

Standing Together:

A Social Justice Guide for Shavuot

Shavuot commemorates the anniversary of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. On Shavuot, we remember the moment when we stood in the Presence of the Eternal One as we received the Torah and became a people, bound together by a sacred covenant. The period of the *Omer*, the forty-nine day bridge between Passover and Shavuot, and the evening of Shavuot itself, are traditionally times of preparation for this moment of re-living revelation. Hence the entire season of Shavuot encourages us to re-engage with Torah.

It has been said that the entire Torah exists to establish justice. Thus, through the study of Torah and other Jewish texts, Shavuot offers us an opportunity to re-commit to *tikkun olam*. Moreover, aspects of the holiday of Shavuot and the period of the *Omer* lend themselves to the study of and engagement with particular social action issues. This guide offers programmatic suggestions for the *Omer*, Lag BaOmer, *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, Shavuot day and confirmation.

In particular, Lag BaOmer and *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* lend themselves to social action. During the *Omer*, many Jews refrain from celebrating *simchahs*; however, on Lag BaOmer, the thirty-third day of this period, this prohibition is lifted. Because so many festivities occur on this day, Lag BaOmer can be a time to consider ways to incorporate social action into our rejoicing. *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, the late or all-night study session on Shavuot eve, offers a significant period of time that can be used for studying social justice and for engaging in *tikkun olam*.

This guide will focus on four issues connected with Shavuot: economic justice, the environment, world Jewry and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) issues and advocacy. Each of these topics is covered in a thematic section. Sections begin with an explanation about the connection between the social justice theme and Shavuot and the *Omer*. After the general introduction, families, social action chairs, confirmation classes, youth group leaders and other synagogue groups will find programs, projects and study topics that connect Shavuot and the *Omer* with these themes.

For information on how to count the *Omer*, organize a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* or celebrate Shavuot, visit the holiday website of the URJ Department of Religious Living: www.urj.org/holidays.

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The *Omer*: In Preparation for Revelation

Beginning on the second day of Passover and continuing for the forty-nine days (seven by seven weeks) to Shavuot, Jews celebrate the ritual of counting the *Omer*. Originally, this was an agricultural activity, marking the days between the barley harvest around the time of Passover and the wheat harvest around the time of Shavuot. The term “*omer*” means “barley sheaf” and refers to the barley offering that was brought to the Temple on the second day of Passover. Then, on Shavuot, two loaf offerings (made of wheat) were brought to the Temple. The period of the counting of the *Omer* was a time of agricultural growth between what the community hoped would be two successful harvests.

The *Omer* is also a period of spiritual growth. We look inward as we prepare symbolically to journey from redemption on the shores of the Red Sea, which we commemorate on Passover, to the moment of revelation at Sinai, which we celebrate on Shavuot. The texts of our traditions and their inherent ethical and moral principles were revealed at Sinai; hence, our spiritual preparation during the *Omer* leads us to social action.

Study *Pirkei Avot* and Social Justice

In many communities, it is traditional to read from *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers, during the period of the *Omer*. *Pirkei Avot* includes many moral teachings and emphasizes the connection between Torah study and justice. The following sections from *Pirkei Avot* are particularly appropriate for social justice study during the *Omer*. You may wish to study one or more of these texts before or after engaging in social action. Or, focus on a different text each Shabbat during the period of the *Omer*.¹

Simon the Righteous was one of the last of the Great Assembly. His motto was: “The world stands on three things – the Torah, the [Temple] service, and loving acts of kindness.” (Avot 1:2)

[Hillel said,] “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself alone, then what am I? And, if not now, when?” (Avot 1:14)

Rabban Shimon, the son of Gamliel, said, “The world stands on three things: on truth, on judgment, and on peace; as it is stated [in Scripture]: ‘Execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates.’” (Avot 1:18)

[Hillel said,] “In a place where there are no human beings, try to be one.” (Avot 2:5)

¹ All texts are taken from *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics*. Kravitz, L. and Olitzky, K. eds. and trans., New York, UAHC Press, 1993.

Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah said, “Where there is no Torah, there will be no good conduct; where there is no good conduct, there will be no Torah. Where there is no wisdom, there will be no reverence; where there is no reverence, there will be no wisdom. Where there is no understanding, there will be no knowledge; where there is no knowledge, there will be no understanding. Where there is no bread, there will be no Torah; where there is no Torah, there will be no bread.” (Avot 3:17)

To what shall be compared one whose wisdom is greater than one’s deeds? To a tree whose branches are many, but whose roots are few, so that, when the wind comes, it will uproot it and overturn it, as it says, “One shall be like a tamarisk in the desert and shall not see when good comes; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness.” [Jer. 17:6] To what shall be compared one whose works are more numerous than one’s wisdom? To a tree whose branches are few, but whose roots are many, so that, even if all the winds of the world were to come and blow upon it, they could not move it from its place, even as it said, “For one shall be as a tree planted by the water, that spreads out its roots by the river. It shall not fear when heat comes, for its leaf shall be green. It shall not worry in a year of drought, for it shall never cease yielding fruit.” [Jer. 17:8] (Avot 3:17)

There are four kinds of people who would give to charity (*tzedakah*). One wishes to give but [believes] that others should not. That one’s eye is evil to those others. One [wishes that] others give and that he should not. His eye is evil toward himself. One [wishes that] he should give and so should others. That one is a saint. [The] one [who believes that he] should not give nor should others is a sinner. (Avot 5:13)

Read up on Social Action

Visit www.socialaction.com/omer2000.html. This website lists a different article for each of the seven weeks of the *Omer*. Each article, in turn, provides a list of seven items, one for each day of that week. Titles include, “Seven Principles for Building a Community of Justice,” “Seven Social Action Role Models” and “Giving as Justice: Seven Ways of Doing Philanthropy Which are Changing the World.” These readings provide food for thought and suggestions for implementing social justice into our everyday lives.

Shavuot and Economic Justice

And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way
to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest;
you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger:
I the Eternal am your God. (Lev. 23:22)²

The holiday of Shavuot is mentioned several times in the Bible. In Leviticus, Shavuot is linked with the commandments of *pei-ah* (leaving crops at the corners of the field for the poor) and *sh'chicha* (leaving the fallen grain for the poor). Even as we celebrate the first fruits and the bounty of the land, we are to remember those in need. We are commanded to provide for the stranger, the orphan and the widow (Deut. 24:19). Hence, our rejoicing is incomplete unless even the poorest and most vulnerable members of society have enough to eat.

These are the things that have no fixed measure: leaving crops at the corners of the field for the poor, bringing first-fruits to the Temple as Pilgrimage Festival offerings, performing deeds of loving-kindness and studying Torah. These are the things the fruits of which one enjoys in this world and the stock of which remains in the world-to-come: honoring one's father and mother, acts of loving-kindness, and making peace between one person and another; but the study of Torah is equal to them all. (Mishnah Pei-ah 1:1)

The rabbis took to heart the commandment to set aside a portion of the harvest for the poor. This passage from the Mishnah mentions that there is no upper limit to the amount that a person can set aside for this purpose. Thus, one can (and should) offer as much as one is able. As associative thinkers, the rabbis connected *pei-ah* with other actions on which there is no fixed upper measure – the amount of first fruits, acts of loving-kindness and the study of Torah. Rabbi David Polish wrote that this list reveals “the attitudes and practices that the Rabbis considered to be of ultimate value. The [list] reads like an instruction book about how each of us should live our lives and reminds us about what is of limitless importance.”³

The Book of Ruth, which traditionally is read during Shavuot, contains many social justice themes, including the importance of reaching out to strangers and our communal obligations towards those in need. Ruth and Naomi were able to fill their bellies because the Jewish community of Bethlehem practiced *sh'chicha*. When Ruth went into the fields to glean, she met her kinsman Boaz, who showed her additional kindness, instructing his

² All biblical citations are taken from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*, Philadelphia, JPS, 1985. Note that ‘Eternal’ may be substituted for ‘Lord.’

³ *Together at Sinai: A Study Program for the Night of Shavuot*, New York, UAHC Press, 2002, p. 54.

workers to drop extra sheaves of grain. This initial act of *g'milut chasadim* (loving-kindness) formed the foundation of the relationship between Boaz, Ruth and Naomi. At the end of the Book of Ruth, Boaz married Ruth. Their child Obed became the grandfather of King David and the ancestor of the Messiah. Hence, the Book of Ruth suggests that when we fulfill our communal obligation to treat the poor with justice, we contribute to the work of redeeming the world.

You shall count off seven weeks of years – seven times seven years – so that the period of seven weeks of years gives you a total of forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the horn loud... and you shall hallow the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you. (Lev. 25:8-10)

Beginning on the second day of Passover and continuing for the forty-nine days (seven by seven weeks) to Shavuot, Jews celebrate the ritual of counting the *Omer*. The seven times seven weeks of the counting of the *Omer* parallel the seven times seven weeks of years in the Jubilee cycle; hence, the period of the *Omer* is like “a microcosm of the Jubilee cycle.”⁴ In a Jubilee year, debts are forgiven, the land is redeemed and slaves are set free. The Jubilee ensures that no person or family remains trapped in a cycle of poverty. All people have the opportunity to return to the land and sustain themselves. As we prepare during the seven weeks of the *Omer* to stand again at Sinai, progressing from slavery in Egypt towards the freedom of revelation, during the Jubilee cycle the Israelites progressed each ‘week of years’ towards a society that was more free and more just.

The message of the Jubilee continues to ring true today, for it mandates that we create a society in which all people have an opportunity to sustain themselves through work. Poorer people need not and ought not remain permanently oppressed.

