

National News

Reform Rabbis support legalizing Gay marriage

by Wendy Johnson

By a resounding voice vote, the nation's largest group of rabbis last week approved a nonbinding resolution to support the legalization of Gay marriages and to oppose governmental efforts to forbid them.

The resolution was approved March 28 at the Central Conference of American Rabbis in Philadelphia, one of Judaism's longest-running and largest gatherings of rabbis. The conference represents about 1,750 rabbis in Judaism's liberal Reform movement.

"This decision is a big deal," said Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, an openly Lesbian rabbi of Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, New York City's Gay synagogue. "They're the largest [group of Rabbis] to make this kind of a statement." The Reform movement represents about 42 percent of the nation's 5.8 million Jews, making it the largest of Judaism's three major branches, which also include Orthodox and Conservative.

Kleinbaum credited Rabbi Margaret Wenig with orchestrating approval of the resolution. Wenig could not be reached by *Blade* deadline.

But while Kleinbaum hailed the group's political stand on the Gay marriage issue, she pointed out that Reform rabbis have not yet decided whether they should actually officiate over such ceremonies.

"I absolutely call on the [Central Conference] to ultimately endorse the ceremonies," she said.

That issue, which will involve a close examination of how Reform Jews have adapted Jewish tradition to shifting social mores, will likely be debated at next year's conference in Denver, said Rabbi Simeon Maslin, Central Conference president. A task force is expected to present a report on sexual ethics at that time, Rabbi Maslin said.

"As far as we know, there is no precedent in the Jewish tradition about [same-sex marriages]," said Rabbi Selig Salkowitz, chair of the task force. "It's not a subject that's been discussed. Our focus is to interpret it in terms of Jewish tradition. We have to consider how people have adapted tradition to keep it alive in these changing times, and then look at how we want to do it."

Passage of the resolution itself, howev-

er, is still significant, Kleinbaum said. It comes during a time of widespread backlash to the concept of same-sex marriage. Thirty states have considered or are considering banning the recognition of same-sex marriage in anticipation of a decision pending in the Hawaii courts as to whether the state can legally deny marriage licenses to same-sex couples.

"This moment in history is very important," Kleinbaum said. "This resolution means that Gay [civil rights] groups can go to their legislators and say, 'Look, here's a group that supports same-sex marriage'."

But not everyone is happy about the resolution, Kleinbaum said. Some Jewish leaders have criticized the rabbis' eagerness to support legal Gay marriages while remaining undecided as to whether they should actually officiate such ceremonies.

"It was sort of halfway support," said Scott Mezistrano, president of D.C.'s Gay synagogue Bet Mishpachah. "They might be more successful in calling for support from civic leaders if they were more willing to give that support themselves."

Rabbi Maslin agreed.

"It's a complex issue and will probably be a much bigger struggle," he said. Although some Reform rabbis do officiate at Gay commitment ceremonies, they do so without the formal approval of their colleagues.

Bet Mishpachah's Robert Saks believes this approval may come next year.

"The voice vote [at the conference] was so clear and overwhelming," said Saks, who attended the meeting. "Had there been a resolution on rabbinic officiation, I think it would have passed."

The Central Conference of Reform rabbis is the first group of Jewish leaders to officially support legal recognition of same-sex marriage, although two years ago the smaller Reform group, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, called for recognition of "committed Lesbian and Gay partnerships."

Reform Rabbis have a long history of supporting Gay civil rights, including passage of a resolution in 1977 by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations to support Gay civil rights, and a vote by the Central Conference six years ago not to bar Gays from ordination. ▼