

# US Reform approves same-sex unions

Julie Wiener

NEW YORK: After years of heated debate over gay marriage, American Reform rabbis last week overwhelmingly passed a resolution recognising same-sex ceremonies as valid.

The resolution affirms that "the relationship of a Jewish, same-gender couple is worthy of affirmation through appropriate Jewish ritual".

However, the resolution — passed almost unanimously at the rabbis' annual convention in Greensboro, North Carolina — is not the wholesale endorsement of gay marriage that some proponents had hoped for, or that critics will probably characterise it as. It does not use the words "marriage" or "wedding", and was modified before the vote to say not only that "we support the decision of those who choose to officiate at rituals of union for same-gender couples", but also "and we support the decision of those who do not".

According to the handful of rabbis who voted against the resolution and even some who voted in favour, the move may harm Reform Judaism's credibility among traditional streams of Judaism and, possibly, Israelis.

The debate leading to the convention was long and heated — at times even "McCarthyist", according to those who initially opposed the resolution and felt they were unfairly being labelled homophobes and bigots. However, reflecting the mutual satisfaction with the last-minute changes, the floor discussion lasted only an

hour, with few people speaking out against the resolution.

Described as "groundbreaking" and a major step forward for gay and lesbian Jews, the resolution marks the first time that a "major religious body has indicated its support for any of its clergy who officiate at same-gender ceremonies," said Rabbi Paul Menitoff, executive director of the Reform movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis.

In response to concerns from rabbis hesitant about endorsing religious officiation at gay ceremonies, the resolution was modified in the week preceding the vote to add support for rabbis who do not choose to officiate. Under their influence, the rabbis also omitted from the body of the resolution a quotation stating that "*kedushah*" — Hebrew for holiness — "may be present in committed same-gender relationships between two Jews".

In addition, the rabbis added a background statement outlining the Conference's positions over the years on the rights of homosexuals, including a 1995 Responsa committee that, by a vote of 7-2, concluded that gay relationships "cannot be called *kiddushin*" — the Hebrew term for marriage.

It is unclear whether the resolution will influence the practices of American Reform rabbis or lead to an increase in the number of gay couples gathering under the *chuppah*. Even before the resolution, many Reform rabbis, as well as Reconstructionist ones — who went on record in sup-

port of same-sex ceremonies in 1993 — were officiating at such ceremonies.

The resolution means that the Conference can now distribute liturgy, wedding contracts and other resources for people officiating at same-sex commitment ceremonies.

Californian Rabbi Denise Eger, one of the co-chairs of the Conference's Gay and Lesbian Rabbinic Network, said the resolution will "create the opportunity for spiritual fullness for gay couples". Rabbi Eger, who underwent a Jewish commitment ceremony with her lesbian partner under a *chuppah* several years ago, also said the vote would "send a message of hope" to Jewish gays and lesbians, their friends and families. She said she was pleased that it was something on which the vast majority of American Reform rabbis could agree.

Those rabbis who had pushed for these changes, among them Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin of New York, said they were pleased with the final version, which they described as a "compromise".

But proponents of the original resolution insisted the changes were only "modifications" and that the final resolution still sends a strong message. "The essential nature of the resolution remained," said Rabbi Shira Stern of New Jersey, adding that the final resolution "affirms the sacred relationship between two Jews who are gay and lesbian and says that we are going to create materials to reflect that affirmation".

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## Australian Reform won't follow suit

AUSTRALIA'S Progressive rabbinate will not follow the lead of its American colleagues in conducting same-sex ceremonies.

Ten years ago, the Council of Progressive Rabbis of Australia and New Zealand issued a statement in support of "heterosexual, monogamous, procreative marriage", which "remains the official position". Council chairman Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins told the *Australian Jewish News* in the wake of the American resolution. "While the Central Conference of American Rabbis' decision will most likely lead to further discussion on this issue at our conference in May, I believe that our position will remain basically the same as it was in 1990."

According to the Council's 1990 statement, "as teachers of Judaism, rabbis are expected to abide by the highest moral values of our people. Within Jewish tradition, heterosexual, monogamous, procreative marriage is the ideal human relationship for the perpetuation of the species, covenantal fulfilment and the preservation of the Jewish people."



Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins

The 1990 statement affirmed that "all human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim* (in the Divine image). We regard sexual orientation as irrelevant to the human worth of a person. Hence, we recognise that all individuals must have equal civil rights and opportunities."

Emphasising that "all Jews are welcome to become full and equal members of our congregations", it called on the community "to engage in further study on the issue of homosexuality and Judaism in order to deepen our understanding of, and sensitivity towards, these matters".