Maimonides’ ladder of *tzedakah* echoes the message of the Jubilee cycle. This ladder of *tzedakah* ranks the various ways we offer assistance to those in need. At the lowest level is the person who gives *tzedakah* grudgingly. Somewhere in the middle is the person who provides food for the poor. At the highest level is the person who helps another become self-sufficient. In a world where everyone performed *tzedakah* on this highest rung, we would no longer be under the obligation to provide *tzedakah* because all people would have enough.

Program Ideas for Shavuot and Economic Justice

Study Economic Justice During the *Omer* and/or as Part of a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*

⁴ Waskow, A., *Seasons of Our Joy*, New York, Bantam, 1982, p. 182.

Study Gleaning in the Book of Ruth

Resource: “Gleanings from Ruth: Through a *Tikkun Olam* Lens,” by Rabbi Daniel Polish. This study session for a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* can be found in “Together at Sinai: *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*,” UAHC Press, 2002, p. 49 or at www.urj.org/holidays/shavuot/tikkun/.

Learn About Supporting the Stranger in the Book of Ruth

Resource: “Helping the Stranger in Our Midst,” by Rabbi Ellen Flax, Jewish Fund for Justice. This Shavuot study session can be found at www.jfjustice.org/EDU_lessons.

Study the Current Challenges of Poverty During this Season when we Celebrate the Abundance of our own Harvest

The following resources can help you get started:

- Statistics, fact sheets and Jewish texts on poverty: www.urj.org/csa/projects/poverty, www.jfjustice.org/povertyfacts_51.html.
- More information about Shavuot and economic justice: www.mazon.org/What_You_Should_Know/Hunger_and_Judaism/Holidays.asp.
- Information on Judaism and economic justice: www.mazon.org.
- Hunger No More is a project that provides resources about hunger for religious congregations: www.hungernomore.org.
- A short Internet video that displays the discrepancy between the poverty line and the actual cost of living: www.nccbuscc.org/cchd/povertyusa/tour2.htm.

Take action on economic justice as part of your *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*

Make Donations Part of Your Tikkun Leil Shavuot

Make canned goods, new socks and underwear, school supplies or unused toiletries part of admission to your *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. If you are collecting items like school supplies or toiletries, create a station where people can assemble backpacks or toiletry bags throughout the evening.

Prepare Food for Those in Need at Your Tikkun Leil Shavuot

Bake bread or muffins during the night, and bring them fresh and hot to a local soup kitchen for the morning breakfast. Or, make bag lunches of PB&J, tuna fish, fresh fruit,

boxed drinks and cookies. Bring them to your local soup kitchen to distribute at breakfast so people have food for lunch.

Serve Fair-Trade Coffee

At a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, we stay up all night studying Jewish texts, a tradition many of us are only able to maintain through consuming caffeine, in particular, coffee. Most coffee is grown by subsistence farmers who are facing crisis as worldwide coffee prices have plummeted. Fair Trade coffee is a real solution. Fair Trade certification ensures that coffee farmers are paid a livable wage, and it also promotes sustainable practices, such as organic farming. More information on Fair Trade coffee (including where to purchase it) can be found at www.rac.org/advocacy/issues/fairtrade.

Become a congregation (or home) that serves only Fair Trade coffee. Kick off the program at your *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. Have a session where you teach about the importance of economic justice in the developing world. Staff a coffee cart where participants can taste various Fair Trade coffees and vote on their favorite. Continue this important work by serving Fair Trade coffee at synagogue functions throughout the year and at home.

Fair Trade certification is not limited to coffee. Look for Fair Trade labels on tea, chocolate and fruits like bananas, pineapples and mangos.

Economic Justice During Shavuot

Plant a Row for the Hungry

Observe the mitzvah of leaving the corners of your fields for the poor. In your home and/or synagogue garden, harvest the crops from the corners of your plot, or plant several extra rows of crops to donate to those in need.

Since 1991, **Congregation Mishkan Israel of Hamden, CT** has participated in a *pei-ah* project, which yields two to three thousand pounds of produce for local soup kitchens each summer. Rabbi Herbert Brockman studies Jewish sources with the congregation, exploring texts on the connection between agriculture and providing for the poor, such as Mishnah Pei-ah and the section on *matanot* (gifts to the poor) in the *Mishnah Torah*. Other texts might be about Jewish environmentalism or Zionism and the land.

Next, they dedicate their field and begin to plant seedlings (many of which were started by religious school classes during Tu BiSh'vat). The quarter-acre garden is divided into twelve plots, each of which is tended by various people, including families or groups of friends. A portion of each plot is dedicated to produce for two local soup kitchens; groups can grow whatever they would like on the rest of their plot. Over three-quarters of participants return to plant a plot the next year.

Support Educational Programs

On Shavuot, we re-live the moment when we stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and received the Torah, becoming the People of the Book. While Torah study and education are timeless Jewish themes, they especially resonate during Shavuot, the season of *matan Torah* (the giving of the Torah). So often, poor education contributes to the cycle of poverty. We can make a difference in the lives of at-risk children by sharing our love of learning and literacy. Shavuot is a good time to begin planning a project in time to launch it at the start of the next school year.

Partner With a Local School

Create a partnership with a local public school. There are many ways for synagogues to become involved with local schools, including coordinating donations of needed goods, creating a tutoring corps, volunteering in classrooms and organizing or sponsoring school events. The CSA Guide: “For the Sake of the Children: A Synagogue Guide to Public School Partnerships” at www.rac.org/pubs/guidemanuals/partnership/ has many helpful suggestions for setting up a partnership program and for involving a broad spectrum of the synagogue community in this important work. The summer can be a valuable time to plan for the coming academic year.

Volunteer to Tutor at a Local School or Library

During the summer months, schools and libraries need volunteers in special programs for at-risk youth. Seniors, high school students and members of sisterhood or brotherhood (among others) can make a significant difference in a child’s life. Tutoring programs often require that volunteers commit to several months to ensure continuity for the children in the program. Check with your local public schools, libraries and community centers for volunteer opportunities, or visit the website of the National Jewish Coalition for Literacy, www.njcl.net.

Incorporate Economic Justice into our Celebrations

As we celebrate *simchahs* on Lag BaOmer and congratulate recent confirmands, we can incorporate economic justice into our rejoicing.

Create Mitzvah Basket Centerpieces

Fill decorative baskets with non-perishable food items, and use them as centerpieces. These can then be donated to soup kitchens or food pantries after the celebration. As an alternative, incorporate new stuffed animals or sporting equipment in your centerpieces. Donate them to a children’s shelter, after-school program or Ronald McDonald House.

Make a Donation to MAZON

Incorporate *tzedakah* into your celebration. Contribute three percent of the cost of your *simchah* to MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger. MAZON can be reached at www.mazon.org.

Incorporate Charitable Giving in Your Wedding Plans

The I-Do Foundation helps couples incorporate economic justice into the entire wedding celebration. Partner corporations donate a percentage of the cost of gifts, honeymoon packages, etc. to charity. You can create a donation registry, find wedding favors for charity and donate your dress. Visit www.idofoundation.org.

Donate Leftover Food

Get a copy of your state or province's Good Samaritan Law regarding food donations. If permissible, participate in the mitzvah of gleaning by donating leftover food from Jewish communal gatherings and *simchahs*.

Give Gifts that Promote Economic Independence

Mayaworks, a cooperative of women in Guatemala, promotes community growth through the economic development of women. By giving their beautiful handmade crafts, including home accessories, personal accessories, *kippot* and *mezuzot*, as gifts, you can contribute to the highest level of *tzedakah* by giving someone a job. For information, go to www.mayaworks.org. This and many other great *tzedakah* ideas can be found at the web page of the Ziv Tzedakah Fund: www.ziv.org.

Shavuot and the Environment

The choice first fruits of your soil you shall bring to the house of the Eternal your God. (Ex. 23:19)

Initially, Shavuot was a celebration of the harvest. One of the names of Shavuot is *chag hakatzir*, or the Festival of the Harvest. Long before supermarkets existed, our people realized that the food we eat comes from the land; it is a gift from God. The Israelites would set aside the *bikurim*, the very first fruits of the new harvest, to bring to the Temple, celebrating the connection between humans, the earth and God.

Imagine seeing the first fig on your tree – the first variety in your diet after the winter, the first of the crops you labored over so tenderly – and refraining from enjoying it. Instead, you would tie a piece of string around that fig to bring to the Temple, to remind yourself that the land, the harvest and the food on the table are gifts from God. Today we remind ourselves of these connections by giving thanks for the food we eat in the blessings we recite before and after the meal, *HaMotzi* and *Birkat HaMazon*.

As we celebrate the summer harvest, we can strengthen our connection with the earth. In particular, how can we ensure that we live in an ecologically responsible manner? For instance, we can drive fuel-efficient cars, recycle, refrain from using harmful pesticides and herbicides and consume food grown in an environmentally responsible manner. As we make these choices in our personal lives, we can also advocate for environmental awareness in the broader community.

Over the years, Jewish communities remembered their connection to the earth by bringing the fruits of the land into the synagogue. One traditional Shavuot custom is to decorate the synagogue and home with flowers and greenery (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim*, 494). Many congregations continue this custom by decorating the *bimah* with flowers during confirmation ceremonies.

Shavuot thus highlights the direct connection between the land, God and the earth which sustains us. It prompts us to consider our role as caretakers of the environment.

Program Ideas for Shavuot and the Environment

Study the Jewish Connection to the Environment During the Omer and/or as Part of Your Tikkun Leil Shavuot

The following selected list of resources can help you put together your study session:

- COEJL, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, has a host of references at www.coejl.org/learn.
- Waskow, Arthur, ed., *Torah of the Earth*, Jewish Lights, 2000.
- ***For Children:*** Biers-Ariel, Matt, *The Seven Species*, URJ Press, 2003. This book contains Jewish stories and recipes for each of the seven species.
- ***For Children:*** Cherry, Lynne, *The Great Kapok Tree*, Voyager Books, 2000.
- ***For Children:*** Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax*, Random House, 1971.

