

Conservative Jews ✓ restudy gay issues

Argument could split centrist body

By Rachel Zoll
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Conservative Judaism may be about to reopen discussion of the denomination's ban on same-sex unions and ordaining homosexuals — a move critics say could fracture the centrist branch of U.S. Jewry.

Judy Yudof, lay president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, wants the movement's lawmaking body to decide whether its condemnation of homosexual sex still holds under current interpretations of religious law. The Torah's prohibition against homosexual behavior is the reason Conservative Judaism bars homosexuals from serving as rabbis and cantors.

Miss Yudof plans to submit the question to the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, a panel of 25 rabbis, within the next month.

She said she is simply seeking answers for just under a million Conservative Jews, who make up the second-largest branch of American Judaism.

"I've just felt there is some concern out there — in the lay world at least — about the status of homosexuals within our movement," said Miss Yudof, whose organization represents about 800 North American congregations. "There are some people who feel uncomfortable about putting a restriction upon someone who admits to being a homosexual."

The slightly larger and more liberal Reform movement ordains homosexuals and blesses same-sex couples, while the smaller and stricter Orthodox does not.

The last time Conservative Jews reviewed the policy on homosexuals was in 1992 in a fierce debate that ended in a compromise some dubbed "don't ask, don't tell." The lawmaking committee barred homosexuals from rabbinical schools but promised not to investigate stu-

dents' sexual orientation. At the same time, the panel urged congregations, youth groups, summer camps and schools to welcome homosexuals.

Rabbi Joel Meyers, head of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly, is among those who believe the policy should stand.

"People who are from within the gay community themselves are treated just fine," he said. "There is no discrimination."

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Conservative movement's main rabbinical school, has warned that ordaining homosexuals would be a major break from Jewish law and would split the movement.

But Idit Klein, head of the Boston chapter of Keshet, an advocacy group for homosexual Jews, called the policy unacceptable and said she knows many people who left the Conservative movement because of it.

The committee chairman has the authority to decide whether to take up the issue. The chairman is Rabbi Kassel Abelson, who wants to maintain the ban, but he plans to step down in April. He could be succeeded by Rabbi Elliot Dorff, the vice chairman and an advocate of same-sex unions and ordaining homosexuals.

Mr. Dorff, the rector of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, said the ban has been applied unevenly, with some homosexual rabbis allowed to serve and others forced out.

"Over the last 10 years, we agreed to disagree in the movement," said the rabbi, whose daughter is a lesbian. "But more people now know people and love people who are members of their families and good friends who are gay and lesbian. It's much harder to hate or disdain people you know and love."

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