

# Introduction

*Michael A. White*

*Rabbi Kahana went and hid under Rav's bed. He heard him speaking with his wife and joking and doing what he required. Kahana said to him, "One surely would think that Abba never sipped the dish before." Abba said to him, "Kahana, are you here? Get out, because it is rude." Kahana replied, "This is Torah, and I must learn."*

Berachot 62a

This famous talmudic passage is often quoted to evoke questions regarding boundaries between teachers of Torah and their students. Kahana apparently believed that a student doesn't study only the texts with his teacher; he also studies the teacher's life, including his intimate life. But this text raises other equally fundamental questions regarding the parameters of Torah study: Are the mechanics of sexual intimacy considered Torah, as Kahana's actions suggest? Or was Abba correct when he ejected Kahana from his bedroom?

The work of the CCAR Ad Hoc Committee on Human Sexuality reflects this tension; throughout its history this committee examined the intersection of sexual relations and Reform Jewish values while highlighting the necessary privacy and dignity attendant to sexual intimacy. The scope of the committee has been vast. It has sponsored panels at CCAR conventions that have explored such diverse topics as marital sexual infidelity, Reform Jewish definitions of *to'eivah* and *kiddushin*, transgender issues, *taharah hamishpachah*, menopause, and others. But its most transformative work brought dignity and equality to gays and lesbians within the Reform Jewish community.

In 1990 the CCAR Ad Hoc Committee on Homosexuality and the Rabbinat, under Selig Salkowitz's leadership, commenced a comprehensive discussion within the Reform Movement that would culminate in a CCAR resolution affirming the right of gays and lesbians to openly enter the Reform rabbinat. This resolution,

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quoting from the CCAR Code of Ethics, elevates “the virtues of family life, integrity and honorable social relationships” without regard to sexual orientation. The Ad Hoc Committee on Human Sexuality then engaged in a thorough process that led to its 1998 report delineating “Reform Jewish Sexual Values.” This report defines the ten qualities inherent in a sanctified intimate relationship, irrespective of the sexual orientation of the partners. The report concludes that “*kedushah* may be present in committed same-gender relationships and...we believe that such same-gender relationships are worthy of affirmation through Jewish ritual and that each rabbi should decide about officiation according to his/her own informed rabbinic conscience.” This stance was affirmed by a resolution offered by the committee, then under Jonathan Stein’s leadership, passed at the 2000 convention. With this historic vote, the Reform Movement in Judaism became the first major religious denomination in this country to openly advocate religious rites for same-sex relationships.

At the 2004 CCAR convention in Toronto, members of the Ad Hoc Committee presented a series of papers on a wide array of human sexual phenomena. Jonathan Stein, editor of this journal, offered to devote space here to reprint them. They are thoughtful and scholarly, exploring their diverse topics through the prism of Reform Jewish thought.

The tension between Abba and Kahana has always guided the approach of the Ad Hoc Committee on Human Sexuality as it examined the challenging arena of sexual behavior. We didn’t shirk our responsibilities as we confronted the myriad expressions of the human sexual urge, especially when those expressions create emotional, psychological, and even physical pain. We condemned when condemnation was warranted; we urged discretion, compassion, and flexibility where appropriate, especially when we believed they could enable healing. And we proudly stood with those whose sexual orientation has been a source of oppression, demanding justice, nobility, and equality.

I conclude with gratitude to Selig Salkowitz and Jonathan Stein, previous distinguished chairs of this committee, along with all who served with them. Their work granted dignity and access to gay and lesbian Jews, and it reframed the terms of discussion regarding sexuality, highlighting integrity, monogamy, fidelity, and mutual respect as core religious values. They are to be commended; it was an honor to serve with them.