Count an Omer for the Earth

The Noah Project (www.noahproject.org.uk/), a Jewish environmental group from the United Kingdom, has created an environmentalist's guide to counting the *Omer*. This guide builds on a kabbalistic (mystical) tradition of linking each week of the *Omer* with a different *s'firah*. According to the kabbalists, there are ten *s'firot*, each of which represents a different set of attributes through which humans come to know God. In the Noah Project's guide, the themes of each of the seven 'lower' *s'firot* are linked with concrete actions you can take to help the earth. This guide might even inspire you to create your own. It can be found at www.coejl.org/programs/displayprog.php?id=132.

Lag BaOmer and Environmental Action

Lag BaOmer is a day for celebrating in nature. Many American Jewish families and communities go into the local forest to build bonfires (if permissible), sing songs and rejoice. Because of this outdoor connection, Lag BaOmer lends itself to environmental awareness.

Participate in or Organize a Trail, River or Beach Clean-Up Day

On (or near) Lag BaOmer, go out into the forests, fields, beach or other natural area. Every person should carry a bag to hold any trash that they find. Individuals can go with family, friends or join with a larger organization or congregation. Sometime during the event (perhaps at a resting point along the walk or around a campfire after you are finished walking), gather to share snacks, sing songs and learn about the Jewish connection to the environment.

Sponsor a Lag BaOmer Environmental Bike Ride

NFTY, brotherhood, sisterhood or the confirmation class can organize a bike ride to raise awareness about environmental concerns. The bike ride can also be a fundraiser for environmental organizations.

Hazon is a sponsor of Jewish environmental bike rides. According to Hazon's website, "Jewish environmental bike rides use Jewish tradition in an inventive way to raise environmental awareness in the Jewish community, to raise money for Jewish environmental projects and to deepen people's understanding of Jewish tradition." For more information about Jewish environmental bike rides or to participate in a Hazon ride, go to www.hazon.org.

Lag BaOmer and Confirmation: Incorporating Ecological Responsibility into our Celebrations

As we gather at *simchahs* on Lag BaOmer and for confirmation on Shavuot, we can make our celebrations, both at home and in our synagogues, more environmentally friendly.

Avoid Disposables

At synagogue and at home, use re-usable tablecloths, napkins and serving-ware at *simchahs* and events.

Use Recycled Products

If you are using disposable products, look into recycled paper napkins, towels and plates. Also, use recycled paper in creating invitations, fliers and place cards.

Create Environmentally-Friendly Decorations

Instead of throwing the balloons and flower arrangements into the trash, consider attractive, re-usable decorations. For instance, use bonsai trees or potted plants as centerpieces. These can then be donated to nursing homes.

Invest in Re-Usable Decorations

The synagogue can purchase re-usable decorations, which are then made available for other synagogue functions and *simchahs*. These re-usable decorations both reduce waste and build community. A confirmation class could donate (or make) these decorations as their class gift.

Environmental Action During Shavuot

Decorate Your Home or Synagogue with Greenery

Bring the environmental connection home as you participate in this traditional Shavuot custom. In preparation for Shavuot, decorate your home, the *bimah* or synagogue classrooms with greenery (or better yet, potted plants). Go outside with your children or religious school class to gather flowers and leaves to decorate the home or classroom. Talk with young children about the importance of nature.

Eliminate Pesticide, Fertilizer and Weed Killers in Home and Synagogue Gardens

Shavuot reminds us of the need to be good stewards of the land. Pesticides, fertilizer and weed killers poison the land, and even those marketed for home use are not guaranteed to be safe. It is possible to eliminate fertilizers, weed killers and pesticides and still have healthy and beautiful lawns and gardens.

COEJL, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, suggests investigating environmentally friendly ways to garden, leaving grass trimmings on the lawn and composting to provide fertilizer, and considering native plant gardens that would require less intensive chemical treatment. For more information, visit www.coejl.org.

Consider the Ecological Impact of our Food Choices

On Shavuot, it is traditional to eat dairy foods. According to one legend, our ancestors learned about keeping kosher during revelation. But they did not have the resources to immediately change to a kosher lifestyle, in particular, to switch to kosher slaughter. So they started by eating only dairy meals.

Many Jews keep kosher (or aspects of kashrut) in order to sanctify the act of eating, to remember the connection between God, food and the earth. The growing movement of eco-kashrut has pointed out that to fulfill this goal of sanctification, we should be mindful of a broad range of concerns, both traditional and modern. Eco-kashrut asks, how can the food choices we make be healthy for us and for the world?

Eco-kashrut encourages us to look at the entire cost of the food we eat. Do our food choices contribute to pollution or contain unhealthy additives? Are the farm workers who grow and harvest our food fairly compensated? Are the environmental practices we employ ecologically sustainable? What is the environmental impact of transporting our food long distances?

By examining such questions, we can ensure that we retain the holy connection to God and the earth as we break our daily bread.

Buy Locally Grown Organic Produce

The Israelites offered the seven species at the Temple, which reminded them of their connection to the land. When we purchase locally grown organic produce, we also remember our connection to the land. Such produce supports environmentally sustainable farming techniques. Moreover, locally grown produce avoids the hidden costs of produce that needs to be transported long distances: the cost of fuel used for transport and refrigeration and the cost of the added pollution from these trucks, trains and planes.

Take Your Students and Children to a Local Farmer's Market or Farm

Talk to the farmers about how they grow their food. Use the visit as an opportunity to discuss the connection between God, the earth and the food on the table. Teach the different blessings we recite for different kinds of food.

Demonstrate Eco-Kashrut Recipes at Your Tikkun Leil Shavuot

Create a cooking session at your *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* to teach about eco-kashrut. Choose organic, locally grown or pesticide-free produce and dairy products. Make healthy, fun recipes as part of the learning experience.

Host a Shavuot Brunch Discussion

At a meatless Shavuot brunch, possibly including the traditional blintzes and cheesecake, host a discussion about the environmental impact of the food we eat. Consider inviting a speaker from your local community, or have a discussion based on the resources listed in this section or other materials. This is an activity that you can do at home, or that the brotherhood, sisterhood, 20s and 30s group, or seniors might find interesting.

Incorporate Healthy, Organic Food into Festive Meals, Onegs and Receptions

The food we eat impacts not only our health, but also the health of the earth. Choose foods that are grown in an environmentally sustainable manner and that protect the rights of farm workers. If you are serving coffee, tea, chocolate or tropical fruits like bananas, mangos and pineapple, look for the Fair Trade label. See page 8 for more information.

Selected Resources on Eco-Kashrut:

- Green, Arthur, "To Work It and Guard It: Preserving God's World," in Waskow, A., ed., *Torah of the Earth*, Jewish Lights, 2000.
- Mikva, Rachel S., "Adventures in Eating: An Emerging Model for Kashrut," *CCAR Journal*, Winter 2004, pp. 55-66.
- Weintraub, Samuel, "The Spiritual Ecology of Kashrut," www.coejl.org/learn/je_weintraub.shtml.
- "Sh'mini: We Eat What Is 'Fit,'" in *To Learn is to Do: A Tikkun Olam Roadmap*, by Sharon D. Halper, UAHC Press, 2000, pp. 36-9.

Shavuot and World Jewry

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 Eternal our God and with those who are not with us here this day. (Deut. 29:13-4)

The entire Jewish community entered into the covenant at Sinai. Some say that “those who are standing here with us this day” refers to our ancestors at Sinai, while “those who are not with us here this day” refers to the Jews of future generations. The covenant at Sinai connects Jews across the centuries.⁵

Today our Jewish communities include old and young, rich and poor. We include Jews from all over the world and a variety of cultures; Jews who convert to Judaism; Jews of different sexual orientations; Jews who are single, married, divorced or widowed. All of us come together at Sinai.

Additionally, the covenant at Sinai not only includes those who are sitting and standing with us in synagogue on Shavuot. We stand at Sinai with Jews in our local community, Jews across the country and Jews around the world. In particular, we think of and reach out to Jews who are at risk because they are Jewish or who are desperately seeking the resources to reinvigorate Jewish communities.

Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi said that when the people Israel stood at Mount Sinai, they were unanimous in accepting joyfully the rule of heaven, as it is written, ‘All the people answered as one...’ What is more, they vouched for one another’s commitment to fulfill the commandments... (Tanhuma Yitro)⁶

When we stood together at Sinai, we not only entered a relationship with God; we entered a relationship with one another. On Shavuot, we remember our responsibility to and for one another. We ask how we can ensure a vibrant Jewish community in our local congregations and around the world. While we share a particular concern for our Jewish family, we always remember that the Torah contains a mandate for justice for all human beings.

This section of the guide includes social action program ideas relating to world Jewry. These communities include Ethiopian Jews, both those awaiting immigration to Israel and those who are struggling to adjust to life in Israel; Jews from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and Eastern Europe, who are experiencing a renaissance of Jewish life after

⁵ Exodus Rabbah 28:6.

⁶ Cited by Agnon, S.Y., trans. Swirsky, M., *Present at Sinai*, Philadelphia, JPS, 1994, p. 108.

years of Soviet suppression of religion; and Jews in Argentina, who are experiencing economic distress after the collapse of the Argentine economy.

As Reform Jews, we also share a special relationship with progressive Jewish communities around the world and in Israel. These communities are served by the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) and by the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism (IMPJ).

Program Ideas on World Jewry

Below are ideas that can be applied to work with many different world Jewish communities. Many examples come from congregational work with the Jewish communities in Argentina, the FSU and Ethiopia.

