

Love Your Neighbor as yourself

A month after I was ordained as a rabbi, I found myself walking into a country club, signature black leather briefcase in hand, ready to officiate at my first Jewish wedding. Moments later, I looked down at the first California Marriage License I would sign as a solo officiant. My hand shook as I tried to make sense of the official document before me. I took a deep breath and brought to mind the calming words of Rabbi Cohen: Whatever you do, just don't mess up the marriage license!

Bride, groom, witness 1, and witness 2—all gathered around me. They signed their names with flourish. The room filled with an energy of joy and celebration. I too poised my hand. Over the line marked "officiant," I signed my full name, Jocelyn E. Hudson.

This should have been a moment of unadulterated glee. For six years, I had studied for this opportunity. Two of my oldest friends were getting married. But, instead of joy, I felt tears in my eyes. I tried to push down the overwhelming pain rising up in me.

"How deeply unfair," I thought. But, I smiled broadly at the overjoyed couple before me. I focused, as I have done at so many other weddings, on *their* joy, on *their* simcha, on *their* union.

But, the reality was breaking through, and the words were back in my mind, and the words were ringing in my ears before I could shut them out: "How deeply unfair," I thought.

I realized once again at that moment that no person—rabbi, educator, or otherwise—is made of steel. And, in that moment, I looked to the one person in the room who I knew was there to support me unconditionally. I looked up to catch the eye of my own partner, Tali. As her eyes met mine, I shared at that moment a feeling of pain so deep it makes me shudder to remember it.

How incredible to realize that I, Rabbi Jocelyn E. Hudson, could sign a civil marriage document and create a union between a man and a woman who loved each other. And, how deeply unfair to realize that I, Jocee Hudson, was denied the right to sign my own name, beside my partner's, onto a California marriage license, because we were not a man and a woman, but a woman and a woman.

"Love your neighbor as yourself."

Let's be clear. I am well aware that I live a life of privilege. I am blessed to be surrounded by a family that loves me, supported by this wonderful Temple Beth Sholom community, and filled with a sense of purpose that guides me.

But, let me say this: None of this. None of these pieces were able to erase the reality that was before me at that moment in that country club: I was a second class citizen. Denied the right to marry the person I love.

Things have changed in the past year and a half. This past May, California became the second state in the nation to strike down a ban on same-sex marriage. My partner Tali and I are now engaged to be married. For the past months we have been elbow deep in the best of wedding details: floral arrangements and fabric swatches, registries and RSVPs, table linens and toasts.

In fact, joining us for today's services are my parents, Margo and Dan, and my sister and brother-in-law, Emily and Andy. They are visiting from out of town because on Sunday, Tali and I will join each other under the *chuppah*, the Jewish wedding canopy. On Sunday, Tali and I will be proclaimed legally married spouses.

I offer these anecdotes to you today, though, with a higher purpose than simply sharing my own story. As you know, the recently awarded right to marry coupled with public discourse surrounding Proposition 8, a ballot measure, which if passed in November will eliminate the right of same-sex couples to marry, has resurfaced a lot of talk about "religion's" views on same-sex marriage. I want us to explore these issues together today.

There are those in literalist religious communities, including our own Orthodox Jewish community, who have claimed vocally that the bible is "against" gay marriage. In fact, the bible, our Torah, says nothing about the unions between gay men and lesbians. The Torah includes two verses in Leviticus, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, which speak of a singular prohibition, couched in a list of prohibitions, against a single cultic act. From this, some believers have extrapolated an entire worldview against same-sex relationships, labeling their stance as "biblical." But, their beliefs are not biblical. Theirs is an interpretation. And there are plenty of other religious thinkers and leaders, including Rabbi Richard Levy, Director of the Hebrew Union College Rabbinic School in Los Angeles, who reinterpret these verses quite differently. Rabbi Levy and others suggest that this single Leviticus law should not be expanded in order to forbid same-sex marriages, but rather should be looked at in the very limited context in which it was presented. The fact is Torah says nothing about the deep relationships, connections, and families that gay and lesbian couples create together. We, today, must ask ourselves a fundamental question: Do we read Torah searching for inspiration to exclude and marginalize, or do we understand that the purpose of Torah is to include and promote dignity? The Talmud answers this question for us when it teaches, "The value of human dignity is so great that it supersedes a negative commandment of the Torah" (Brachot 19b-20a). What, then, does our Torah have to say about gay and lesbian marriage?

It says: *Tzedek tzedek tirdof*. Our Torah commands us: Justice, justice shall you pursue. In our tradition, justice means equality. It means fair treatment for each individual under the law. This was the gift that Torah gave to the world. It was the Torah's sense of justice that guaranteed the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the stranger among us to basic human rights, to basic human dignity. The Torah tells us, "You must neither wrong nor oppress a stranger living among you, for you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20). We are Israel and we remember what it was like to be oppressed. We are Israel and we remember what it was like, for so many centuries of history, to be labeled as "different." We are Israel and Torah tells us even the stranger, who is different from you. Even the stranger who you don't understand. Even they deserve to be treated fairly and justly like you. "Love your neighbor as yourself," Leviticus teaches us (Leviticus 19:18). Guard the rights of your neighbor as you guard own.

