

Comment: Let faiths celebrate gay marriages

by Rabbi Aaron Goldstein for PinkNews.co.uk

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Rabbi Aaron Goldstein, the co-chair of Rabbinic Conference of Liberal Judaism, says the government must include religious ceremonies in the forthcoming gay marriage consultation.

When I meet people who have encountered Liberal Judaism for the first time, I take great pride in describing us as a 'radical movement'. In some ways this is a misnomer as we, like most organisations, have conservative members just as we have liberal and radical members and I am not sure how radical I am as a rabbi! However, at its core, Liberal Judaism is a radical movement.

The UK Liberal Jewish movement was founded in 1902 by Jews committed to ensuring the continuity of Jewish faith, tradition, practice and ethics within a contemporary framework. It was and we still are, at the cutting edge of modern Judaism. In 1902, women had complete equality in all manner of ritual and worship, ahead of suffrage in this country. With roughly 50 per cent of our rabbis being women, we were one of the first religious communities to move to gender-inclusive language in our liturgy. In 2003 when I was ordained, I became outreach director with the brief to welcome all Jews and if relevant their non-Jewish spouses and partners to our communities. In areas of the country, where some Jews and in particular the LGBT Jewish community were disenfranchised, we established a new community, for example Manchester Liberal Jewish Community.

In 2005, the Rabbinic Conference of Liberal Judaism published its 'B'rit Ahavah, Covenant of Love: Service of Commitment for Same-Sex Couples,' and in doing so became the first religious movement in the country to produce official liturgy for this purpose. The same-sex commitment ceremony affirms the importance and holiness of marriage and Jewish family life. We are steadfastly committed to the justice of equality in marriage law and we see this as an extension of our belief that all are equal and created b'tselem Elohim – in the image of God. Our rabbis have long acknowledged that modern ethical, psychological and scientific insight demands a change in traditional attitudes to same-sex relationships, and have welcomed lesbians and gay men as members of its congregations, as teachers and as rabbis. We celebrate this inclusion and the enrichment that it brings to our community.

Liberal Judaism's engagement in such ceremonies is not forced on our rabbis or congregations. Our rabbis have simply created the possibility for an affirmation of the sanctity of a loving and committed same-sex relationship within the bounds of Judaism. Neither do we seek to enforce our beliefs and practices on any other religious denomination, Jewish or otherwise. However, we have seen that our courage in making such blessings possible has emboldened other religious movements and individuals to follow suit, albeit timidly at times.

Equality is not currently afforded in English law. While we can perform a Jewish marriage in our synagogues and act as civil registrars, we cannot act in the same way for a same-sex marriage in our place of worship. Rather, a lesbian



or gay couple desiring a religious blessing on their civil partnership is forced to have two separate ceremonies in two separate venues. Allowing civil partnerships to occur in places of worship as proposed by the government is a small step which will permit ministers of religion and congregations to show their support for loving unions under one roof but there will still need to be two separate ceremonies.

I cannot understand why, when there is no compulsion involved in the planned legislation, religious bodies who wish to provide gay marriage equality with heterosexual marriage cannot do so. It merely allows those who wish to do so to open the doors – literally – to their houses of worship and sanctuary, so that gays and lesbians can celebrate their loving unions alongside their straight brothers and sisters.

We do so in the spirit of our prophetic tradition. The ancient Hebrew prophets recognised that ritual encouraged people to acknowledge the presence of God and to imbue their relationship with God's blessing. Enshrined within that relationship, was the divine requirement that human beings establish justice in their lives and in the societies in which they lived.

Together with the Quakers and the Unitarians and Free Christians, we are seeking to uphold our religious freedom and individual rights. We urge the government to protect the rights of those who wish to provide complete marriage equality to lesbians and gay men as well as those who choose not to do so. Let us rejoice in the love and commitment of a same-sex couple in one seamless and meaningful occasion, enshrined in the law of this country and celebrated in the presence of God.

Rabbi Aaron Goldstein is the co-chair of the Rabbinic Conference of Liberal Judaism and senior rabbi of Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue. He believes in a Judaism that counts people in, not out, and in creating an inclusive, sacred community that welcomes all Jews and non-Jewish spouses and partners and their children. He is a leading spokesman for inclusion within religion and is quoted extensively in the Jewish Press and has featured widely on BBC Regional Radio. Aaron is married with two children.

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