Host a session at your *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* on World Jewry

This session could either focus on our general obligation to Jews around the world or on a specific community with which your congregation is engaged in *tikkun olam*. The following resources can help you plan your program:

- Information about the Jewish communities in the FSU and Ethiopia is listed under “Israel and world Jewry” at www.rac.org/advocacy/issues.
- Information on the Argentine Jewish community can be found at www.rac.org/pubs/packets/argentina.
- The World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ), the international organization of Reform, Reconstructionist and Liberal Judaism, has information on progressive congregations and communities around the world at www.wupj.org.
- The Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism (IMPJ) has information on Reform congregations in Israel www.reform.org.il.
- Lesson plans and photographs about progressive Judaism in Israel and the FSU are available at www.urj.org/hineini.

Program Suggestions for a Tikkun Leil Shavuot

Throughout the World Jewry section, you will find many ideas which could be incorporated into a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. The following suggestions from the WUPJ may also be helpful:

- Hang a map of the world on a bulletin board. Have participants put pegs in the map indicating where their ancestors came from.
- Prepare culinary treats and/or play music from the country you are studying.
- Download and display the photographs at www.urj.org/hineini of progressive Jews in the FSU and Israel.

Plan and Promote Alternative Vacations

On Shavuot we are reminded of our connection with the broader Jewish community, or *K'lal Yisrael*. There are a host of exciting summer and school break vacation options that combine service, travel and Jewish community building. Often these trips are specifically concerned with supporting Jewish communities abroad. You can find information about alternative vacations at www.jewishservice.org/volunteer.html. This site lists opportunities for teens, college students, young adults and seniors. Volunteer vacations last from a few weeks to several months, and can be domestic or international.

Provide information about alternative vacations during the *Omer* or at your *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. Set up a display table in the temple lobby with pamphlets and fliers. The *Omer* is a particularly suitable time to promote these programs because many people are in the process of making their summer plans.

Participate in the Keshet Argentina Ambassadors Program

Keshet Argentina Ambassadors are Reform college students who visit Argentina on group missions and participate in social action. When they return home, these students teach others about the Argentine community. For more information, visit www.keshetnet.com or call (212) 650-4078.

Go on a Mission to Visit Jewish Communities Outside of North America

Because the covenant at Sinai reminds us of our connection to Jews around the world, Shavuot is the perfect time to kick off a congregational mission to a developing Jewish community (as in the FSU or Eastern Europe), a struggling community (as in Argentina) or a progressive Israeli congregation. A mission to a Jewish community in a different part of the world can be a great way to connect with *K'lal Yisrael*, learn about Jewish life and create connection within the community at home.

Use Shavuot as a springboard for your mission. Talk about the community you are hoping to visit during services or at the *oneg*. Incorporate education about the mission into the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. Contact the World Union for Progressive Judaism at (212) 452-6530 and ARZA Travel at www.arzaworld.com to help organize your mission.

If your congregation is not planning a mission, join with other Reform Jews from across the country on an ARZA-World Vacation. These vacations combine exciting travel with

education about local Jewish communities. Visit www.arzaworld.com for details on current offerings.

Twin with a Fledgling World Union Congregation

In 2001, **Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos, CA** became a North American twin with Beth Am, a progressive Jewish congregation in Poltava, Ukraine. Congregation Beth Am provides vital financial support for its sister congregation, as well as organizational and emotional support. In addition to raising funds, the congregation has sent books to Kiev to enhance the Jewish libraries of the Ukraine, provided computer equipment and invited Jewish leaders in the FSU to Los Altos to learn about the American Jewish community. An artist from their community made the *ner tamid* for the congregation in Poltava. In the future, the congregation hopes to organize a mission to visit Poltava. Through this twinning program, members of Congregation Beth Am have developed a tangible relationship with a sister congregation, and they have taken on the responsibility of caring for our Jewish brothers and sisters around the world.

As a North American twin, congregations provide long-term financial, spiritual and practical support to a developing progressive community, thus helping foster the re-development of Jewish life. For detailed information about becoming involved with the twinning program, contact the WUPJ at (212) 452-6530.

Participate in the Hineini Program

The Hineini Program, an initiative of the Union for Reform Judaism, encourages congregations to demonstrate their commitment to Reform Judaism and World Jewry. Congregations are asked to collect \$18 a year from each member. Those congregations that collect this amount from over half of their membership become Builder Congregations. The funds are designated for three programs: sponsoring future Reform rabbis in Israel, building a Reform synagogue in Israel and strengthening progressive Judaism in Eastern Europe and the FSU. For more information, including lesson plans, a short video, publicity materials and photographs, visit www.urj.org/hineini.

Participate in the Shomrei Torah Donation Program

On Shavuot, we celebrate revelation, the moment when the Jewish community received the Torah. The Torah has been called our 'tree of life.' Indeed, a Torah scroll stands at the symbolic center of a Jewish community and is necessary for worship and learning. Fledgling World Union for Progressive Judaism congregations often need the most basic supplies to get started, including a Torah. If your congregation has an extra Torah, its gift to the WUPJ can give life to a new congregation. Torah scrolls are needed throughout the FSU, Western Europe and Israel. Please join with dozens of North American

congregations that have made this special gift to an overseas Reform congregation. Contact the WUPJ at (818) 907-8740 ext. 28 for more information on this mitzvah.

Collect and Donate Goods for Jews in Need

Incorporate giving into your *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. Make donations part of admission. Link your donation drive with a study session about other Jewish communities. Spend time during the evening packing the items for shipping and (if needed) creating an itemized list.

There are many creative ways to collect donations. Religious school children, *b'nai mitzvah* students and confirmation classes could contact local doctors and dentists to see if they have extra, unused items such as medicine samples, bandages, toothbrushes or dental floss. Affiliate groups, like sisterhood or a new parent group, could host a baby shower where guests bring new baby items from a 'registry' for donation. At the party, members would learn about foreign Jewish communities. Confirmation classes can use donated goods to create centerpieces at their luncheon or *oneg*. Families and *chavurot* can also collect items or funds. If your family does not already have a *tzedakah* box, you can make one together and use the proceeds to help a struggling Jewish community.

Work with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)

Many struggling Jewish communities, including those in the FSU, Eastern Europe, Argentina, India and Latin America, have desperate need for a wide variety of goods. The JDC, www.jdc.org, distributes goods, depending on the needs of local Jewish communities. Because these donations will be sent overseas, follow these suggestions when collecting and sending donations.

1. Contact the JDC at (212) 885-0862 to pick a project based on which supplies are most in demand and which communities are most in need. Together, you will decide upon a project.
2. Collect the items.
3. At the same time, plan to collect funds to ship the items overseas. Overseas shipping is surprisingly expensive.
4. Once you have collected everything, create an itemized packing list (this is necessary for customs).

Support Ethiopian School Children in Israel

In order for Ethiopian Jews to succeed once they arrive in Israel, education is critical. According to the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ), 45 percent of Ethiopian school children lack the most basic school supplies. You and your congregation can make a difference in a child's life. Collect new school supplies as admission to your *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* or as a religious school *tzedakah* project. If you are going on a synagogue trip to Israel, you can bring the supplies to the NACOEJ office in Jerusalem. Or, send the supplies to the New York office, 132 Nassau St., Ste. 412,

New York, NY 10038. For a list of supplies needed and to arrange donations, go to www.nacoej.org/schoolsup.htm.

Participate in Yad B'Yad: The Latin American Initiative

This World Union for Progressive Judaism program began as a way for the North American Reform community to help the distressed Argentine Jewish community. It has since expanded to respond to the needs of Reform communities throughout Latin America, and Yad B'Yad is particularly active in Brazil and Chile. Congregations can collect over-the-counter medications (including pain relievers, gastro relief medication, etc.) and sample-sized prescription medications to send to Argentina. The Argentine community also needs Jewish educational items (particularly in Spanish), clothing and monetary donations. In Argentina, funds collected through Yad B'Yad support food banks, a job bank and a subsidized Jewish day school that also provides for special needs students. Throughout Latin America, the Yad B'Yad program helps to strengthen progressive Jewish communities and to create a network for these congregations to share knowledge and resources. Contact the WUPJ (212) 452-6533 for more information and to coordinate donations and shipping.

Put your Knitting, Crocheting or Quilting Skills to Work

Join together with fellow knitters, crocheters and quilters from your congregation to make a difference for Jewish communities in need. **Wilshire Boulevard Temple, in Los Angeles, CA** runs "Knit to Fit." This group meets every month to work on baby and children's clothing to be sold in Buenos Aires to raise funds for the economically depressed Argentine Jewish community. This group is truly intergenerational, as it brings together knitters aged 13-84.

Provide Financial Support for Jewish Communities Around the World

Many organizations that help the world Jewish community simply need enough funds to run their programs. The following is a selected list of projects.

The Million Quarter Project

Seventeen thousand Jews remain in Ethiopia, facing hunger and poverty every day. It costs only a quarter to provide a meal. The funds collected by the Million Quarter Project support the meals provided by the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ), including the 'bag of beans' program, which provides pregnant and nursing women with food for the evening meal. For many Ethiopian Jews, the meals provided through this program comprise the sole meal of the day. For more information on this and other NACOEJ projects, visit www.nacoej.org. For background information and sermon and program ideas, go to www.shalomethiopia.org or www.urj.org/csa/projects and click on the Million Quarter Project.

Confirmation Project: Adopt an Ethiopian High School Student in Israel

Once Ethiopian Jews arrive in Israel, they still face many hurdles. NACOEJ notes an all-too familiar cycle of "failure in over-crowded, under-staffed Israeli elementary schools;

‘tracking’ to low-level vocational-training boarding high schools which separate youngsters from their families and largely fail to educate them; dead-end, low-income jobs, and limited futures that in no way equal the great potential of these bright, eager-to-learn young people.”

