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THE MAKING OF GAY AND LESBIAN RABBIS IN RECONSTRUCTIONIST JUDAISM, 1979–1992

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Since the mid-nineteenth century, most American Jewish leaders have been trained in seminaries and ordained as rabbis. A rabbi is a teacher, preacher, pastor, prayer leader, and interpreter of Jewish life and customs to both secular and other faith communities. Rabbis serve in a variety of institutional contexts but primarily in synagogues, schools, hospitals, and communal organizations. Rabbis were all men (with a few exceptions) until the 1970s. Today, excluding the Orthodox, half of American rabbis are women. The vast majority were (and still are) married and raising children in keeping with Jewish pronatalist values.¹

Until the 1980s, it was also presumed that all rabbis were heterosexual. We have little way of knowing how many rabbis might have hidden their same-sex desires or behaviors during the decades—and centuries—before the emergence of modern gay and lesbian identities.² But just as the second-wave feminist movement enabled Jewish women to imagine that they too could be rabbis, so did the gay and lesbian movement of the same era also encourage Jews who were coming out as gay or lesbian to consider the rabbinate as a career option.³ The entrance of women—heterosexual and lesbian—and gay men into the rabbinate posed a great challenge to the Jewish community in that era, making Jews question their assumptions and beliefs about religion and sexuality. While the story of women entering the rabbinate has been told many times over, the struggles of gay men and lesbians to achieve acceptance has yet to be explored in depth.⁴

This chapter tells how one Jewish denomination, the Reconstructionists, came to accept gay men and lesbians in their school for training rabbis, adopting the following policy: “An openly gay or lesbian orientation shall

not in itself constitute adequate grounds for the rejection of an otherwise qualified applicant for admission to the College or for dismissal from the College of a student otherwise in good standing, or for denial of graduation of a student who otherwise meets all requirements for graduation.”⁵ This policy, adopted in 1984, made the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) the first school for training rabbis to admit and ordain openly gay and lesbian students and only the second denomination in the United States to formally allow gay and lesbian religious leadership.⁶ This move was particularly bold at a time when other religious organizations, even liberal ones, were actively barring gay men and lesbians from the clergy.

The story of RRC’s shift in policy between 1979 and 1992 reveals the tangled and uneven nature of institutional and ideological change in sexual and religious mores. In practice, the changes in RRC as a religious institution look very similar to other kinds of organized policy change. They took place through committee meetings, communal debate, and democratic vote. Individuals’ ideas about same-sex sexuality and their experiences with gay and lesbian identities shaped how they participated in this process. And some of those participants were gay and lesbian themselves. At first glance, much about this process does not seem “religious”—if by that term we mean formal teaching, ritual practice, or textual interpretation. But these institutional practices and decisions about policy were also deeply tied to, shaped by, and productive of religious meanings. The story of how RRC came to accept the ordination of gays and lesbians as rabbis highlights the complicated relationship between policy and practice.

The debate over including gays and lesbians began in 1979 when RRC rejected its first openly gay applicant. The policy change in 1984 permitted ordination, but hostility toward gays and lesbians as well as the efforts to transform the heteronormative culture of the school and the denomination at large continued until 1992, when the Reconstructionist movement officially affirmed the policy for its congregations. These struggles ultimately resulted in open acknowledgment and solidarity, in which the Reconstructionist movement has taken great pride. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, this landmark decision would be interpreted as a cornerstone of the Reconstructionist movement’s platform on inclusive community.⁷

RECONSTRUCTIONIST JUDAISM

Given its history, it is not surprising that Reconstructionist Judaism moved relatively quickly to embrace religious rights for gay men and lesbians. Reconstructionism is a denomination of Judaism that began in the United

States in the 1920s, based on the teachings of Mordecai Kaplan, a Jewish philosopher and rabbi. Kaplan's followers call themselves Reconstructionists based on his idea that the customs and traditions of Judaism can be brought to life for every generation of Jews, who must "reconstruct" their Jewish heritage in ways that both incorporate the Jewish past and are in keeping with the best values of contemporary society. When it comes to making changes in Jewish tradition, the past, as Kaplan phrased it, "has a vote, but not a veto." Reconstructionists affirm that American Jews must straddle two worlds—the American and the Jewish. They maintain Jewish observances (celebrating holy days, keeping kosher) while simultaneously bringing the values of America (like democracy and women's rights) into Jewish organizational life. Kaplan famously called this effort "living in two civilizations."⁸

On this basis, Reconstructionist leaders were often supportive of progressive causes. In the 1930s and 1940s when the movement first got underway, Kaplan and his circle were politically outspoken in support of socialism, unions, and workers' rights. They published an influential magazine, the *Reconstructionist*, where they debated matters of interest to the general society as well as Jewish life. From its inception, Reconstructionism supported gender equality and is perhaps known best as the originator of the bat mitzvah in 1922. Until this time, the rite of passage at puberty had been restricted to boys. Reconstructionist Jews are innovative in their worship practices, tending toward an informal style of prayer while at the same time preserving the traditional Hebraic character of Jewish liturgy. This comfort with innovation would provide the backdrop for the willingness to tackle difficult social issues like gay and lesbian equality.⁹

Although Reconstructionism began as a philosophical approach, by the 1950s its followers organized into a structured denomination, culminating in the establishment of a school to train rabbis in 1968 in Philadelphia. As a product of its times and of the movement of which it was a part, the school defined itself as progressive. Women were admitted into the rabbinical program as soon as they applied, in its second year of operation.¹⁰ Because democracy was an important value, students were included in decision-making processes. The progressive agenda, however, did not yet include openness to homosexuality, and there was no written policy about admitting homosexuals to the school.

