who will tell you (who have told you) that my relationship is an abomination. They will cite several verses in Leviticus which they interpret as denouncing homosexuality. They will tell you that the evidence is irrefutable and you must not pass this law.

I could go into a long lesson about how those verses in Leviticus are misunderstood; how they prohibit a sexual encounter that could only be outside the bounds of a family relationship because men could only be married to women and therefore, yes, such an encounter would be destructive. I could talk about how the Torah could not imagine sexuality between men that could be stable, loving and committed as we know today it can be. But I won't.

Instead I'll say that even if we disagree about those couple of verses, the overwhelming message of the Torah is human dignity, respect for individuals and for the diversity of creation. 36 times the Torah teaches that we must take care of the poor, the widow and the orphan - those in a Biblical society who did not have the rights afforded to others. Human Rights 36 - Questionable objection to homosexuality 3.

Passing this legislation ensures the human rights of GLBT people and does nothing to inhibit the rights of those who choose to object to the diversity of creation.

I am a Rabbi committed to over 3000 years of Jewish ethics and moral values and the way that those values evolve, speaking powerfully in every new generation. I am a citizen of the state of Maryland, proud of its history of personal and religious freedom, including our state's permission to incorporate Baltimore Hebrew as the first Jewish congregation among Christian ones in 1830. I am a spouse and a mother of two children who I hope will never feel the sting of discrimination and the anxiety of not being protected by their own country's laws. I urge you to pass this legislation and make that hope a reality. Thank you.

Sample Sermons

ENDA: A Jewish Perspective

Karen L. Erlichman

As a spiritual director, I have the privilege of supporting and witnessing the sacred unfolding of people's spiritual journeys, and of creating a sanctuary for them to discern the Divine Presence in their lives. In addition, as a psychotherapist, I am often sitting with people as they create healing and wholeness for the places in their lives and hearts in which they experience profound brokenness. Finally, as the Bay area director for Jewish Mosaic: the National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity, I facilitate dialogues, workshops and other programs designed to foster full LGBTQ inclusion in all aspects of the Jewish community.

Since text study has always been one of the cornerstones of Jewish practice, I often find tremendous refuge and guidance in sacred texts. One particularly powerful and favorite reading from Deuteronomy describes the fullness and diversity of sacred community:

"You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God, your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to waterdrawer, to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God, which the Lord your God is concluding with you this day, with its sanctions, to the end that God may establish you this day as God's people and be your God, as God promised you and swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord your God, and with those who are not with us here this day." --Deuteronomy 29:9-14

In my line of work, I witness far too many people searching for a place in which to discuss and heal from workplace abuse, discrimination and trauma. For queer folk in general, and in particular queers who may also be Jewish, people of color, transgender or genderqueer, being one's full self in the workplace may mean risking their jobs, their wellbeing, and/or their safety.

In studying and praying with a text like this, I am acutely aware of its emphatic and unequivocal inclusiveness; both in terms of the kinds of people (children, spouses, even the outsider), and the nature of their work (from woodchopper to waterdrawer). As a queer Jew, I strive to embody and practice this holy diversity in all aspects of my life.

There are many Jewish texts which honor the sacredness of diversity and the holiness of work. One of my favorites is of Shimon haTzadik, Simon the Righteous. He said, "Al ShlosHa Devarim Ha Olam Omed al ha-Torah, v'al ha-Avodah, v'al Gemilut Hasidim-- 'The world stands on three things: Torah, avodah ("divine service", or work or worship), and acts of lovingkindness'" (Avot 1:2). This quote comes from the opening section of Pirke Avot -the book of wisdom from the Jewish sages. In Hebrew words often have multiple meanings. The word avodah means both work and worship. Why? There is an aspect of worship and prayer that requires us to work, to study, to stretch and to grow, and work or service can be done with a prayerful heart.