NACOEJ is seeking to end this cycle. Its Adopt A High School Student Program provides financial support for Ethiopian teens to go to high school. High school in Israel costs money – for books, materials, gym clothes, transportation to and from school and mandatory school trips. Because most Ethiopian families in Israel live below the poverty line, the monies collected in this program level the playing field, making all the difference in a young person’s future. It costs \$350 and up to sponsor a high school student. For more information, go to www.nacoej.org/highschool.htm.

Create Partnerships Through an Associate Membership Program

Woodlands Community Temple, of White Plains, NY, developed the Abayudaya Moses Synagogue Associate Membership Project to help the Abayudaya Jewish community in Uganda. After the congregation learned about this impoverished community, they developed an associate membership program in which Woodlands congregants and friends contribute “dues” of \$50 per family annually. The congregation coordinates the spending of funds with the Abayudaya community and with Kulanu, an organization dedicated to finding and assisting lost and dispersed remnants of the Jewish people. The funds have been used to provide electricity for the community, and they soon hope to find a water solution. In addition to providing funds, the congregation sponsored an educational program to learn about and forge ties with the Abayudaya community.

Other North American congregations and world Jewish communities could adapt the model of associate membership programs and develop their own partnerships. More information on the Abayudaya and other dispersed Jewish communities can be found at www.kulanu.org.

Purchase Products from World Jewish Communities

Help World Jewish communities raise funds by purchasing handicrafts, music and books.

Ethiopian Embroidery

The NACOEJ sponsors an embroidery program that gives work to Ethiopian Jews awaiting immigration to Israel. You can purchase *tallit* bags, challah covers, pillow covers and other items through their website, www.nacoej.org. These beautiful items fulfill the highest level of *tzedakah*, helping another to become self-sufficient.

As part of their year-long program, “We Can Make a Difference,” **Temple Jeremiah of Northfield, IL** combined a congregational sale of handmade Ethiopian products with an awareness campaign about Ethiopian Jews. A volunteer group organized a large shipment

of embroidery from the NACOEJ office that they prepared for sale. The embroidery sale was combined with educational programs and a photography exhibit about the Ethiopian Jewish community. Within the first two months of the embroidery sale and awareness campaign the congregation raised over \$10,000 for NACOEJ.

Yad Lakashish, *the Lifeline for the Old*

Yad Lakashish offers work opportunities for needy elderly and disabled individuals in Jerusalem. Its website explains, “Lifeline’s philosophy and programs are based on the principles that through work, purposeful recreation and activities of self-help the elderly and disabled can lead a life of meaning and dignity.” Lifeline runs a number of workshops, many of which produce goods sold in its online gift shop at www.lifeline.org.il. You can find beautiful *challah* covers, *tallitot*, *tallit* bags, wall hangings and other items to give as wedding, confirmation or *b’nai mitzvah* presents. A visit to Lifeline can also be a memorable part of a trip to Israel.

Shavuot and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Issues and Advocacy

All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning,
the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking. (Exodus 20:15)

According to midrashic tradition, every Jew was present at the moment of revelation. “All the people” includes the priests and the commoners; elders, adults and children. “All the people” includes all Jews, past, present and future.⁷ “All the people” agreed to enter to covenant at Sinai together.⁸ As a result, each of us – regardless of our gender, gender identity or sexual orientation – shares equally in the covenant between God and the Jewish people. Therefore, there should be a place for all Jews in the community – a place of welcome and of full participation.⁹

Reform Jewish communities have made and are continuing to make progress towards the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Jews.¹⁰ Full inclusion means that we treat GLBT Jews with the same rights, responsibilities and consideration that we would grant to anyone. Moreover, full inclusion does not stop at the synagogue walls; as Reform Jews we work towards full inclusion of and rights for GLBT individuals in our larger communities, states or provinces and country.

Rabbi Yohanan said: [God’s] voice split into seventy different voices, one for each of the seventy languages, so that all the nations could hear [God’s voice] in their own languages.... Observe how the voice issued forth. It came to each person according to his or her capacity [to hear]: the elderly, the young men, the children, the infants, the women – each according to his or her capacity... everyone [heard] according to his or her ability.¹¹

Each person – regardless of language, stage or station in life – could directly experience and understand revelation. This midrashic tradition prompted Eliyahu Kitov to write,

⁷ Exodus Rabbah 28:6.

⁸ Tanhuma Yitro.

⁹ Judith Plaskow, writing from a feminist perspective, argued for an expanded vision of the Jewish community at Sinai in *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism From a Feminist Perspective*, Harpercollins, 1990. We are indebted to her work as we seek to expand the tent to fully include GLBT Jews.

¹⁰ For many people, the terms ‘bisexual’ and ‘transgender’ may be unfamiliar. Bisexual individuals are romantically and physically attracted to both men and women. Transgender is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender individuals may or may not choose hormonal and/or surgical intervention. More notes on terminology can be found in Appendix B.

¹¹ Exodus Rabbah 5:9, in Agnon, S.Y., trans. M. Swirsky, *Present at Sinai*, Philadelphia, JPS, 1994, p. 271.

“There were as many ‘words’ as there were individuals, for the understanding of one was unlike that of the other.”¹²

As it celebrates the myriad of ways in which God’s voice was experienced at Sinai, the midrashic tradition acknowledges diversity, both within the Jewish community and in how we interpret the Torah. In the first chapter of Genesis we learn that each person is created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. “*B’tzelem Elohim* underscores the inherent dignity of every person... with the equal honor and respect due to each individual’s integrity and sexual identity.”¹³ As the Divine voice honored each person’s unique creation by speaking directly to each individual, so too should our congregations create a community that honors, celebrates and respects us all.

Moreover, we each hear the Divine word anew in each generation; hence, our Torah interpretation has always been dynamic. On Shavuot, we continue this dynamic tradition as we open the door to GLBT Jews and as we advocate in the larger community.

But Ruth replied, “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the Eternal do to me if anything but death parts me from you.” (Ruth 1:16-17)

The Book of Ruth tells a story of inclusion. In her declaration to Naomi, the Moabite Ruth states that she desires to be part of the Israelite community. Ruth journeys with Naomi back to Bethlehem, performs acts of loving-kindness for her mother-in-law and marries the Israelite Boaz.

Ruth finds a home in the Israelite community despite the law in Deuteronomy 23:4 that prohibits admitting an Ammonite or a Moabite or their descendents into the Israelite community. In fact, Ruth becomes such an integral part of the Israelite narrative that she becomes an ancestor of King David and the messianic lineage.

The Prophet Micah envisions an inclusive messianic age. “In that day, declares the Eternal... I will gather the outcast and those I have treated harshly... The Eternal will reign over them on Mount Zion, now and for evermore.” (Micah 4:6-7) Micah teaches that we are to gather the outcast and those who have been treated harshly into our hearts and our homes. Micah urges us to work for a world in which all are treated fairly. When we strive towards a community and a society that fully recognizes the divinity in all of us, we work towards this messianic era.

¹² KiTov, E., trans. N. Bulman, *The Book of Our Heritage*, vol. III, New York, Feldheim, 1978, p. 57.

¹³ CCAR Ad Hoc Committee on Human Sexuality, Selig Salkowitz, Chair. Report to the CCAR Convention, June, 1998.

Even when a literal reading of Torah would suggest exclusion, the Book of Ruth and our prophetic heritage welcome the outsider into our community. Similarly, our text study and action surrounding Shavuot can highlight our vision of an inclusive community for everyone.

The themes of Shavuot and the *Omer* lend themselves to education and advocacy about GLBT issues. Additionally, Shavuot and the *Omer* fall during the late spring, when many communities are preparing for GLBT Pride Month in June. If you live in a community with a Pride celebration, Shavuot and the *Omer* can be a time to learn about GLBT issues and to plan how you and your congregation can become involved in these celebrations. Even in communities without large scale Pride events, congregations can observe Pride Month, perhaps through a Pride Shabbat or other event.

Since 1965 the Reform Jewish Movement has been an advocate of gay and lesbian rights, and today the Reform Jewish Movement is committed to securing civil rights for GLBT individuals, including the right to civil marriage. **Information about the Reform Jewish Movement and GLBT rights is in Appendix A. In Appendix B you will find a fact sheet on current GLBT policy issues and terminology.**

The *Omer* and Marriage Equality for Same-Sex Couples

For many Jews, it is a hardship to not be able to celebrate weddings during the period of the *Omer*. In contrast, Lag BaOmer is a day of joyful release, when voices of bridegrooms and brides burst forth across the Jewish world. Yet GLBT Jews are not able to experience this day of release.

In the United States, not only are GLBT Jews denied marriage licenses and the joy of a wedding celebration; they are also denied the entire system of legal benefits that is afforded to heterosexual couples. In every state except Massachusetts, when same-sex couples stand under the *chuppah* and sign a *ketubah*, they are unable to acquire for themselves the thousands of legal benefits and protections awarded to heterosexual married couples by state and federal governments. These benefits include the right to hospital visitation, to make decisions about a partner's treatment, to petition for a partner to immigrate, to file joint tax returns, to pension and social security benefits, to inheritance, to joint ownership of property, to joint adoption and to family insurance.

The vast majority of states do not recognize same-sex marriage or civil unions. More problematic, many states have passed amendments to their state constitutions defining marriage as between a man and a woman and, in some cases, banning all domestic partnership benefits. Despite its defeat in both houses in the last Congressional session, lawmakers are re-introducing an amendment to the United States Constitution, which would ban same-sex marriage on a national level, enshrining homophobia and discrimination into our nation's most sacred document.

Yet, there are some states and cities that are in the process of creating legislation to allow for marriage equality. Like Lag BaOmer, their efforts provide a glimmer of hope and an opportunity to celebrate the *simchah* of holy union. However, we must continue to raise our voices and advocate that the voices of the bride and her bride and the groom and his groom might yet burst forth.