JEWISH VIEWS OF HOMOSEXUALITY

The absence of such a policy was not surprising. Jewish texts and traditions, as historian Daniel Boyarin argues, did not conceptualize same-sex behavior in the terms and definitions of modern homosexuality.¹¹ And as Rebecca L.

Davis shows in this volume, the pronatalist concerns of twentieth-century Jews contributed to an increasing emphasis on marital heterosexuality. As a result, there was virtually no discussion of homosexuality in the Jewish community; if asked, most Jewish leaders probably were unaware that some Jews were homosexual. Moreover, the American Jewish press had little to no coverage of homosexuality until the 1970s. However, the emerging concern about homosexuality as a distinct area of deviance led Jewish leaders to formulate teachings and textual interpretations that specifically addressed this issue.

In 1968, Norman Lamm, a renowned rabbi and professor of philosophy at Yeshiva University (the Orthodox rabbinical school), was among the first to raise the topic in public, responding negatively to Christian clergy (and a few rabbis) who spoke in support of homosexual rights.¹² The most important addition to Jewish learning, *The Encyclopaedia Judaica*, was published in 1971–72 but did not include an article about homosexuality in its initial sixteen volumes. Indicative of the growing visibility of gay men and lesbians in American society, the subsequent first volume of the *Encyclopedia Judaica Yearbook* (1974) included what is now the classic explication of traditional sources forbidding homosexual relations, “Judaism and the Modern Attitude to Homosexuality,” that Norman Lamm was invited to write. This thorough explication of the few references to homosexuality in ancient texts was the first of its kind. There were virtually no other resources available.

The mid-twentieth-century gay and lesbian identity movement also crystallized a challenge to this newly explicit antihomosexual tradition. Individual Jews were leaders in the homophile movement of the 1950s and in the beginnings of gay liberation in the 1960s, including in Philadelphia.¹³ Jews in the gay liberation movement fought for social issues like decriminalization and destigmatization of their sexuality. Religious rights were not on their agenda, and the homophile movement in Philadelphia had little bearing on Jewish life in the 1950s and 1960s. The lack of connection stemmed from the fact that mainstream synagogues, with their intense focus on heterosexual marriage and child-rearing, were unwelcoming to gay and lesbian congregants.

THE EMERGENCE OF GAY JEWISH IDENTIFICATION

Not all gay and lesbian Jews were willing to relinquish their connections to Jewish religion. Gay-welcoming Christian churches like the Metropolitan Community Church provided a model for gay and lesbian Jews. In the early 1970s, several gay-welcoming synagogues and lesbian-feminist communities were founded. These groups did not affiliate with mainstream denominations.

The exception was the first gay synagogue, Beth Chaim Chadashim, founded in Los Angeles in 1972, which was supported from its inception by the Reform movement's regional leader, Rabbi Erwin Herman, the father of a gay son.¹⁴

As gay and lesbian Jews created visible Jewish institutional spaces, it was inevitable that rabbis too would begin to create spaces for sexual diversity within Jewish institutions. Doing so meant “coming out”—publicly declaring a gay or lesbian identity as a signature act of liberation. This decision symbolized, as historian John D’Emilio explains, “the shedding of the self-hatred that gay women and men internalized, and consequently it promised an immediate improvement in one’s life.”¹⁵ However, when gays and lesbians came out, they also risked open stigma and the loss of family ties, jobs, and friends. Having created welcoming spaces where it was possible to come out, newly emboldened gay and lesbian Jews began to put more pressure on liberal Jewish institutions for validation and acceptance.

Rabbis, leaders, and teachers who publicly identified as gay would be an important next step in this process. Of course there were many mainstream rabbis who were “in the closet,” and they rightly feared that coming out publicly would end their rabbinic careers. The first closeted rabbi came out in 1979. Alan Bennett, who had been ordained at Hebrew Union College (HUC) in 1974, decided to leave closeted mainstream life and take a job at Sha’ar Zahav, the gay synagogue in San Francisco. The demand by gay and lesbian Jews to be accepted into the liberal schools that trained rabbis was the beginning of a process of institutional change at the Reform movement’s Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Their applications triggered institutional discussions about the place of gays and lesbians within Judaism and as leaders in the community.

THE FIRST “OUT” GAY APPLICANT

In 1979 RRC received its first application from a gay man who chose to remain out because he was unwilling to live in fear of being outed and expelled. The applicant, Jordan Barbakoff, was well credentialed—a graduate of the Orthodox Crown Heights Yeshiva, the recipient of a BA in Judaic studies from the State University of New York at Albany, and a master’s student in Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary—and would have made an ideal candidate.¹⁶ As part of the application process at HUC, Barbakoff had a preliminary screening interview, at which he was advised not to apply. Even though HUC later accepted several out gay men and lesbians in the early 1980s, institutional closeting persisted among the Reform denomination, and

HUC cautioned them that being public as students would jeopardize their career options and could result in their not being ordained.¹⁷

Rejected by HUC, Barbakoff turned to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. He was encouraged by Stanley Isser, his undergraduate academic adviser, who thought that the progressive heritage of the Reconstructionist movement would lead to his admission to RRC. The initial institutional response was not outright rejection; in keeping with the philosophy that the past “has a vote, but not a veto,” RRC’s administration began a process of study and reflection on the place of same-sex sexuality. RRC’s academic dean, Ronald Brauner, an Orthodox scholar, decided to turn Barbakoff’s application into an opportunity for an open discussion of the issue at RRC, although the applicant’s identity was not revealed. While not resulting in an affirmative reply, the internal debate over this openly gay candidate began unanticipated transformations.

