

PLACING HOMOSEXUAL RABBIS IN CONGREGATIONS

Rabbi Kassel Abelson

This paper was approved by the CJLS on May 19, 1993, by a vote of thirteen in favor and eight opposed (13-8-0). Voting in favor: Rabbis Kassel Abelson, Stanley Bramnick, Jerome M. Epstein, Samuel Fraint, Reuven Kimelman, Vernon H. Kurtz, Lionel E. Moses, Paul Plotkin, Mayer Rabinowitz, Avram Israel Reisner, Chaim A. Rogoff, Joel Roth, and Gerald Skolnik. Voting against: Rabbis Ben Zion Bergman, Elliot N. Dorff, Myron S. Celler, Arnold M. Goodman, Susan Grossman, Jan Caryl Kaufman, Aaron L. Mackler, and Gordon Tucker.

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah.

שאלה

An avowed homosexual who is a member of the Rabbinical Assembly has asked that his name be sent by the Joint Placement Commission for rabbinic placement to congregations. May the Joint Placement Commission place such a rabbi in a congregation?

תשובה

On March 25, 1992, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards adopted a consensus statement by a vote of nineteen in favor, three opposed and one abstaining. There were five provisions in this consensus statement only one of which applies to the question. It states:

We will not knowingly admit avowed homosexuals to our rabbinical or cantorial schools or to the Rabbinical Assembly or to the Cantors' Assembly. At the same time, we will not instigate witch hunts against those who are already members or students.

An obvious intent of this consensus statement was not to permit the ordination of gay rabbis and cantors and their admission to the professional organizations, so as to avoid placement of gay rabbis and cantors in congregations. There is also the proviso that "we will not instigate witch hunts against those who are already members or students," which points to a policy of not searching to see if one is a homosexual, or in any way penalizing those who are not "avowed homosexuals." The consensus statement

does not, however, deal explicitly with a policy for present members of the Rabbinical Assembly who openly avow their homosexuality. In such cases, it would seem that the first half of the statement would then apply, and we should not place “avowed homosexuals” in congregations. If we were to make exceptions for present members of the Rabbinical Assembly, we would be contradicting the intent of the policy barring admission to the rabbinical and cantorial schools and to the Rabbinical Assembly and the Cantors’ Assembly.

Conclusion

In accord with the apparent intent of the consensus statement, the Joint Placement Commission should not recommend “avowed homosexuals” for placement in congregations.