In his book *These are the Words*, Rabbi Arthur Green further explains avodah:

"Avodah, the term for "worship" in Hebrew, is derived from the root ayin-bet daled, meaning work, labor or service, as performed by a servant. We are to see ourselves as servants of Adonai, working at God's service...There, avodah refers to sacrifices ...[from the times when] the Temple was yet standing. After its destruction, the rabbis made the daring move of calling prayer "Avodah she'ba'lev," the avodah of the heart. This means that the same power of approaching God, whether to show one's love and gratitude or to seek atonement, that had previously lain in the offering of animals, was now transferred to the interior realm (the inner sanctuary within us)...the devotional attitude associated with the word avodah is not an easy one for us today. " p. 119

How do these core Jewish teachings help us to understand the critical importance of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act to protect every member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community? In our generation, many years after the destruction of the Jewish Temple, everywhere that we engage in avodah (work and worship) must be regarded as holy, and we are thus accountable to holy standards of relationships, laws and behavior.

The text from Deuteronomy is a powerful reminder of the covenantal aspect of being in community with one another, with the Holy One of Many Names, with those who are standing here and those who are not. As queer people of faith our activist work for a fully inclusive ENDA is reflected by this covenant.

May we be blessed with the courage, foresight and strength to live fully in the light of our covenant with God, and to honor the diversity and dignity of all queer creatures created in the Divine Image.

Reflection on a GLBT Chanukah

Rabbi Denise L. Eger, Dec. 15, 2006

Chanukah is know as Chag Orim—The Festival of Lights. We light up the darkness of a winter's eve with the many branched candelabrum known as a menorah or chanukiah. For each of the eight nights of Chanukah we light an additional branch of the chanukiah as a reminder of the great

miracle of the Maccabees—that they, against all odds, were able to rededicate and reclaim the ancient Temple in Jerusalem from the hands of the Syrian –Greeks. A small band of the faithful against the mightiest army in the world, was able to cleanse the Temple of the idols that had been erected there and dedicate the holy altar once again.

For GLBT people at this season, the story of the Maccabees should provide us with great inspiration. The Maccabees (whose name means hammer) were able to overcome the great oppression of their day. The Syrian Greek powers horribly oppressed the Israelites. They did not let them worship freely and did whatever they could to desecrate the ancient Jewish worship spaces. They murdered and tortured Jewish families who would not bow down to their idols. And yet, the Maccabees prevailed and were able to cleanse the Holy Sanctuary in Jerusalem and restore and rededicate it to the Divine. They re-lit the ancient Menorah, symbol of the Jewish people, bringing light and joy at this season.

In our day and time GLBT people are still oppressed in many corners of the world and in our own country. Our equality is not secure and there are those who do everything in their power to wage war against GLBT people. We battle on many fronts—equality in the workplace, in school and in our churches and synagogues. We battle for parenting rights and the right to adopt. We battle for marriage and the right to serve our country openly. The story of the Maccabees’ dedication to liberty and freedom should inspire us that although the odds seem overwhelming at times, that the few can overcome the many. The Maccabees’ dedication to justice should give us hope that we too can successfully bring justice and equality to GLBT people both here and abroad. When we work together as a community, we are stronger and strengthen one another. We are doing this work together, bit by bit!

So at this season of light, let the light of the Chanukah menorah remind us of our journey to freedom from oppression and let that light inspire us all to work for the day of triumph, glory and justice when GLBT individuals will be truly free and equal.

Rabbi Denise L. Eger is founding Rabbi of Congregation Kol Ami in West Hollywood, CA (www.kolami.org) and a member of HRC’s Religion and Faith Council.

Sample Resolutions

URJ and CCAR Resolutions on LGBT Equality:

All Reform Movement resolutions regarding LGBT equality may be found [here](#). These include resolutions in favor of marriage equality from [CCAR](#) (1996), [URJ](#) (1997), and [NFTY](#) (2003).