Even as an openly gay applicant pushed for reform, closeted lesbian and gay students within RRC began to challenge the admission process. This activism was profoundly difficult for gay and lesbian students at the school. Linda Holtzman, who was in her final year of the RRC program, had begun exploring her lesbianism one year earlier. She remembers being “so unsure of my own identity and so uncertain about the direction of my own career” that she could not take a leadership role in the conversations.¹⁸ Classmates to whom she had revealed her situation, however, supported her and circulated a letter to the students in favor of admitting openly gay and lesbian students despite the negative message in the traditional texts. Approximately half of the student body (nineteen students) signed the letter. Students who did not sign based their reluctance on both practical considerations and concerns about Jewish law.

RRC faculty met to decide on Barbakoff’s candidacy on March 9, 1979. They unanimously passed the motion “The RRC will not consider the candidacy of an avowed homosexual.”¹⁹ Their refusal came from a range of theological and cultural sources. For some faculty members, homosexuality was “inimical to the survival of the Jewish people,” in keeping with the common assumption in this era that gay people could not have children. After the Holocaust, any threat to producing the next generation of Jews, from intermarriage to abortion, was often perceived in this light. Other faculty members were supportive of civic equality for gay and lesbian people, and RRC president and founder, Ira Eisenstein, was unequivocal in his support of homosexual civil rights.²⁰ But they, too, voted against admission. For them the issue of visibility within the Jewish community was at the heart of the

matter. The fear of being condemned by traditional Jews outweighed their desire to welcome gay and lesbian Jewish leadership.

RRC was now on record as opposing the ordination of openly gay men and women, but this formal statement had unintended effects. The initial result, of course, was the candidate's rejection: Barbakoff received a simple letter, accompanied by a sympathetic phone call and verbal apology from Brauner.²¹ However, the debate also emboldened openly gay men and lesbians to put more pressure on liberal Jewish institutions for acceptance. Several developments of the early 1980s also put new weight on this pressure for change. These years witnessed the founding of gay and lesbian synagogues in most large cities, a flourishing of progressive conversations about the place of homosexuality in Judaism, and efforts among gay and lesbian Jews to reconcile these identities within mainstream Judaism.²² The topic of homosexuality, itself once closeted, was out in the open, and the demand for acceptance was growing.

A NEW POLICY

It took only five years for the faculty of RRC to reverse the policy. In March 1984, the faculty voted to admit openly gay and lesbian students. Change in the RRC leadership was primarily responsible for reconsidering the policy. A new president, Ira Silverman, came to RRC in 1982. His vision of Reconstructionism emphasized gender equality, ritual experimentation, and engaging a broader range of voices. Sweeping personnel changes brought in new liberal faculty and thus an opportunity to reconsider gay and lesbian admission and ordination.

At a fall 1983 faculty meeting, two of these new faculty members—left-wing Conservative rabbi Hershel Matt and Reconstructionist rabbi Linda Holtzman—volunteered to draft a position paper for the faculty's consideration on admitting gay and lesbian students. Holtzman, a 1979 graduate of RRC, was already well known to the Philadelphia Jewish community as a public advocate for lesbian and gay inclusion. She also made history as the first woman rabbi to serve a mainstream Conservative movement congregation. (That movement was not yet ordaining women as rabbis.) Although not out to her congregation, she had begun living an openly lesbian life and worked with the lesbian and gay congregation in Philadelphia, Beth Ahavah. In contrast, Matt was an elder statesman. He was widely respected throughout the Jewish world as a traditionalist but also known to be willing to take liberal stands on controversial issues.

Matt had already published an essay that offered support for gays and lesbians within traditional Jewish language. Published in 1978 in *Judaism*, “Sin, Crime, Sickness, or Alternative Life Style? A Jewish Approach to Homosexuality” advocated for a change in halacha (Jewish law) based on the idea that homosexuality was not a choice but innate. If gay men and lesbians are “born that way,” he argued, they should be treated compassionately. He applied the halachic category of *ones* (compulsion), reasoning that if you cannot act otherwise, you are not culpable for your actions. Matt argued that homosexuals could even become rabbis (a startling idea in 1978). But he held out one proviso—that the homosexual rabbi “honestly hold the conviction—and would conscientiously seek to convey it to others—that, in spite of his or her own homosexuality, the Jewish ideal for man and woman is heterosexuality.”²³

Despite the inferior status for gay men and lesbians that this position assumed, Matt’s argument also created an unprecedented place within Judaism for gays and lesbians. Presenting homosexuality as an innate and unchangeable identity rather than a sinful choice—and making this argument from halachic premises—made a powerful case for accepting gays and lesbians within Jewish traditions.

