Orthodox, Conservative condemn gay union vote

NEW YORK: It's bad for Jewish unity, but not as bad as the decision to recognise the children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers as Jews. That is how Orthodox and Conservative rabbis are viewing the American Reform movement's recent decision to affirm the right of its rabbis to officiate at gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies.

But even though the leaders of Judaism's more traditional movements say the Reform decision is less divisive than the 1984 move on patrilineal descent, Orthodox leaders are harshly condemning the vote. The criticism from Conservative leaders is more subdued.

1993 resolution "started a shift in Reconstructionist rabbis".

Discussion of the issue "made it less possible for individual rabbis to avoid the issue", said Hirsh, who began officiating at gay ceremonies after 1993. "Having support of the rabbinic group makes it easier for you to make a stand in your own congregation."

The executive vice-president of the Rabbinical Assembly, which represents 1500 US Conservative rabbis, said while his movement supports civil rights for gays, it does not approve of its rabbis officiating at same-sex ceremonies. Rabbi Joel Meyers acknowledged that despite this position, some Conservative rabbis officiate at

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Those promoting Reform Judaism in Israel insist that because the resolution recognises the diversity of views on same-sex unions and does not use the words "marriage" or "wedding", it will not pose a serious obstacle to attracting Israelis to the movement. The Israeli Reform movement generally takes a cautious approach to controversial issues because it does not want to give the Orthodox establishment further ammunition.

Leaders of the Reconstructionist movement — which recognises patrilineal descent and in 1993 supported same-sex commitment ceremonies — backed the Reform decision. Other movements, though, predict it will undermine Jewish unity.

While the Reform resolution means the movement will develop *ketubot* (marriage contracts) and liturgy for same-sex ceremonies to its 1700 rabbis in the US, the resolution does not require them to officiate at same-sex unions. Many Reform rabbis had officiated at same-sex ceremonies even before the resolution was passed.

Rabbi Richard Hirsh, executive director of the 200-member Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, said the resolution will encourage Reform rabbis who do not officiate at same-sex unions to do so. He said his movement's

same-sex ceremonies and — unlike Conservative rabbis who officiate at intermarriages — they are allowed to remain in the Rabbinical Assembly.

Meyers does not expect Reform's move to strain Conservative-Reform relations, and predicted it would have less of an impact than the patrilineal descent issue, which "goes to the heart of defining who's Jewish and who's not, and that's a more serious question".

The Rabbinical Council America, representing 1100 Orthodox rabbis, issued a state-ment that said: "Conferring legitimacy upon relationships which our Torah and tradition specifically prohibit is beyond the pale of acceptable Jewish teaching and practice. It's another step of fragmentation and disunification of the Jewish community," said Rabbi Steven Dworken, executive vice-president. "First they did it with patrilineal descent, and now this." Rabbi Avi Shafran, spokesman for the fervently Orthodox Agudath Israel of America, was even more outspoken, saying it should "convince all Jews that anything goes in Reform leadership. Even the prohibition against incest could go." But he added that unlike the patrilineal descent issue, the new resolution would not 'split the Jewish people in two".