Judea Reform Congregation, Durham, NC

[Regarding NC Amendment 1](#)

In May 2012, the citizens of North Carolina will be given the opportunity to vote on House Bill 777/Senate Bill 106. While this is commonly called the “Defense of Marriage Amendment,” it is also

known as the Anti-LGBT Amendment because it is discriminatory against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender North Carolinians. If passed, the amendment will enshrine discrimination into the state's constitution, a document which is intended to protect the citizens of the State. In addition, the amendment contradicts two Sections of Article I of the North Carolina State Constitution. Section 1 declares:

"We hold it to be self-evident that all persons are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, the enjoyment of the fruits of their own labor, and the pursuit of happiness."

And Section 19 states:

"No person shall be taken, imprisoned, or disseized of his freehold, liberties, or privileges, or outlawed, or exiled, or in any manner deprived of his life, liberty, or property, but by the law of the land. No person shall be denied the equal protection of the laws; nor shall any person be subjected to discrimination by the State because of race, color, religion, or national origin."

These Sections are designed to preserve and protect the liberty of all North Carolina citizens, including those in the minority. Inclusion of a discriminatory amendment violates the spirit and letter of these existing Sections.

The Social Action Committee believes that this amendment is a dangerous, unprecedented attack on the rights of its citizens and that it should not be passed. We recommend that the Board of Trustees of the Judea Reform Congregation pass the resolution presented below and work with other faith-based organizations to block the passage of this legislation.

The Union of Reform Judaism has long held an inclusive position with respect to our LGBT members. Repeatedly, the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) and the Religious Action Center (RAC) have passed resolutions affirming our belief that all people are created in the divine image. As a corollary to this basic tenet, the Reform Movement has been in the vanguard of support for the full recognition of equality for lesbians and gays both within our congregations and in all walks of life. Most recently, the CCAR passed a resolution supporting the right of gay and lesbian couples to share fully and equally in the rights of civil marriage and to oppose governmental efforts to ban gay and lesbian marriage. Clearly, the proposed constitutional amendment is anathema to the unequivocal position endorsed by the Reform movement and for this reason alone, we believe that the Judea Reform Congregation should pass its own resolution against the proposed Anti-LGBT amendment.

We also believe that there is a long list of equally compelling reasons why the proposed amendment should be defeated. Several of these reasons are listed below:

The Anti-LGBT amendment is redundant and is an unnecessary use of legislative time and resources. Same-sex marriage is already illegal in North Carolina under the North Carolina General Statute (NCGS) § 51.1-2. While the SAC disagrees with this law, we cannot deny that NCGS § 51.1-2 exists making the proposed Amendment redundant.

The Anti-LGBT Amendment is bad for business and will cause real harm to North Carolina's ability to support businesses in the State. The proposed amendment is broadly written and defines marriage as the "only domestic union" that can be "valid or recognized in this state." This wording has caused many business leaders across the state to comment that passage of the Amendment will have a chilling effect on their ability to recruit qualified employees, because the ability of private businesses and governmental employers to offer domestic partner benefits will be jeopardized. Political figures as polarized as Governor Beverly Purdue (D) and U.S. Representative Renee Ellmers (R) recognize the effect that this Amendment may have on the fragile NC economy and have voiced opposition to its passage for these reasons.

The Anti-LGBT Amendment has the potential to invalidate protections for members of same-sex domestic partnerships. Again, because the Amendment is so broadly written, passage of the amendment will deny to opposite-sex domestic partners the legal rights typically extended to married opposite-sex couples (e.g., employer-sponsored family medical benefits, short- and long-term disability benefits, child custody and visitation rights and end-of-life arrangements).

For all of these reasons, the Social Action Committee requests the Board of Trustees to pass the following resolution:

The Board of Trustees of Judea Reform Congregation unequivocally endorses the public position of the Reform Movement which supports the right of gay and lesbian couples to share fully and equally in the rights of civil marriage. As such, we oppose all governmental efforts to ban gay and lesbian marriage while we honor all monogamous domestic relationships including those formed by gay and lesbian couples. Therefore, we resolve to work to defeat the passage of the Anti-LGBT Amendment of the NC constitution.