Many of these ideas would appear in Matt and Holtzman’s position paper, which also responded to the vocal challenge from Rabbi Ivan Caine, one of the two faculty members remaining from 1979. Caine circulated a substantial and dense position paper arguing against a change in policy, “On the Admittance of Overt Homosexuals to the RRC.”²⁴ He expressed concern that the faculty was not considering the weight of halacha, and thus not in his opinion honoring the position of Reconstructionist founder Mordecai Kaplan, that the past “should have a vote.” Kaplan tied this defense of Jewish tradition to fears about the social dangers of the “homosexual life style” as a source of promiscuity, hedonism, and seduction. He argued that overt homosexuals would not accept Matt’s position granting them lesser status and was skeptical that homosexual role models would not be inclined to persuade undecided young people to become homosexual. Caine also argued that this would begin a “slippery slope” for the admission of comparable groups: prostitutes, bigamists, transvestites, brother-sister incestuous couples, drug users, the intermarried, non-Jews. He cautioned the faculty about consequences. Shouldn’t the other arms of the movement, the rabbis and lay leaders, be included in this decision that would affect them? Wouldn’t the activist and militant overt homosexuals turn RRC into the “gay seminary”? Shouldn’t the faculty be concerned about what would happen when congregations refused to hire an openly gay rabbi? Or would

congregations be required to do so? In language that mirrored broader antigay discourses, Caine presented homosexuality as a threat to Jewish traditions in general and a threat to the survival of RRC in particular.

Matt and Holtzman's position paper, "Proposed RRC Policy Statement on Gays/Lesbians," responded to many of Caine's criticisms. They argued against traditional positions that associated homosexuality with idolatrous worship as a misinterpretation of the Hebrew Bible. They supported Jewish pronatalism but argued that procreation was not the only avenue to preserve the Jewish people; gay men and lesbians could contribute as teachers, following the rabbinic idea that "whoever teaches another person's child Torah is as one who has borne or begotten a child."²⁵ The statement emphasized that gay and lesbian families would create nurturing relationships. It asserted, as Matt suggested in his earlier work, that "the basic question is not whether people should *be* homosexual but whether they can live openly and with integrity what they *truly* are." This perhaps was the most persuasive point of all. Furthermore, a gay or lesbian rabbi could be an asset, helping congregants acknowledge and come to terms with their true sexual orientation and "reduce prejudices and stereotypical thinking" of heterosexual congregants. They acknowledged that a change in the policy might be detrimental to the college's reputation and fund-raising ability but also suggested that some people would "be moved and impressed by the moral courage and forthrightness of such a policy," and they advocated the change as the "most truly moral, Jewish, Reconstructionist thing to do."²⁶

The faculty vote on the Matt-Holtzman paper was held in June 1984 after the students had left for summer vacation. Silverman and the incoming academic dean, Arthur Green, spoke in strong support. Caine reiterated his opposition at length, but only one other faculty member voted with him (10–2 by secret ballot). The majority vote was based on a belief that admitting openly gay and lesbian students was the moral and therefore the correct Jewish position, even if it contradicted Jewish legal precedent. Despite their conviction, faculty members were aware that this position was not shared by most of the Reconstructionist community who would need to be convinced that this change would not destroy the Reconstructionist movement by placing it outside the mainstream and subjecting it to the criticism of traditional Jews. But President Silverman was willing to handle the fallout and wanted the policy in place for the following year.²⁷ To allay fears about adverse publicity, the report recommended that the decision not be publicized with a press release. The faculty would inform only the Board of Governors, students (although not until the following fall), and the rabbinic leadership

of the movement, as well as “individual prospective students who inquire”²⁸ prior to the fall announcement. The policy would not appear in the RRC catalog (and did not until 1993). Thus, RRC passed an internal policy that permitted gay and lesbian admission and ordination but as an institution was itself not publicly “out” about this new policy.

INSTITUTIONAL AMBIVALENCE

The 1984 policy offered an important symbolic step toward ending the injustice of homophobia at RRC. But it was only a first step in a much longer process of creating institutional change within RRC and within the Reconstructionist movement as a whole.

In many ways the gay-inclusive policy served as an unintentional litmus test that revealed the Reconstructionist movement’s pervasive heterosexual biases. The initial backlash from movement leaders was powerful, and acclimation would be slow. People who agreed with Caine’s moral position (mostly, but not only, Orthodox and Conservative Jews) were outraged. The rabbinic and lay bodies of Reconstructionism were angry that they had not been consulted. Employment issues were a concern, both for students and congregations. While the passage of the admissions policy was significant, it was the beginning of a long process rather than its culmination.

The formal policy of inclusion also compelled many gays and lesbians—and supportive allies—to look more critically at the institutional culture of the seminary and the Reconstructionist movement as a whole. On the face of it, the policy made one thing clear: once gay men and lesbians matriculated as rabbinical students, it was no longer acceptable for faculty or students to question the legitimacy of the ordination of gay or lesbian rabbis. However, even the working of the policy suggested that this legitimacy came at a cost, and those who wanted equal respect were not pleased with Matt’s argument that heterosexuality was the preferred way of life. In addition to stated matters of policy, there was also the larger question of practice. The symbolic statement of inclusion did nothing to address the homophobia of faculty and students or the heteronormative culture of the school. The faculty had assumed that a lesbian or gay student would apply, be admitted, and be treated like everyone else. They had given no thought to the possibility that closeted students and applicants might feel more vulnerable because of the policy. Could the students who were out be trusted to respect the closets these students had so carefully built? The faculty also did not consider how to address students who had never met an out gay person or who disapproved of the “homosexual

lifestyle.” The formal gesture of inclusion did nothing to change the everyday practices that made gays and lesbians feel like trespassers in straight space.

