

Recommended to the Board for Adoption by the Resolutions Committee, 3/3/15

Central Conference of American Rabbis

**Resolution on the 25th Anniversary of the
Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Homosexuality and the Rabbinate**

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The Acceptance of Openly Gay and Lesbian Rabbinic Students at HUC-JIR

Background

While there no doubt have always been homosexual rabbis; until very recent days, they lived deeply closeted lives.

Since 1977, the CCAR has spoken out in favor of civil rights for gay men and lesbians. Until 1990, however, the CCAR never took a position opposing discrimination within the synagogue and Jewish institutions. A 1981 responsum declared that “overt heterosexual behavior or overt homosexual behavior which is considered objectionable by the community disqualifies the person involved from leadership positions in the Jewish community” (American Reform Responsa XCI [1981], pp. 67-69).

In the years after the Stonewall revolution, a few gay and lesbian rabbis came out. With the exception of the gay and lesbian outreach congregations, no congregation knowingly hired a gay or lesbian rabbi, and several rabbis lost their positions when their sexual orientation became publicly known. Until 1990, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion did not knowingly admit or ordain gay or lesbian students. Many outstanding candidates for the rabbinate never applied, were screened out during the admissions process, or were asked to leave before being ordained.

In 1986, a resolution calling for the full inclusion of gay and lesbian Jews and rabbis in the Reform movement was proposed. The CCAR members who proposed this resolution agreed to table it with the understanding that an Ad Hoc Committee on Homosexuality and the Rabbinate be appointed to address these issues.

The Committee’s deliberations continued over several years. The Committee was profoundly moved by personal testimonies – many, by necessity, anonymous – from gay and lesbian rabbis, as well as from others who had sought to enter the rabbinate but were unable to do so. During the years of the Committee’s work, many CCAR members advocated for rapid, forthright, and full acceptance of gays and lesbians as Jews and as rabbis on an equal basis. Others opposed a statement of acceptance with equal fervor.

In 1990, HUC-JIR for the first time declared that it would not affirmatively discriminate against gay and lesbian applicants. In a letter to the Committee, President Alfred Gottschalk

announced: “HUC-JIR considers sexual orientation of an applicant only within the context of a candidate’s overall suitability for the rabbinate, his or her qualifications to serve the Jewish community effectively, and his or her capacity to find personal fulfillment within the rabbinate.” Since the CCAR automatically admits all rabbinic graduates of HUC-JIR, the question of CCAR membership was also resolved.

The Ad Hoc Committee on Homosexuality and the Rabbinate’s Final Report, issued at the CCAR Convention in 1990ⁱ, noted the commitment of the CCAR to “provide placement services” to all its members. There was no mention of any non-discrimination policy or expectation with respect to placement. To the contrary, the Report indicates that “the unique position of the rabbi as spiritual leader and Judaic role model make acceptance of gay or lesbian rabbis an intensely emotional and potentially divisive issue.” In fact, gay and lesbian rabbis—or rabbis who were thought to be gay or lesbian—continued to experience discrimination for many years, whether being excluded from consideration, being counseled to remain “in the closet,” or losing their positions.

By action of the Joint Rabbinical Placement Committee of the CCAR, HUC-JIR, and the Union for Reform Judaism, congregations seeking rabbinic placement through the Commission must sign a non-discrimination statement which includes sexual orientation. While gay and lesbian rabbis now serve the Reform movement in every rabbinic capacity, including as the rabbis of leading North American synagogues, on the faculty and staff of the College-Institute, and throughout the Reform and wider Jewish community, prejudice and discrimination continue.

Since 1990, the CCAR has taken positions on the rights of gay men and lesbians, particularly in the area of marriage. However, it has made no further statement on the status of gay men or lesbians as rabbis.

Therefore, Be It Resolved:

That the Central Conference of American Rabbis:

1. Honors the memories of colleagues whose entire rabbinic service took place at a time when they could not openly live in fidelity to their sexual orientation while serving the Jewish community as rabbis;
2. Recognizes the pain of those colleagues and students who sought to serve the Jewish people through the rabbinate but were never allowed to serve or whose rabbinic careers were curtailed or constrained because of prejudice;
3. Salutes the gay and lesbian colleagues who were among the first to serve as rabbis after openly acknowledging their sexual orientation. Often sacrificially, they paved the way for a future generation that knows decreasing discrimination on the basis of sexual

orientation – and, we pray, for a generation to come that will not know this discrimination at all;

4. Honors the brave work of the Ad Hoc Committee on Homosexuality and the Rabbinates (1986-1990) for its ultimate encouragement of the Reform Movement's acceptance of gay and lesbian colleagues;
5. Celebrates the 25th anniversary of the change in the admission policy at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, to permit the acceptance of gay and lesbian candidates for the rabbinate;
6. Joyfully marks this 25th anniversary of the CCAR's formal acknowledgement of openly gay and lesbian rabbis in our ranks, while recognizing that change came slowly, both before and after 1990;
7. Rejoices that this 25th anniversary coincides with the installation of the first openly LGBT President of the Conference, Rabbi Denise L. Eger;
8. Expresses delayed gratitude to the Joint Commission on Rabbinic Placement for requiring that congregations seeking a rabbi sign a statement indicating that they will not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation;
9. Acknowledges that work remains to be done. Some colleagues may continue to feel compelled to be closeted. Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation persists in the rabbinate. CCAR redoubles its commitment to enable colleagues to come out with safety and celebration and to end discrimination through education of colleagues, lay leaders, and the Jewish community throughout the world.

ⁱ The Committee had originally been charged to report back to the Conference at the 1988 Convention.