Signed:
Board of Trustees, Judea Reform Congregation
Resolved, October 25, 2011

Temple Emmanuel, Greensboro, NC

[We are Reaffirming Equality Because Everyone Counts: Temple Emanuel of Greensboro Against NC Amendment 1](#) *(Excerpt)*

The two most often cited Biblical texts concerning homosexuality are both found in the book of Leviticus, where they are in the context of a larger section directing sexual behavior. First, it is written: "Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence." (Leviticus 18:22) The second citation is from Leviticus 20:13, where we read that "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 blood guilt is upon them."

In this verse, the word for "abomination" or "abhorrence" is Toevah. Interestingly, that the exact same word is used to describe eating fish that do not have fins and scales (such as catfish and shrimp), carcasses, eagles, bearded vultures, buzzards, ravens, owls, storks, herons and bats. The word is also used in reference to those who use unjust scales, those who lie or have a perverse heart, the way of the wicked, and those who are unjust or proud of heart. Clearly, selecting some biblical verses concerning

abomination to observe, while ignoring others, is not valid from a biblical point of view. Such selection would tend to reflect the innate biases of the “selector” rather than solid biblical scholarship.

However as Reform Jews, we are also guided by the very basic belief that all human beings are created b'tselem Elohim (in the Divine image), as it says in Genesis 1:27, “And God created humans in God’s own image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them.” Rabbi David Saperstein, the director of Reform Judaism’s Religious Action Center recently said in Congressional testimony that “regardless of context, discrimination against any person arising from apathy, insensitivity, ignorance, fear, or hatred is inconsistent with this fundamental belief. We oppose discrimination against all individuals, including gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, for the stamp of the Divine is present in each and every one of us.”

Each of us, created in God’s image, has a unique talent, with which we can contribute to the high moral purpose of tikkun olam, the repair of our world. Excluding anyone from our community lessens our chance of achieving this goal of a more perfect world. The Reform Movement has been an advocate of gay and lesbian rights since 1965, when the Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ) passed a resolution calling for the decriminalization of homosexuality. In 1977, our movement called for human rights for homosexuals. Since then, our movement has accepted the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the rabbinate and cantorate, elimination of discrimination within the Armed Forces and the Boy Scouts, legislation which called for workplace non-discrimination and other civil rights legislation. In addition, the Reform Jewish movement is committed to working to secure civil rights for gay men and lesbians, including the right to civil marriage.

Another Jewish Perspective: It is unacceptable to enshrine discrimination into our state constitution
(Rabbi Fred Guttman)

“We reject any attempt to write into the constitution of this state under the guise of protecting heterosexual marriage an amendment which seeks to restrict the rights of a certain group of people based upon their sexual identity. As Jews, we would respond passionately in this area. As Jews, we would recall that in 1935, the Nuremberg laws prohibited marriage between Jews and Germans or people of kindred blood. Based upon the history of the murder of six million Jews, laws prohibiting marriages might represent a slippery slope towards greater discrimination.

When this country was founded over two hundred years ago, “we the people” included only white males. Since that time, equal protection has been extended to all of our citizens, except for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.

Laws prohibiting marriages between white people and Negroes were enacted as early as 1872. Such laws were overturned by the Supreme Court in 1967. In South Africa, similar laws were enacted in 1949 and repealed in 1985. This amendment will not strengthen the institution of heterosexual marriages in our state or for that matter in our country. Let us separate the religious issue from the issue of discrimination and civil rights.”

Online Resources

General Social Justice

Khilat-Tzedek is a guide for enhancing the role that social justice advocacy plays in your congregation: <http://urj.org/socialaction/training/khilat-tzedek/>

Taking Action for LGBT Equality

Equality NC has a great report on the North Carolina anti-marriage equality amendment including strong talking points about reasons to oppose it. You can find the PDF here (<http://equalitync.org/truth>).