Students who arrived on campus from more radical corners of the counterculture quickly noticed this gap between policy and practice. Jane Litman and Julie Greenberg, incoming students who were public about their respective bisexual and lesbian identities, found themselves in an environment that was less welcoming than they had anticipated. Both Litman and Greenberg had come to RRC from the lesbian separatist group Dyke Shabbos,²⁹ where they were exploring new lesbian-feminist approaches to Jewish life. They wanted a similar environment at RRC. However, RRC’s atmosphere had not changed much from the one Greenberg described when she came for her interview the year before. Finding only “one closeted student and one closeted faculty member,” Greenberg decided to keep quiet about her sexuality as a student.³⁰

The vast majority of queer students made similar choices about obscuring their sexual identity despite the formal inclusivity of the seminary.³¹ Yet all were out in their personal lives and came out to at least some faculty and students during their student years. Among them was Sharon Kleinbaum, who would later become the leading student advocate for the policy and the first full-time rabbi of the gay synagogue of New York, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, where she has served for over twenty-five years. At the time of her matriculation in 1985, however, she was astonished at how deeply closeted many of the RRC students and faculty were and was “overwhelmed by heterosexual assumptions” she found. Coming from a place where she, too, had been quite open and moving to Philadelphia with her partner, she nonetheless decided, at least temporarily, to “go back into the closet” at RRC.³²

These decisions about coming out publicly also posed unique challenges for faculty and administration at the seminary. The institution’s reticence to make its inclusion policy public placed unique demands for silence on those who represented it as authorities. Faced with the high cost of making their sexual identity public, these leaders found less public strategies for advocating change. Linda Holtzman, coauthor of the 1984 policy, was going through her own coming-out process. When renegotiating her synagogue contract in 1985, she told her Conservative congregation that she would need “two weeks of co-parenting leave to ‘help my housemate when she gave birth’ written into my next contract.”³³ The congregation refused to provide a contract with that provision, and Holtzman left the congregation and increased her time working at RRC. The role she took there would be crucial to the next steps in the process of helping the public acclimate to the new policy. Along with Matt she

became the trusted confidant of many of the students who were encouraged to explore their sexuality in this changing environment.

Jacob Staub, another faculty member, used his role as the editor of the *Reconstructionist* magazine to support the policy even as he felt it necessary to be circumspect about his own gay identity. As editor of a special issue on Judaism and homosexuality in October 1985, Staub urged the Reconstructionist movement to further support the inclusion of gay men and lesbians in Jewish life:

Many of us probably wish that a Jew's sexual preference could remain private and that the subject could be closed right there. The facts are otherwise, however. . . . Gays and lesbians now seek to live their lives out of the closet. They are forming congregations where they can celebrate their *semakhot* [life cycle events] openly and can confront honestly the hostility of Jewish tradition. They want to consecrate their relationships in public Jewish ceremonies, and they want to raise their families with Jewish communal support. . . . There should be no question that the needs of gay and lesbian Jews deserve our full attention.³⁴

The issue included reviews of the current literature and of halachic (legal) positions, an essay by Janet Marder about her positive experience as the rabbi of a gay synagogue, and two personal essays by mothers advocating for their gay children. And yet this groundbreaking public discussion of lesbian and gay inclusion not only did not mention the editor's personal investment in the topic but also did not mention the change in RRC's admission policy.

Neither did *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach*—the introduction to Reconstructionism coauthored by Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub and also published in 1985. Tellingly, the only mention of homosexuality was a suggestion that in keeping with the Reconstructionist value of “living in two civilizations” (the Jewish and the American), Jews should adopt the American value of “decent treatment of homosexuals.”³⁵ Neither the authors nor the movement was ready to be more public, yet. In the fall of 1986, Alpert, then dean of students, began the process of leaving her marriage and coming out. Arthur Green, who became president after Silverman's departure in 1986, worried about the adverse publicity the policy was receiving in the traditional community. Seeing the sexual identity of the seminary's leaders as a reflection of its institutional identity, Green informed Alpert that if she chose to be public about her sexual orientation, she would have to leave her position.

Green's concerns reflected genuine conflicts. RRC as an institution risked being marginalized within broader Jewish communities by publicly staking out a stance of sexual inclusion. In December 1986, RRC student Jane Litman gave an interview about her views on Jewish feminism to the *Boston Jewish Advocate*, where she was quoted as saying that Judaism is homophobic and patriarchal and explaining that her interest in goddess worship was meant to overcome the absence of sexuality outside "heterosexual monogamy" in traditional Judaism.³⁶ The article provoked intense reactions. Conflating feminism and lesbianism, Rabbi Samuel H. Dresner, a faculty member at the Conservative movement's rabbinical training institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary, concluded that the ordination of lesbian and gay rabbis was a return to paganism. Quoting Litman's interview, he argued that Judaism, to separate from pagan sexuality, gives primacy to family as the "moral, eventually monogamous" container for the "sexual impulse."³⁷ Real Judaism, according to Dresner, was defined by its promotion of heterosexual marriage and family.

Dresner also suggested that RRC, by this measure, was not truly Jewish. Dresner not only faulted Litman but also accused RRC of supporting "an anti-family, sexually free goddess-cult." He viewed Litman as dangerous not because of her views but because a rabbinical student holding such views *remained* a rabbinical student. In response, RRC countered that it was open to students' experimentation, which prompted Dresner to describe a slope even slipperier than the one Rabbi Caine had outlined: "Does it entail a new type of rabbi who will expect a couple to live together before marrying them? Does it include the worship of a goddess or becoming a witch? . . . Does it mean rabbis who see the family of husband-wife-and-child as 'very limiting' and 'homophobic'? Does it include homosexual or lesbian rabbis? . . . Where will it end?"³⁸

Dresner, like Caine, was expressing views that were not uncommon in the Jewish community in the mid-1980s, even in liberal circles.³⁹ Homosexuality, seen as a wholesale challenge to family and child-rearing, also seemed to pose an insidious threat to the integrity of Judaism itself.