Program Ideas for GLBT Issues and Advocacy

The inclusiveness of revelation prompts us to ensure that our communities – congregational, local, state and national – are fully inclusive, extending the same rights to GLBT individuals as they do to everyone else. The discussion of inclusiveness in this guide has two levels: within a synagogue community and in the wider public arena. Some congregations may just be beginning the discussion. Those who already have considered gay and lesbian inclusion and rights could use the opportunity of Shavuot to begin a discussion about full inclusion and rights for bisexual and transgender individuals as well. Finally, congregations and families can advocate for GLBT rights on a local and national level.

Take the First Step: Implement a Program of GLBT Inclusion in Your Congregation

Shavuot can be a time to evaluate the extent to which your congregation includes and welcomes GLBT Jews. The URJ Department of Family Concerns offers extensive resources, including *Kulanu: A Program for Congregations Implementing Gay and Lesbian Inclusion*. An updated *Kulanu* (scheduled for release in 2006) will include information on bisexual and transgender Jews. Visit www.urj.org/jfc/inclusion/gaylesbian/ for more information.

Stay Informed About Local Issues and Take Action

Write Letters to Your National, State and Local Representatives

Learn about local legislation affecting GLBT rights. Two resources are www.thetaskforce.org/community and the “Your Community” link at www.hrc.org. Local legislation, particularly at the state level, can affect the rights of GLBT individuals to adopt, engage in civil partnership and live in safety and security. Pay attention to what is happening in your local community and speak out.

Write Letters to the Editor to Your Local Paper

When local issues come up, it is important to let your voice be heard so that GLBT individuals know that they are not alone and so that the larger community recognizes that GLBT rights are of concern to everyone.

Learn About the Policies in Your Workplace and Congregation

Does your employer and/or congregation provide equal benefits to GLBT employees and their partners? Are domestic partners covered for healthcare and/or parental leave? Does your company engage in fair hiring practices? If not, advocate for workplace rights of GLBT individuals.

Put Together a Panel Discussion and/or Text Study on GLBT Issues as Part of a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*

This can be a great way to begin or foster further education about GLBT issues. For instance, at **Temple Israel of Omaha, NE**, the process of learning about Judaism and gay and lesbian issues began with bringing in outside experts and members of the congregation for a panel discussion on Jewish and psychological approaches to gay and lesbian issues. Information on this program, entitled “Are We All Created in God’s Image?” is available in the 1999 Fain Award Booklet, www.rac.org/social/bank.

These sorts of educational programs can be a catalyst for creating a synagogue statement on GLBT issues that can then be used in press releases, letters to local newspapers or as a basis for future programs and advocacy. The congregation’s inclusion policies also should be clearly stated in membership materials. Panel discussions can also raise awareness about advocacy issues facing the GLBT community. These issues include hate crimes, employment discrimination and family issues (such as adoption and marriage). Such a panel might also be followed by an advocacy action, such as letter writing.

Use the resources at the end of this section and in Appendices A and B to help plan your programming.

Join with Other Religious Groups in Interfaith Education and Action

In 2004, **Temple Beth El of Aptos, CA** organized “Out in Our Faith,” an educational weekend forum to celebrate and promote the full inclusion of GLBT individuals in the life of churches and synagogues. “Out in Our Faith” focused not only on religious inclusion but also provided an opportunity for people of faith to study and discuss current political and social issues facing the GLBT community. As an interfaith effort, “Out in Our Faith” formed and strengthened relationships between various religious and other groups committed to diversity and inclusion. Participating organizations received a plaque indicating that they are a welcoming community.

For the 2005 “Out in Our Faith,” Temple Beth El plans to run Thursday night sessions throughout May. Two of the sessions will repeat the most popular workshops from the prior year’s event: “How to Be an Agent for Change” and “Questioning and Coming Out at Any Age.” There will also be a session geared for youth. The program will culminate with a Friday night Pride Shabbat and participation in the regional Pride Parade. Organizers hope to include a broader spectrum of faith groups, including Buddhist,

Hindu, Bahai and possibly Muslim representatives. For more information, contact Kathy Goldenkranz, VP of Worship and Justice at Temple Beth El, at KGoldenk@aol.com.

Other Suggestions for Interfaith Action

- Organize an inter-faith coalition to take action on timely issues. For instance, the coalition could be on call to compose press releases when local issues arise.
- Write letters-to-the-editor in conjunction with other religious institutions
- Coordinate rallies, letter writing campaigns and prayer vigils

Make Space in Your Congregation Available to Host Meetings of Jewish GLBT Groups

Create a space for GLBT Jews in your community to meet in a safe location. Many Jewish GLBT individuals have experienced rejection from and are distanced from the Jewish community. Providing a meeting space signals your synagogue's commitment to the GLBT community.

Consider integrating the work of Jewish GLBT groups with the larger synagogue population. "Twice Blessed," the GLBT outreach committee of Temple Beth El of Aptos, CA, realized that the events they hosted were attended mainly by GLBT Jews and their families and friends. The group broadened its focus to involve the entire synagogue community, hosting events such as a Chanukah Social Action Party, which is attended by a broad spectrum of the congregation.

GLBT Issues and Yom HaShoah

Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, falls during the period of the counting of the *Omer*. Hitler not only targeted Jews; he also targeted gays and lesbians. Yom HaShoah can be a day of education about discrimination and hatred against GLBT individuals.

Light an Additional Yahrzeit Candle

On the eve of Yom HaShoah, light an additional candle to commemorate the lives of gays, lesbians, gypsies and other non-Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust. For families with younger children, this can be an opportunity to discuss the importance of respecting and treating everyone equally and fairly.

Visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Online Exhibit: Nazi Persecution of Homosexuals

This online exhibit tells the story of Nazi persecution of homosexuals during the Holocaust. Parents can visit this site with their children and religious schools can incorporate this site into their Holocaust education. A teacher's section contains resources. The exhibit is at www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online.

Take a trip to a Holocaust Museum

Find out if your local Holocaust museum teaches about the Holocaust and gays and lesbians. Or, consider organizing a trip to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC.

Sponsor a Speaker About the Impact of the Holocaust on Gays and Lesbians

Congregation **Chevrei Tikvah of Cleveland, OH** sponsored a lecture by Dr. Klaus Muller, Professor of European Studies at the University of Amsterdam, consultant to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and renowned scholar on anti-gay Nazi policies and persecution. The congregation also presented the documentary film of gay Holocaust survivors entitled, "We Were Marked With a Big 'A,'" (a German pejorative applied to homosexuals). The lecture drew over 260 people, of whom over 82 percent were from outside the congregation—specifically the lesbian and gay interfaith and Jewish communities. Later that year, the synagogue co-sponsored a trip to the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC.

This program helped introduce, or expand awareness of, the effects of the Holocaust on the lesbian and gay community. It placed their often forgotten story in the context of the Nazis' vicious persecution. Participants were also reminded of the continued persecution of lesbians and gays after the death camps were liberated, and the growing threat of intolerance by hate groups toward lesbians and gay men.

Speak out Against Hate

As part of our Yom HaShoah observance, we can raise our voices in protest against the hatred and discrimination experienced by GLBT individuals in our society. According to the 2003 FBI report, sexual orientation-based bias crime is now the second highest category of hate crimes in the United States, accounting for about 14.6 percent of such crimes. Only race-based bias crime occurs at higher rates. Additionally, because these statistics are reported on a voluntary basis, many hate crimes go uncounted. These numbers do not track crimes based on bias against transgender individuals. The entire report is available online at www.fbi.gov.

The problem of hate speech is acute amongst teens. According to PFLAG's web site, "The average high school student hears 25 anti-gay slurs daily; 97 percent of high school students regularly hear homophobic remarks. This harassment takes its toll: gay students are far more likely to skip classes, drop out of school and/or commit suicide."

Speak out Against Hate at Home and at School

Refuse to participate in hate speech and let those around you know that you do not tolerate it. Talk with your teenagers about hate speech. Work with teachers and administrators to make schools safe for all students. PFLAG and GLSEN

have extensive resources on school safety and education. Visit www.glsen.org and www.pflag.org/education/schools.html for more information.

Learn about the effects of hatred and anti-gay bias by watching *The Laramie Project*, an HBO video written and directed by Moises Kaufman about the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, a young gay man who lived in Laramie Wyoming. Or, consider hosting a performance of the play at your congregation.

Form Gay-Straight Alliances

One way to raise awareness of GLBT issues and to create safe schools is through gay-straight alliances. NFTY groups can work to create these sorts of groups at school or *shul*. More information is at www.glsen.org.

Make a Connection to Pride Month

The month of June is GLBT Pride Month. Because Shavuot usually falls in late May or early June, our Shavuot holiday celebrations can be an opportunity to link with local Pride celebrations.

Sign up for Pride Parade

If you live in a community which hosts a Pride celebration or parade, use the opportunity of Shavuot to explain your synagogue's involvement in GLBT rights, perhaps at a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* or in a bulletin article. Sign up a congregational delegation, either that night, through the bulletin or at the confirmation service. The confirmation class could march as a group in the Pride parade. Individuals can sign up family and friends to walk together.

Host a Pride Shabbat

Regardless of whether the local community hosts a Pride celebration, your synagogue can host a special Shabbat dedicated to GLBT issues. Teach about the Reform Jewish perspective on homosexuality, speak out against hate, learn about current issues, and demonstrate your support for the GLBT community and GLBT Jews.

Resources for GLBT Programming and Advocacy

In the appendix you will find information on the Reform Jewish Movement and GLBT rights and a fact sheet on GLBT policy issues and terminology. Other resources include:

Books:

- Shneer, David and Aviv, Caryn, *Queer Jews*, Routledge, 2002.
- Greenberg, Steve, *Wrestling with God and Men*, University of Wisconsin, 2004.