On1Foot is a database of Jewish texts related to social justice. LGBT issues are included: <http://on1foot.org/category/categories/gender-sexual-orientation>. Use these in a text study.

Resources from **Reform Jewish Voice of NY State** were used to good effect during the campaign for marriage equality in New York (<http://www.marriageforallny.org/>). They include good sermon templates, Torah study suggestions, temple bulletin inserts, etc. All can be easily adapted.

The **Human Rights Campaign** has a number of resources which you can use – including talking points on legislation and sample letters from a faith perspective (<http://www.hrc.org/issues/religion/13282.htm>).

Bullying and Suicide

The **It Gets Better Project** (<http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>) is a moving compilation of stories. See the RAC's video here (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IG2g2jkO-YI>). The New York campus of HUC-JIR did a video as well (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJckL52r6Qg>). Other creative videos include ones by the employees of Apple (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWYqsaJk_U8), Pixar (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4a4MR8ol_B8), and Google (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYLS4NCgvNU>). The Google Chrome ad is great too (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7skPnJOZYdA>). Among the most moving (it's about twelve minutes long, but worth every second) is this one: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ax96cghOnY4>.

I encourage you to use these, or clips from these, as tools to teach acceptance/tolerance in the religious school.

The **Suicide Prevention Research Center** has a very helpful 2008 report about LGBT suicide (http://www.sprc.org/library/SPRC_LGBT_Youth.pdf).

The **Religious Institute** a number sample prayers and sermons that address the issue of anti-LGBT bullying (<http://religiousinstitute.org/initiative/speaking-out-against-lgbt-bullying>).

LGBT Inclusion

The **Union for Reform Judaism** has helpful resources on its website for congregations (<http://urj.org/cong/membership/diversity/glbta/>).

Keshet, a LGBT Jewish organization, has a speaker's bureau. They offer a "safe schools & supportive communities" curriculum which comes with posters, DVDs, and other materials and available for a fee. You can buy it/learn more here: <http://www.keshetonline.org/programs/?program=national>. They also have posters of LGBT Jewish heroes which you can put up around your synagogue

(<http://lgbtjewishheroes.org/>) – this can be an important tool reminding LGBT youth that their sexuality isn't incompatible with having big goals in life!

The **Religious InSTITUTE** offers a number of very good resources. For example, if your congregation is interested in celebrating Pride, you can find some suggestions and toolkits here (<http://religiousinstitute.org/initiative/celebrating-lgbt-pride-in-your-congregation>). In addition, they have two very helpful reports: one on how faith leaders can address issues of sex and sexuality, especially in an LGBT-inclusive way (<http://religiousinstitute.org/research-report/sex-and-the-seminary-preparing-ministers-for-sexual-health-and-justice>), and another from the Unitarian Universalist Association discussing best practices for sex and sexuality education (<http://religiousinstitute.org/research-report/toward-a-sexually-healthy-and-responsible-unitarian-universalist-association>). Lastly, they offer syllabi for courses on a range of topics, which you can find here (<http://www.religiousinstitute.org/search/syllabus>).

Congregation Beit Simchat Torah is an LGBT congregation which has a variety of resources available on its website (<http://cbst.org/content/view/full/101>).

Educating Yourself and Your Congregation

ReligiousTolerance.org has a good collection of resources on what Jewish sources has to say about homosexuality (http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_judaism.htm), as well as some information about religion and homosexuality more generally (<http://www.religioustolerance.org/homosexu.htm>). They also have some helpful resources on LGBT issues (<http://www.religioustolerance.org/homosexu9.htm>).

Zeek.net also has a great article from Jay Michaelson about being gay and Jewish, and in particular addressing the problematic passages in Leviticus (http://www.zeek.net/jay_0409.shtml).