CHANGING RRC CULTURE

The absence of a strong institutional response to these inflamed worries sent a different message to gay and lesbian Jews: it reinforced the implicit feeling that they were outsiders to a religious tradition normatively defined as heterosexual. Inside RRC, however, things were beginning to change. In



In 1993 *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends* hosted a Havdalah service and benefit concert at the National March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Rights and Liberation, called "An Evening of Jewish Lesbian Entertainment," at the New York Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. The Havdalah service was written and conducted by Rabbi Linda Holtzman and lesbian students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, including Elizabeth Bolton, pictured here. Photo by Linda Eber.

spring 1988, Sharon Kleinbaum had been working as a student rabbi at Bet Haverim, the gay outreach synagogue in Atlanta. Emboldened by that experience, Kleinbaum wanted to make a contribution to changing the culture at RRC.⁴⁰ She and Staub convened the “What Now?” Group to talk about what needed to change. It consisted of Staub, Holtzman, and Alpert representing the faculty and Kleinbaum and two other students.⁴¹

The group began discussions with the acknowledgment that the policy change, now nearly four years old, did not in itself achieve genuine inclusion. Gay and lesbian students at RRC needed support. Their privacy was not being protected. Some were being outed without their consent. Even supportive classmates often did not understand the complexities of living a double life and made damaging assumptions about what they could say to whom. The first class that had entered under the new policy was nearing their final year. What was RRC going to do about job placement? Would the school honor congregational requests for only straight candidates? The conversation also raised broader questions about the nature of the policy itself. The policy stated a right to be included. However, that statement did not amount to a moral position with broad implications about the equality of gay men and lesbians or the holiness of their sexuality.⁴²

In the fall of 1988, members of the “What Now?” Group invited Felice Yeskel of Cold Spring Educational Consultants to help them think about culture change. They began by producing a packet of materials for the rabbinical students to use. The packet explained how to respond to provocative questions, such as these: Isn’t Judaism against homosexuality? Shouldn’t I worry about my kids being molested? Aren’t Jews obligated to “be fruitful and multiply”? Is RRC really a hotbed of gay activity? These were questions that in 1988 were still difficult for RRC faculty and students to answer.⁴³ Presenting clear, factual, and nondefensive responses to these questions helped to redress gay and lesbian students’ sense of being besieged.

In 1989–90, the “What Now?” Group planned a daylong seminar for the RRC community. Christie Balka and Andy Rose had just published an edited anthology, *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish* that included articles by several Reconstructionist rabbis and other local Philadelphians who were invited to speak. The highlight of the day was a conversation with leaders of the Reconstructionist movement, “Where Do We Go from Here?,” where difficult questions were raised about the movement’s plans for inclusion.⁴⁴

These actions helped to achieve the “What Now?” Group’s goal of culture change. Beginning with the class of 1989, graduating seniors agreed among themselves not to discuss their personal lives with prospective employers at their initial interviews so that lesbian and gay students would not be rejected before the

search committees even considered them. Additionally, the 1990 graduating class passed a resolution to be forwarded to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, demanding that the association's representatives on the Joint Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot–RRA Placement Commission “insist that guidelines require all listing congregations to refrain from discrimination.”⁴⁵ These policies and practices took important steps beyond symbolic inclusion. They presented sexual inclusivity as a shared value that was also supported in pragmatic ways by Reconstructionist Jews of all sexual orientations.

These changes at RRC also slowly influenced the broader Reconstructionist movement. Employment in the mainstream Jewish community for out gay and lesbian rabbis was still a work in progress. Until 1996, no RRC graduates came out when they interviewed for their first rabbinic positions. Leila Berner graduated from RRC in 1988 and took a congregational job at a Reconstructionist synagogue in the Philadelphia suburbs but did not come out to members. Her partner functioned as the *rebbitzin* (rabbi's wife); their relationship was an open secret. Berner's article under the pseudonym *La Escondida* (“the hidden one”) in *Twice Blessed* described the difficulties of living a double life.⁴⁶ Julie Greenberg found a solution by starting her own organization, the Jewish Renewal Life Center, in 1990.⁴⁷

Ultimately, things would need to change within the movement at large. The Reconstructionist Commission on Homosexuality, comprising representatives from all arms of the movement, was convened in 1990 and met five times for three days, discussing every nuance of every issue. The commission's report was published in 1992. The document, passed unanimously, is an example of the signature Reconstructionist approach to values-based decision-making. In contrast to the family values ascribed to Judaism by thinkers like Samuel Dresner, the document lists the key Jewish values (human dignity, equality, variety of family forms, good sex, children, and many others) as the reasons for full religious and civil equality for gay men and lesbians. In keeping with the Reconstructionist value of giving the past “a vote, but not a veto,” the document balances current social science and traditional texts and enumerates guidelines for full inclusion and education, including endorsing same-sex wedding ceremonies. Going beyond the earlier views of Hershel Matt, the document concludes, “We recognize the bias in Jewish and American culture that deems homosexuality as less desirable than heterosexuality. As we affirm that heterosexuality and homosexuality are both normal expressions of human diversity, we affirm that both are ways of being which offer fulfillment.”⁴⁸ With this statement of full inclusion, the Reconstructionist movement was now ready to accept its gay and lesbian rabbis as equals.