- For a comprehensive book list on GLBT issues and Judaism, visit the website of Ru'ach, a *chavurah* of lesbians and gay men which is associated with Temple Israel of Miami, FL. Information is at www.templeisrael.net/entertainment/text003.php3?page=1553.

Film:

- *Trembling Before G-d*, directed by Sandi Simcha Dubowski, 2001. This film is not rated.
- *The Laramie Project*, directed by Moises Kaufman, HBO Home Video, 2003.

Web Resources:

- Learn about Reform Judaism and GLBT issues at www.rac.org/advocacy/issues/issuegl and at www.rac.org/advocacy/specialresources/marriage/. The CCAR also has a proposed outline for an informational weblink on same gender marriage at www.ccarnet.org/outline.
- For Jewish GLBT resources, turn to Congregation Beth Simchat Torah's website: www.cbst.org/links.shtml or to the World Congress of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Jews, www.glbtejews.org.
- Mosaic, the National Jewish Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity, www.jewishmosaic.org, has useful links and is available to help congregations plan programming on GLBT issues.
- PFLAG, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, has many educational resources on its website, www.pflag.org. This comprehensive website includes sections on safe schools, teens, rural outreach and more.
- For legal resources, turn to Lambda Legal, www.lambdalegal.org, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights, www.nclrights.org.
- Two large national GLBT advocacy organizations, which also have links to local issues are: The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, www.thetaskforce.org, and The Human Rights Campaign, www.hrc.org.
- Information geared for teens can be found at www.outproud.org.
- GLSEN, www.glsen.org, the gay, lesbian and straight educational alliance, works towards creating safe and effective schools for all students. They have an extensive library and curriculum resources that can help create safe schools.

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Kravitz, Leonard and Orlitzky, Kerry, eds. and trans., *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics*. New York: UAHC Press, 1993.

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Social Action Web Resources

In each of the sections of this Guide – Economic Justice, the Environment, World Jewry, and GLBT Issues and Advocacy – you will find web resources for these issues. The following list contains general social action resources that apply to these and other issues.

Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism (www.urj.org/csa)

The Commission on Social Action assists congregations in applying ethical, Jewish principles to contemporary issues. The Commission's website has useful program materials and resources for a wide variety of social action programs.

Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC) (www.rac.org)

The RAC's website has a plethora of background information on social justice issues, including resolutions, initiatives and a social action program bank. It also has links to other social action program guides.

Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) (www.ccarnet.org)

The CCAR is the association of Reform rabbis. Its web page links to CCAR resolutions and responsa, many of which are on social action issues.

Kesher: Connecting Reform Jews on Campus (www.keshernet.com)

Kesher's Social Action Resource Page has programming ideas in a number of areas, including hunger, the environment, gun control and literacy. It also includes links to other major Jewish and social action-oriented organizations.

NFTY (www.geocities.com/nftysanet/Saprog.htm)

NFTY – the North American Federation of Temple Youth – has social action information geared for temple youth groups. The above link takes you directly to its social action page, which provides resources and ideas on a number of issues.

American Jewish World Service (www.ajws.org)

The American Jewish World Service supports grassroots sustainable development throughout the world. Its goal is to “help alleviate poverty, hunger and disease among the people of the world regardless of race, religion or nationality. It breathes life into Judaism's imperative to pursue justice and helps American Jews act upon a deeply felt obligation to improve the chances for survival, economic independence and human dignity for all people.” AJWS runs a community development fund for the Jewish community in the Ukraine, offers Jewish resources on economic justice and coordinates alternative spring breaks and service missions.

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps (www.avodah.net)

AVODAH is a year-long program combining front-line anti-poverty work, Jewish study and community building. It provides an opportunity for young adults to live out and deepen their commitments to Jewish life and social change through a year

of work in low-income communities in New York City or Washington, DC. Its website has social action teachings on the Torah portion and holidays.

Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (www.coejl.org)

The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) promotes environmental education, scholarship, advocacy and action in the American Jewish community. Its website provides environmental program ideas for congregations and individuals during Jewish holidays, resources for educators and articles on Judaism and the environment.

Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life (www.hillel.org)

The Hillel website has many resources for college students and beyond. There is a section on the website dedicated to social justice, including information on grants and how to organize successful social justice events on campus.

MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger (www.mazon.org)

MAZON offers a number of readings and resources relating to issues of hunger, including resources for the holidays and for study throughout the year.

Myjewishlearning.com (www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Shavuot.htm)

This is a site for general information and study material on Shavuot.

The Shalom Center (www.shalomctr.org)

The Shalom Center has a number of interesting articles on social justice, environmental awareness and Shavuot. Follow the link to “Seasons of Our Joy” and then click on “Shavuot.”

Socialaction.com (www.socialaction.com)

Socialaction.com is “an online Jewish magazine dedicated to pursuing justice, building community and repairing the world.” This website has social action resources for the weekly Torah portion, holidays and lifecycle events.

Appendix A: Reform Judaism and GLBT Rights

The Reform Jewish movement has taken a strong stand in support of human rights, including GLBT rights. We believe that all people have basic rights, regardless of their sexual orientation. Hence, Reform Judaism opposes discrimination against any person “arising from apathy, insensitivity, ignorance, fear or hatred... 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.”¹⁴ Not only do we oppose discrimination, we also work towards a world in which the divinity within each of us will be recognized.

The Reform Jewish movement has been an advocate of gay and lesbian rights since 1965, when the Women of Reform Judaism passed a resolution calling for the decriminalization of homosexuality. In 1977 the URJ and CCAR passed their first resolutions on the issue, dealing with human rights for homosexuals. Since then, the URJ and its affiliates have passed resolutions on a range of GLBT issues, including: synagogue inclusion, gays and lesbians in the rabbinate, elimination of discrimination in the armed forces and Boy Scouts, and support for civil marriage.

Today, the Reform Jewish movement is committed to securing civil rights for gays and lesbians, including the right to civil marriage. The CCAR, in its 1996 resolution on gay and lesbian marriage, resolved to “support 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.” In March 2000, the CCAR passed a resolution on same-gender officiation, making history by becoming the first major group of North American clergy, as an organization, to give its support to those in its ranks choosing to perform such ceremonies. This resolution supports the decision of individual rabbis to officiate, or not officiate, at same-gender ceremonies.

Recently, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism lobbied against the proposed Federal Marriage Amendment (FMA), which would ban same-sex marriage nationwide. Rabbi David Saperstein has argued that a ban on same-sex marriage would curtail the right to freedom of religion. For this reason, thousands of clergy from a variety of faiths, including clergy opposed to same-sex marriage, signed onto a petition against the FMA.

Information on the Reform Jewish Movement’s position on same-sex marriage and resources for advocacy can be found at <http://rac.org/advocacy/specialresources/marriage/> and at <http://rac.org/advocacy/issues/issuegl/>. The CCAR has resources for rabbis at www.ccarnet.org.

¹⁴ Rabbi David Saperstein, testimony to Congress in support of the Employment Non-discrimination Act. Found at www.rac.org/advocacy/issues/issuegl.

Appendix B: Policy Issues Facing GLBT Individuals And Notes on Terminology

by Dena Wigder

Legal Discrimination against GLBT Individuals

GLBT individuals face countless acts of legal discrimination each day. These numerous acts are classified into three main categories:

1. Hate Crimes

- Currently crimes committed out of hatred toward GLBT individuals, despite the fact that crimes based on sexual orientation are the second most prevalent form of hate crimes (behind race), are not covered by federal hate crimes statutes.
- Activists have been advocating for the **Local Law Enforcement Enhancement Act** for many years now. This bill would expand the list of protected classes to include sexual orientation, gender and disability under hate crimes law. Moreover, it would remove the current requirement that the victim must be involved in a federally protected activity (speech, religion, assembly, etc.). Ultimately, the bill would increase the number of hate crimes indictments and prosecutions to more accurately reflect the number of hate crimes committed in the United States. We anticipate the re-introduction of this bill in the 109th Congress.

2. Workplace Discrimination

- In 36 states, it is perfectly legal to fire someone because of his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. This fear drives many GLBT citizens to hide their identities and families out of fear of losing their jobs, being passed over for a promotion, or facing daily harassment. Furthermore, many companies refuse to extend benefits, such as health care and retirement benefits, to same-sex partners.
- Only 14 states (California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, Hawaii, Maryland, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island and Wisconsin) and the District of Columbia prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. In the other 36 states, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender employees can be fired or otherwise discriminated against solely on the basis of their real or *perceived* (an individual can be fired simply because his or her employer thinks that he or she is gay) sexual orientation or gender identity.

- The **Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA)** introduced in the 108th Congress by Representative Christopher Shays (R-CT) and Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA), would expand the list of classes protected from employment discrimination to include sexual orientation, thereby making it illegal for public and private employers, employment agencies and labor unions to use the employee's sexual orientation as the basis for employment decisions such as hiring, firing, promotion, demotion or compensation. This bill would not apply to religious organizations and the military. ENDA does not provide for affirmative action or quotas and would not apply retroactively. We anticipate its re-introduction in the 109th Congress.

3. Family Issues

- Currently, loving, monogamous same-sex couples, even those whose unions are blessed in religious wedding ceremonies, cannot obtain government marriage licenses, except in Massachusetts. Marriage licenses would extend to same-sex couples many of the state-level protections offered to heterosexual married couples, including rights to hospital visitation, to employee and social security benefits, to petition for a partner to immigrate and to file joint state tax returns. There are over 1,000 federal benefits – not to mention thousands more state benefits – afforded to heterosexual married couples that same-sex couples cannot enjoy.
- Currently, there is no federal activity towards legalizing or outlawing gay and lesbian adoption. However, the issue continues to be active on a state level, and should be monitored on a state-by-state basis. Only one state, Florida, bans outright adoption by gay or lesbian individuals. In Mississippi, although a gay *individual* may adopt a child as a single mother or father, two gay individuals cannot jointly adopt as a couple. Utah prohibits all unmarried couples, including same-sex couples, from adopting children.
- In 2002, a provincial court in Ontario, Canada ruled it was unconstitutional to deny same-sex couples marriage licenses in Canada. Canada's Supreme Court rejected an appeal of this ruling and instead ruled in December of 2004 that gay marriage is constitutional in Canada and that the government is free to define marriage as a union of a same-sex couple. However, legislation to allow gay marriage must still pass the Canadian House of Commons for gay marriage to be legal nationwide.

