

The Jigsaw Puzzle of Creation : A Jewish View Against Proposition 8

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My friend Rabbi Arthur Waskow relates a conversation he had with his seven year granddaughter Yonit about this week's Torah portion, *Bereshit*. He told her: "You know, according to the Torah God created humans in God's image. What do you think that means?" Yonit asked "What's an image?" Arthur answered: "An image is like a photograph." Yonit responded; "That's strange. God is invisible. How could there be a photograph of God?" After a few minutes she said: "Maybe it's more like the other way around. Maybe God is in the image of human beings. Only it couldn't be just one human being, it would have to be lots of them. And they would all be different from each other. Each one would be like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle. Then you would have to fit all the pieces together. They would be a community.... that's it! A community is the image of God."¹

What a smart little girl! The image of God... a community of people, each unique in his her own way.

Also in this week's Torah portion is the verse: "It is not good for the human to be alone; I will make a partner fit for him." Seems like God doesn't want us to be alone. We are created with the intention of being connected to other people, in love. Maybe that's why so many people want to be married.

What does it mean to be married? The definition has changed over time. In Biblical times it meant that women were property of their husbands. Adultery was defined as a married woman having sex with someone other than her husband. Married men having sex with non- married women wasn't considered adultery. That has changed. Interracial marriage used to be illegal. That was changed in 1948 when California became the first state in the nation to strike down the law preventing interracial marriage. It took over fifty years for the law to be struck down in all the others states! Marriage used to be a legal relationship only between a man and a woman. That too has changed. In May, the California Supreme Court ruled that sexual orientation, like race or gender, "does not constitute a legitimate basis upon which to deny or withhold legal rights." The majority opinion says that the ability to "responsibly care for and raise children does not depend upon the individual's sexual orientation....We therefore conclude that in view of the substance and significance of the fundamental constitutional right to form a family relationship, the California Constitution properly must be interpreted to guarantee this basic civil right to all Californians, whether gay or heterosexual, and to same-sex couples as well as to opposite-sex couples."

Our idea of what constitutes marriage has changed. But many people oppose this change. The "California Marriage Protection Amendment," Prop 8 on your ballot would amend the California Constitution so that only marriage between a man and a woman can

be recognized in California. and make it impossible for any marriage equality bills to be passed by the California legislature in the future.

Why is this a Jewish issue? After all, doesn't the Bible say "one who lies with a male as one lies with a female is an abomination"? If we read the Torah as fundamentalists do, this and other verses would indeed present a problem. (We'd also have to execute people who work on the Sabbath!) But as liberal Jews, that's not how we read the Torah. We read it through the lens of commentary and with the understanding that certain specific laws which might have made sense in Biblical society are not longer relevant now. As Rabbi Brad Artson has written: "We have reviewed a range of rabbinic reasons given for opposing same-sex acts. We have concluded that homosexuality is not intrinsically unnatural, sick, disgusting, destructive of family life, devoid of the possibility of children, or hedonistic. We are dealing, therefore, not with a previously considered and previously outlawed phenomena, but with a situation never before encountered in Jewish law. Modern homosexual love and stable homosexual couples are different in significant respects from anything known in Torah or Rabbinic Judaism."ⁱⁱ

In other words, what the Torah prohibits has nothing to do with contemporary gay or lesbian relationships and therefore has no bearing on the discussion. What does matter are core values that emerge out of Jewish tradition, including the fundamental notion that all human beings are created in the image of God and *mishpat ehat yihe'eh lachem* – that law should be applied equally to all, citizen and stranger alike. ⁱⁱⁱ

Some people are uncomfortable with the idea of homosexuality and homosexual relationships. Some people believe that if their children learn about gay and lesbian relationships they might grow up to become gay. But in fact, most studies are clear that sexual orientation is not a choice or a product of influence but rather a part of the jigsaw puzzle that is creation.

Why is this a Jewish issue? It is a Jewish issue because we know what it is to be victimized because we are different; we need to stand up and defend the civil and human rights of other minorities. It is a Jewish issue because it is about us. Gays and lesbians are part of our family. They are our brothers and sisters, our sons and daughters, our cousins and nieces and nephews. Gay and lesbian families are in our synagogue, their children in our day school, our religious school and our ECC. They are part of our community. "They" are "us."

Reform Judaism has taken a lead in the Jewish community in supporting the civil and human rights of gays and lesbians. In 1974 the Reform movement welcomed the first synagogue for gay and lesbian Jews into what is now the Union for Reform Judaism... The Reform movement began to ordain openly gay and lesbian rabbis in 1990, and in 1996, the Reform movement went on record to "support the right of gay and lesbian couples to share fully and equally in the rights of civil marriage."

Thirteen years ago I stood under a chuppah with my friends Rabbi Lisa Edwards and Tracy Moore, a woman whom I taught as she embraced Judaism and became a Jew

by Choice. It was a powerful ceremony...without a marriage license. They were and still are still are such fitting partners for each other, still in love after all these years. Last month I stood with them again, under their chuppah, this time with Speaker of the State Assembly Karen Bass. This time with a marriage license. When Assembly Member Bass signed the license and declared them married according to the laws of the State of California, the congregation burst into applause. It was an historic moment.

Yes, Prop 8 presents us an historic moment in which the rights and human dignity of Lisa and Tracy and so many others we all know and love is in danger. That why it is so important to vote against Proposition 8. The campaign in favor of Prop 8 suggests many things that are simply not true. It is not true that clergy members will be forced to officiate at same sex marriages if they are uncomfortable doing so. It is also not true that churches would lose their tax exempt status if they refused to recognize gay or lesbian couples.

The right to marry is a matter of civil rights; each of us has the right to choose a fitting partner for ourselves and share the same protection that the law provides to any married couple and their children. The right to marry is a Jewish issue because we believe that all human beings, male and female, gay and straight, are created in the image of God. And we complete that image when we celebrate the jigsaw puzzle of creation and embrace all members of our community

ⁱ Reported on the website of The Shalom Center www.shalomcenter.org

ⁱⁱ Excerpt from “Gay and Lesbian Jews: A Teshuvah” by Rabbi Bradley S. Artson

ⁱⁱⁱ (Lev. 24:22; Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ketubot 33a.).

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