CONCLUSION

The events that took place at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College illustrate the complexity of creating welcoming religious spaces in the 1980s, a slow process that involved challenging social practices and institutional culture as well as formal teachings and policies. The Reconstructionist movement spent over a decade on the process that made it possible for gay men and lesbians to win full religious equality. These policies eventually met with broad acceptance in the non-Orthodox Jewish world. The Reform movement officially approved of gay and lesbian ordination in 1990, and the Conservative movement did so in 2006. Gay men and lesbians who are willing to accept the values and mores of Judaism as it is practiced in liberal religious communities are now fully welcome and included. Bisexuality (and other nonnormative sexual behaviors) has never been accepted. In the last decade, transgender men and women have been admitted to rabbinical programs in the Reform and Reconstructionist movements. In 2016 they are welcomed, but not fully and not everywhere. Not yet.

From a distance, the inclusion of LGBTQ people and clergy within religious denominations appears to occur suddenly: after millennia of exclusion, policies are reversed with a majority vote. A close look at the process undergone in the Reconstructionist movement suggests otherwise. The shift that occurred from 1979 to 1992 was gradual. Initially, queer clergy were unimaginable. It required a great deal of courage for queer and straight individuals, as well the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College as a whole, to stand up for the policy change against fierce hostility. Liberals with heteronormative assumptions had to be willing to accept the possibility that lesbian and gay Jews were full members of the Jewish people and were not threatening. As lesbian and gay rabbis and rabbinical students began to come out, prejudices evaporated. Over a decade, the conversation progressed to the point in 1992 that members of a representative, movement-wide Commission on Homosexuality could unanimously conclude that the traditional Jewish values they most treasured led them to affirm that lesbians and gays should be fully and unequivocally embraced. Ultimately, Reconstructionist Jews came to embrace queer inclusion as something that was itself an important part of their collective Jewish identity.

NOTES

1. See Rebecca L. Davis's chapter in this volume, which illuminates the importance of pronatalist thinking in Jewish life at the time.
2. We attended rabbinical school together in the 1970s, were both closeted in that era, and certainly knew of other rabbinical students who were dealing with issues related to

their sexuality at the time. But we will never know about past generations of rabbis who were compelled to hide their sexual desires. For a suggestive exploration of this question, see Shaun Jacob Halper, "Coming Out of the Hasidic Closet: Jiri Mordechai Langer (1894–1943) and the Fashioning of Homosexual-Jewish Identity," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 189–231. Langer, the subject of this article, was a homosexual Jewish writer in Prague who wrote about homoerotic relations between men in the history of Hasidic Judaism, *Die Erotik der Kabbala* (1923).

3. John D'Emilio's afterword in this volume suggests a different pattern: that those who came out as gay in that era simply left their religious commitments behind. But as books like Heather White's *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015) suggest, many gay men and lesbians in that era sought ways to make sense of both religious and sexual identities.

4. See Pamela Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women's Ordination, 1889–1985* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

5. "Proposed RRC Policy Statement on Gays/Lesbians, drafted by a subcommittee consisting of Hershel Matt and Linda Holtzman, for consideration by the faculty at its meeting on 5/29/84," Jacob Staub personal files.

6. The Unitarian-Universalists led the way in 1980.

7. Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub, *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach*, expanded and updated ed. (Wyncote, Pa.: Reconstructionist Press, 2000), 135–37. This work is a basic introduction to Reconstructionist Judaism.

8. See Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967).

9. See Alpert and Staub, *Exploring Judaism*, chap. 9.

10. Rachel Kranson's chapter in this volume discusses the trajectory of the ordination of women in the Reform and Conservative denominations. Sandy Sasso, the first Reconstructionist woman rabbi, was ordained two years after Sally Priesand in the Reform movement and eleven years before the ordination of Amy Eilberg in the Conservative movement.

11. Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

12. See Norman Lamm, "The New Morality under Religious Auspices," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1968): 17–30.

13. Jews in Philadelphia were actively engaged in the struggle for gay rights, and Frank Kameny, Mel Heifitz, Carole Friedman, Laurie Baron, Mark Segal, Malcolm Lazin, and Clark Polak were important national and local leaders in the 1950s–1970s. While publicly identified as gay and lesbian, they had little or no connection with institutional Judaism. Beth Ahavah, the gay synagogue in Philadelphia, was founded in 1975. Rebecca Alpert and Linda Holtzman made connections between RRC and Beth Ahavah beginning in 1977, but there was no formal affiliation with the Reconstructionist movement.