Family Issues in Vermont and Massachusetts

Family issues such as marriage and adoption have garnered the most attention. Two states have made notable advances in extending benefits of marriage to same-sex couples:

Vermont

In December 1999, the Vermont Supreme Court handed down a groundbreaking decision, granting gay and lesbian couples the same protections and benefits given to heterosexual couples. In addition, the Court ordered the state of Vermont to craft a solution for this situation. This led to the establishment of a “civil union.” The bill, “An Act Relating to Civil Unions” allows both Vermont and non-Vermont residents to acquire a license certifying their relationship with a person of the same sex. This license extends the same state benefits of heterosexual marriage to same sex-couples. However, couples are still ineligible for the over 1,000 federal benefits of marriage, and their partnerships are not recognized in any other state.

Massachusetts

A major victory for advocates of equal marriage rights for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender Americans came in November 2003, when the Massachusetts Supreme Court declared that the Massachusetts ban on same-sex marriage conflicted with the state’s constitution. The Court specifically ruled that civil unions are not sufficient and that in denying them rights to full marriage equality, gays and lesbians are “excluded from the full range of human experience and denied full protection of the laws.”

What are the differences between civil unions and marriage?

While couples who obtain a civil union in Vermont are eligible for Vermont’s state benefits, they remain ineligible for the over 1,000 federal benefits of marriage including the ability to collect social security benefits upon the death of a partner, the right to petition for a partner to immigrate, etc. Moreover, civil unions are recognized in Vermont alone, whereas married couples are recognized by the federal government and all 50 states. As the Human Rights Campaign puts it, “comparing marriage to civil unions is a bit like comparing diamonds to rhinestones. One is, quite simply, the real deal; the other is not.”

Domestic partnerships consist of two individuals who live together and are responsible for each other’s emotional and financial well-being. Domestic partnerships are not legally sanctioned, nor are they recognized by any local, state or federal entity. Employers, usually independently, decide the criteria for domestic partnerships such as length of relationship, and may decide to extend employment benefits afforded to legal spouses to those who qualify as domestic partners. Domestic partnerships often apply to both heterosexual and homosexual couples.

Opposition to Marriage Equality:

Despite many advances on state and local levels in addition to increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians in society, there have been many attempts to deny equal marriage rights to gays and lesbians on both the state and federal level.

Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)

Though same-sex couples in Massachusetts can receive the same benefits as heterosexual couples, couples married in Massachusetts who move to another state will cease to have their marriages recognized by the state. This is due to a law called the Defense of Marriage Act, commonly referred to as DOMA. Passed in 1996, DOMA has two provisions: 1) the law stipulates that no state, territory, or possession of the United States, nor Indian tribe, is required to give any sort of recognition to the marriage of a gay and lesbian couple as recognized or performed in any other state; 2) the law states that in any “Act of Congress, or of any ruling, regulation, or interpretation of the various administrative bureaus and agencies of the United States, the word *marriage* means only a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife, and the word *spouse* refers only to a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife.”

Federal Marriage Amendment (FMA)

Many lawmakers became concerned that a trend had begun when the Massachusetts Supreme Court found denying same-sex couples state marriage licenses unconstitutional. Thus, they proposed an amendment to the United States Constitution that would define marriage as between man and a woman, thereby preventing all lower courts from finding the denial of gay and lesbian rights to civil marriage to be unconstitutional under the federal constitution. FMA would therefore effectively ban any recognition of same-sex couples by the United States federal government. The amendment, S. J. Res. 40 / H. J. Res. 56, failed in both the House and the Senate during the 108th Congress. In the 109th Congress, anti-marriage equality lawmakers have already introduced a so-called “Marriage Protection Amendment” (S. J. Res. 1) in the Senate. We expect a similar version to re-appear in the House of Representatives as well.

State Constitutional Amendments

Currently 13 states have passed amendments to their state constitutions defining marriage as only between one man and one woman. In many cases, these amendments not only ban gay marriage, but any domestic partnership benefits or recognition of same-sex couples as well. This has caused many gay couples to lose the few benefits they did enjoy. The most notable case is that of a woman in Ohio who lost her health insurance at the beginning of 2005 due to the passage of an amendment to the Ohio Constitution banning gay marriage and any sort of domestic partnership benefits. As a result, the woman had to cancel her radiation treatments for breast cancer, as she could not afford the treatment without insurance. States with these constitutional amendments are Oregon, Montana, Utah, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, Mississippi and Georgia.

Additional Resources

The Testimony of Dr. Kathleen Moltz before the United States Senate Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Property Rights
http://www.hrc.org/Template.cfm?Section=Press_Room&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=26455

This testimony can be a key study piece for Tikkun Leil Shavuot or other workshop. Dr. Moltz speaks from her knowledge as a physician, a Jew, a mother and a lesbian to teach about Jewish tradition and GLBT rights and about the ways that the proposed Federal Marriage Amendment may be harmful to gay and lesbian families.

Al Hanisim A Prayer of Gratitude for LGBT Pride

We thank You for the miraculous deliverance, for the heroism and for the triumphs in battle of our ancestors in other days, and in our time.

In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement lesbians and gay men, bisexuals and transgendered people, began to organize for the dignity and justice each of us is due as human beings on this earth. Those who profane Your name, claiming that they hate us in the name of God, rose up to criminalize us, pathologize us, brutalize us and erase us. And You in Your great mercy stood with us in the time of our troubles. You fought alongside us, vindicated us, gave us the courage to stand together, to open our eyes and the eyes of the world around us, to see that the freedom and the right to love belongs to all of Your creations. You have given us the strength to witness and create wonders, to be who we are and to love whom we love not only in the safety of home but outside in the light of the world, to live as Jews in the embrace of community, to sanctify our unions and celebrate ourselves before each other and before you. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. May we never know shame again.

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על הנסים ועל הפרקו, ועל הגבורות, ועל
התשוועות, ועל המלחמות שעשית לאבותינו
ולאמותינו בימים ההם בזמן הזה.

בימי התנועה לזכויות האזרח באמריקה,
קמה קהלת הגאים להלחם על הכבוד
והצדק המגיעים לכל בני אנוש, כשמתללי
שמך, בטענתם שהם שונאים בשם ה',
עמדו נגד בניד ובנותיד להשפילם ולאסרם,
להשמידם ולמתקם, וברחמיך הרבים
עמדת להם בעת צרתם, רבת את-ריבם,
דנת את-דינם, חזקת את-לבם לעמד ביחד,
לפקח את עיניהם ואת עיני העולם, להבין
שהחרות והזכות לאהב שזכות לכל
יצירותיך. חזקת אותם ואותנו כדי שנוכל
לראות נפלאות ולעשות נסים, להיות אשר
נהיה ולאהב את מי שנאהב, לא בצל מגורינו
אלא באור החיים, להיות כיהודים בחיק
הקהלה, לקדש את אחדינו ולשיש עלינו
ועליך. אמן מאסו הבונים היתה לראש פנה.
ולא נבוש ולא נבלם לעולם ועד.

A Few Notes on Terminology

Sexual Orientation:	An individual's physical or emotional attraction to the same and/or opposite sex including lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual orientations. Avoid the term "sexual preference" which suggests that being gay or lesbian is a choice and changeable.
Gender Identity:	One's personal sense of being male or female. For transgender individuals, their apparent sex or their birth-assigned sex does not match their own internal sense of gender identity.
Gay:	Describing people who are attracted to people of the same sex – i.e., gay men and lesbians.
Gay Man:	A man whose primary attraction is to other men.
Lesbian:	A woman whose primary attraction is to other women.
Heterosexual:	A person whose primary attraction is to people of the opposite gender.
Bisexual:	An individual who is romantically and physically attracted to both men and women.
Transgender:	An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender individuals may or may not choose hormonal and/or surgical intervention.
Intersex:	Describing a person whose sex is ambiguous, often due to genetic, hormonal or anatomical variations. Parents and medical professionals usually assign intersex infants a sex and perform surgery to conform the infant's body to that assignment, but the assignment will not necessarily correspond to the child's own gender identity.
Homophobia:	Fear or hatred of lesbians and gay men.

- Equal Rights:** Full enjoyment of the protections and liberties guaranteed to every American. It is important to use the term “equal rights,” not just “rights,” because opponents of GLBT equal rights often deceptively try to portray these rights as “*special* rights” that would privilege the GLBT community over other Americans.
- Domestic Partnership:** A contract recognizing a partnership or a relationship between two people, which sometimes confers limited benefits to them. Such partnerships can be formed by lesbians or gay men, by unmarried heterosexual partners or by others making a home together.
- Civil Union:** Formal recognition of committed lesbian and gay relationships by a state government. Civil unions confer upon same-sex couples the same rights available to married couples under the state’s law in such areas as state taxes, medical decisions and estate planning. Civil unions currently only exist in Vermont. Only civil marriage, however, not civil unions, can address federal-level discrimination.
- Civil Marriage:** Distinct from religious marriage or any wedding ceremony, this term refers to the legal status granted to couples who obtain a government-issued marriage license. This status entitles the couple to more than 1,000 responsibilities and protections afforded under state and federal law on the basis of marital status.

(Adapted from GLAAD’s Media Reference Guide 2003)

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