Conservative Rabbi, Ed Feinstein, from Congregation Valley Beth Shalom said in a recent interview, “I support the freedom to marry because I have never met gays and lesbians in the abstract. It is my son and my daughter, it is my sister and it is my brother, and I wish for them the privilege, the miracle, the gift of a long and lasting relationship. And, in our faith community, we call that marriage.”

Like Rabbi Feinstein, I certainly have never met gays and lesbians in the abstract. I know TBS congregants, like Lynn and Pam, who Rabbi Cohen legally married in our sanctuary this past July. I know lesbian parents raising children in our religious school. I know TBS congregants, Sara and Tracie, who got engaged this past month at the Getty Center. I know other women and men in our congregation and in our community, who are singled and partnered, parents and children, young and old. And, I know that they deserve the same rights as anyone else. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Today is a day of fasting. And I ask: What will be the meaning of our fast? What will endure beyond the hunger pains and beyond the thirst? In today’s Haftarah portion, God, through the Prophet Isaiah, asks this very question. From the book of Isaiah, Adonai exclaims: “Is this the fast I look for? A day of self-affliction? Bowing your head like a reed, and covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to Adonai? Is not *this* the fast I look for: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every cruel chain?” Yom Kippur is not meant to be a day of passive self-reflection. It is not enough for us to look inward, to speak words of repentance, and then leave this sanctuary unchanged. God is asking us to use our fast for the betterment of our world. God pleads with us to use this fast as inspiration for justice.

The Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Jewish movements all support the right of gay men and lesbians to be ordained as rabbis, and support the right of their rabbis of to officiate at Jewish ceremonies for same sex couples. But, it takes a legal document to be married. Rabbi Cohen and I have signed a letter, with over two hundred and forty California rabbis declaring our support for marriage equality. The Temple Beth Shalom Board of Directors has unanimously voted to pledge our temple’s official support to marriage equality. The Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis, as well as the Union for Reform Judaism’s Pacific Southwest and Northwest Councils, have taken public stands firmly supporting marriage equality. The Southern California Board of Rabbis – a group of rabbis from the Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox movements – has declared its opposition to Proposition 8. These stances are not radical declarations, but rather logical steps to keep us in line with our tradition and our Torah values. This is how Judaism teaches us to care for others. Love your neighbor as yourself.

And yet, I opened the *Los Angeles Times* a couple months ago to a shocking headline: “California Churches Plan a Big Push against Same-Sex Marriage.” With a lump in my throat, I read through the story’s lead: “... 1 million Mormons, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, evangelical Christians, Sikhs and Hindus will open their doors, march down their front walks and plant ‘Yes on Proposition 8’ signs in their yards to show they support repealing same-sex marriage in California.”

But this article does not speak for our community and this article does not speak for our religion. Rabbi Cohen has spoken throughout the High Holy Days about our Temple Beth Shalom family. We are a family. And families do not organize themselves on hate. We organize ourselves on acceptance, on love, and on compassion. “I have never known gays and lesbians in the abstract.” We need to advertise our message of love, not necessarily on lawn signs or in newspaper articles, but in our core values. Lynn and Pam are a part of this congregation, Sara and Tracie are a part of this congregation, Tali and I are a part of this congregation. This article does not speak for our religion.

It is legal spouses that are guaranteed the right, in a moment of emergency, to ride in an ambulance with one another while going to the hospital. Can you imagine what it would be like to be denied the right to accompany your spouse to the hospital?

I have met a gay couple, who fearing unjust laws in other states and countries, travel with their son’s adoption papers, their durable power of attorney documents, and their advanced healthcare directives. Adults, you might say, can handle the indignity of being questioned by government officials. Adults, you might say, created this situation. But, now for a moment, imagine the children of those adults. Imagine hearing officials of this country tell a child that his family is not a “real family.” Imagine officials questioning a child, suggesting that one of their parents is not their “real parent.”

I recently had a conversation with a lesbian mother in our Religious School. She told me that her right to marry was not just important to her and her partner, but important to their two children, as well. For years, their children have asked them: “Why aren’t you two married?” It was a good question to ask. After all, the pair had been together for almost 25 years. Imagine the pain these mothers felt explaining to their children that it was illegal for them to get married. I don’t think I can even imagine how their kids felt hearing it. So, in May, when these two moms found out they could be married after all these years, I am sure you can imagine the joy that exploded out of their household. And I think: How different those children must have felt, earlier this summer, when their moms joined together, under the *chuppah*, and were married at last. I have never known the children of gay and lesbian parents in the abstract, either.

Earlier today we prayed “*Avinu Malkeinu*, let the new year be a good year for us.” Indeed, *Avinu Malkeinu*, let the new year be a good year for all of us.

In closing, let me remind us all that at a Jewish wedding, seven traditional blessings are recited. The first blessing is, “Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha’olam shehakol barah lichvodo,” “Blessed are you Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, who created everything for your glory.” These are important words for all of us to remember as we engage in the deep soul searching of Yom Kippur. Each of us, flawed as we may feel on this Day of Atonement, is created in God’s image and is a physical manifestation of the Divine glory in the universe. As we engage in *teshuvah* let us remember that ours is a God of compassion and mercy.

And so, as each of us looks to our neighbor in the weeks to come, let us remember that each person, regardless of who they choose to marry, deserves to be treated with the same mercy and compassion. They too are created in God’s glory. They too are created in God’s image.

Love your neighbor as yourself.