14. See <http://www.bcc-la.org/about/history/> (accessed August 3, 2016).

15. John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 235.

16. Jacob Staub, personal communication with Barbakoff, July 8, 2014.

17. *Ibid.*; with Eric Weiss, February 1, 2010; and with Yoel Kahn, February 15, 2010. Weiss refused to remain closeted as a condition of admission.
18. "Struggle, Change, and Celebration: My Life as a Lesbian Rabbi," in *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation*, ed. Rebecca T. Alpert, Sue Levi Elwell, and Shirley Idelson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 41.
19. Minutes of RRC Faculty Meeting, March 9, 1979, Jacob Staub personal files.
20. RRC's founding president, Ira Eisenstein, retired in 1981. Writing in the 1983 *Judaism* symposium, Eisenstein was unequivocal in his support of civic equality for homosexuals, but he was silent on the question of reconstructing Jewish practice. "Discrimination Is Wrong," *Judaism* 32, no. 4 (Fall 1983): 415–16.
21. Personal communication with Barbakoff, July 8, 2014.
22. There were an increasing number of gay synagogues that became part of a network, the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations. See Aliza Maggid, "Joining Together: Building a Worldwide Movement," in *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish*, ed. Christie Balka and Andy Rose (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 157–70. Another rabbi (Lionel Blue, a graduate of the Leo Baeck Institute in London) came out in 1981. See Lionel Blue, "Godly and Gay," in *Jewish Explorations of Sexuality*, ed. Jonathan Magonet (London: Berghahn Press, 1995), 117–34. A book of essays by Jewish lesbians was published in 1982: *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, ed. Evelyn Torton Beck (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1982). A symposium on Judaism and homosexuality in the influential journal *Judaism* (32, no. 4 [Fall 1983]) included ten articles on the subject. Also that year the gay synagogue in Los Angeles hired Janet Marder, a graduate of HUC, as its first full-time (and not gay-identified) rabbi. Through her supportive writings, Marder would play a major role in the developing acceptance of gay and lesbian Jews. See "Getting to Know the Gay and Lesbian Shul," *Reconstructionist* 51, no. 2 (October–November 1985): 20–25; Janet Marder, "Getting to Know the Gay and Lesbian Shul: A Rabbi Moves from Tolerance to Acceptance," in *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish*, ed. Christie Balka and Andy Rose (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 209–17; and "Our Visible Rabbis," *Reform Judaism* 1/2 (Winter 1990): 5–11.
23. Hershel Matt, "Sin, Crime, Sickness, or Alternative Life Style? A Jewish Approach to Homosexuality," *Judaism* 27, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 21.
24. Caine's position paper is appended to the faculty meeting agenda of May 29, 1984, Jacob Staub personal files.
25. Babylonian Talmud 19b.
26. "Proposed RRC Policy Statement." See above (note 5) for the proposal.
27. Minutes of the Faculty Meeting of June 12, 1984, n.p., Jacob Staub personal files.
28. *Ibid.* An open lesbian had submitted an application for admission, and while Silverman did not mention this fact to the entire faculty, he conveyed to other administrators that there was urgency to the question. Jane Litman identifies herself as this applicant. Jane Litman, "Kol Sason v'kol simcha, Kol Kalah v'Kol Kalah: Same Gender Weddings and Spiritual Renewal," in *Queer Jews*, ed. David Shneer and Caryn Aviv (New York: New York University, 2002), 114.
29. Part of the growing movement of gay synagogues and Jewish lesbian-feminist separatist groups, Dyke Shabbos was a weekly gathering of Jewish lesbians and bisexual

women in the San Francisco Bay area that provided a safe space for them to experiment and blend Jewish and gay identities.

30. Julie Greenberg, "My Piece of Truth," in *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation*, ed. Rebecca T. Alpert, Ellen Sue Levi Elwell, and Shirley Idelson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 182.

31. With one exception, queer students who were admitted in the years 1984–90 of whom the authors are aware were not out at their admissions interview.

32. Sharon Kleinbaum, "Gay and Lesbian Synagogue as Spiritual Community," in *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation*, ed. Rebecca T. Alpert, Ellen Sue Levi Elwell, and Shirley Idelson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 141–51.

33. Linda Holtzman, "Jewish Lesbian Parenting," in *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish*, ed. Christie Balka and Andy Rose (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 133.

34. *Reconstructionist* 51, no. 2 (October–November 1985): 2.

35. Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub, *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* (Wyncote, Pa.: Reconstructionist Press, 1985), 43.

36. Judith Antonelli, "Rabbinical Student Reconstructs Judaism from a Feminist Perspective," *Boston Jewish Advocate*, December 12, 1986, 1, 16.

37. See Samuel H. Dresner, "The Return to Paganism," *Midstream* 34 (June/July 1988): 36. Dresner further elaborated on these ideas in "Homosexuality and the Order of Creation," *Judaism* 40, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 309–21.

38. Dresner, "Return to Paganism," 37.

39. These concerns are echoed in the reluctance of the Women's League of Conservative Judaism to support abortion rights in this same time period. See Rachel Kranson's essay in this volume.

40. Kleinbaum, "Gay and Lesbian Synagogue as Spiritual Community," 145.

41. Sharon Kleinbaum personal files.

42. Report of the Spring 1988 "What Now" Group, June 21, 1988, Sharon Kleinbaum personal files.

43. Minutes, "What Now?" Group Meeting, October 10, 1988, Sharon Kleinbaum personal files.

44. Program, "The What Now Committee Presents a Three Part Seminar Day, Gays, Lesbians and the Jewish Community," February 21–22, 1990, Sharon Kleinbaum personal files.

45. "A Resolution for the Fuller Acceptance of Gay and Lesbian Jews in Our Community," Sharon Kleinbaum personal files.

46. La Escondida [Leila Berner], "Journey Toward Wholeness: Reflections of a Lesbian Rabbi," in *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish*, ed. Christie Balka and Andy Rose (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 218–28.

47. "My Piece of Truth," 182.

48. Bob Gluck, ed., *Homosexuality and Judaism: The Reconstructionist Position*, (Wyncote, Pa.: Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, 1992–93), 37.