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FITTING UNDER THE MARRIAGE CANOPY:

**Same-Sex Weddings as Rites of Conformity
in a Canadian Liberal Jewish Context**

By
Shari Rochelle Lash
B.A. (summa cum laude), York University, 2004

THESIS

Submitted to the Department of Religion and Culture
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts
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Abstract

The topic of same-sex marriage continues to be a source of controversy, yet the publicly recognized commitments between lesbian and gay partners is an emerging reality in the twenty-first century, especially in North America. This thesis focuses on the ritual aspects of same sex marriage by exploring the ways in which weddings are adapted to accommodate the needs of a lesbian or gay couple, particularly within Judaism, a tradition in which the components of a wedding ceremony are historically and culturally significant. Drawing from participant observation and fieldwork interviews with Jewish lesbians in Toronto, this work examines how wedding ceremonies are thought about, performed, and received within a legally tolerant environment. I argue that ceremonies are more likely to conform to traditional norms due to the legal status of same-sex marriage in Canada, emphasizing that innovations to language, symbols, and ritual performance incorporated in the United States that draw attention to difference and disempowerment are no longer necessary.

Acknowledgments

At times, writing this thesis could be likened to walking up a jagged mountain alone, in a foreign country, without a map, in my bare feet, while in the midst of a thick fog.

Fortunately, many individuals appeared at exactly the right moments to guide my way. I am especially grateful to Michel Desjardins and Kay Koppedrayer from the Religion and Culture Department. They each listened with a compassionate ear and directed me with their wise counsel so that I could find my footing and keep going. I am also thankful to the members of my advisory committee, Celia Rothenberg at McMaster University, and Scott Kline at the University of Waterloo. Both these professors buoyed me with their enthusiasm and thoughtful feedback. Meetings always yielded a renewed sense of determination, strength, and confidence. This project was also blessed by the input from my teacher, mentor, and friend, Aviva Goldberg at York University who kept me honest about my perspective as an outsider while also making me feel welcome in her life, her family, and in the lesbian Jewish community. Lastly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Ron Grimes whose capable support for this project was evident from the very beginning. Our meetings were always enriching and I feel grateful to have had the opportunity to work with someone whose standards and reputation are so highly regarded. Ron has continually challenged me to think critically and carefully about my research and writing and has taught me skills that will undoubtedly serve me well in the future.

The value of interacting with real human beings through the course of this research cannot be understated. I am particularly grateful to all the remarkable women who participated in this project. Their stories are the ground on which this work stands and the source of its meaning. I also wish to thank all of my friends, especially those in Toronto and Waterloo who walked with me this past year. I could not have managed without their patience and efforts at dispelling my doubts and despair — and for getting me out of the house every now and then. Even my dog Freya deserves a word of thanks. She (almost) always waited patiently for her meals and walks, and just having her around warmed me during the cold spells. Finally, my gratitude goes out to my parents, Lily and Shimon Lash, who have tirelessly supported me since I began this learning journey later in life than they had hoped. They not only stretched their worldview to embrace the topic of my research, but they did so with admirable respect and love. I want to thank my mother especially for listening intently to every word I read her, and for reminding me time, and time again, that I could do this, even when I was absolutely convinced I could not. This thesis is dedicated to her.

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*Sometimes the rose will lean towards the rose,
the jonquil to the jonquil.*¹

INTRODUCTION

In May 2006, two gay RCMP constables representing the national police of Canada were married in Nova Scotia to widespread media coverage. Much to the consternation of the Conservative federal government, the wedding of David Connors and Jason Tree took place close to one year after the previous Liberal government extended the legal definition of marriage to include same-sex couples. Early in 2007, Ontario Health Minister George Smitherman announced his intention to marry his partner, Christopher Peloso, in a First Nations' inspired ceremony at a wilderness resort in the north of the province. Smitherman downplayed the historical significance of his union in a statement to the *Toronto Star*, suggesting his marriage to Peloso is "not that big a deal now," since same-sex marriage has been legal in Ontario since 2003, and federally since 2005.²

Across the border in the United States, however, one's marriage to a member of the same-sex remains politically charged and fraught with controversy. During the 2006 Academy Awards broadcast, singer songwriter Melissa Etheridge accepted her Oscar for Best Original Song by first thanking her "wife" Tammy Lynn and their four children.³ The speech, seen by millions of people worldwide, lasted only a few seconds but created a firestorm of reaction the next day. Many conservative viewers were outraged by her words while others were absolutely delighted. In using language normally reserved for heterosexuals, Etheridge's remark struck a chord because it asserted the moral and

¹ Mathers, trans. "The First Captain's Tale" in *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, 342-351.

² Rob Ferguson and Robert Benzie. *Smitherman Set to Say 'I do'*, *Toronto Star* Feb. 12, 2007. www.thestar.com/print/Article/180711 (Retrieved March 27, 2007).

³ Melissa Etheridge and Tammy Lynn Michaels held a public commitment ceremony in Los Angeles in 2003. Their union is recognized as a Domestic Partnership under California state law.

cultural equivalency of her family whether or not the state recognized her same-sex “marriage” as legal.⁴

The fact that both prominent and ordinary gay and lesbian couples are coming forward in greater numbers to declare the legitimacy of their relationships without fear of recrimination signals a turning point in history and progress in their struggle for equality. Even though many disagree with and vehemently oppose same-sex marriage, the publicly recognized commitments between lesbian and gay partners is an emerging reality in the twenty-first century, not only in North America, but also in many parts of the world.⁵ In Canada in particular, many now consider legalized same-sex marriage as simply another choice on the menu for a growing diversity of citizens.⁶ Therefore, instead of focusing on *whether* same-sex couples should marry this study looks at *why* and *how* they marry, in a climate where secular rights reinforce a chosen religious rite of marriage.

By examining Jewish wedding rituals I hope to highlight a previously under-represented segment of this issue, which has mostly centred on American data within a dominantly Christian or secular framework.⁷ Jewish weddings have consistent elements that are historically traceable and have adapted over time to changing circumstances. Because of its relatively coherent ritual structure, I explore how the Jewish ceremony

⁴ Close to one thousand automatic federal and state protections, benefits and responsibilities granted to married people are not available to gays and lesbians in most parts of the United States (New York Times Editorial April 24, 2007).

⁵ Currently, same-sex marriages are recognized in the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Canada and the U.S. state of *Massachusetts, and most recently South Africa. Civil unions, domestic partnerships, registered partnership, and other legal recognitions of same-sex couples which offer varying amounts of the benefits of marriage are available in Andorra, Argentina, Brazil, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom; the Australian state of Tasmania, and the U.S. states of California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maine, New Jersey, and Vermont; and the U.S. District of Columbia (Washington, DC). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Same-sex_marriage (retrieved 8/24/06) *Couples must live in the state to qualify for a marriage license.

⁶ Civil marriages are processed in Canada for lesbian and gay couples from around the world although these marriages may not be recognized in their home countries.

⁷ See Lewin, Hull, Stiers, Butler, McWhorter, Sherman.

itself adheres to, departs from, and innovates traditional liturgy and symbolic elements when the gender-complementarity paradigm of the wedding is altered.

Canadian Jewish same-sex weddings simultaneously affirm legal entitlements, only recently pronounced as permanent by the federal government, and claim a space within a liberal Jewish context that has been long fought for. Therefore, a study of this kind moves beyond the presumption of extra legal status and the role of religious sanctioning as an alternative source of authority. American scholars Ellen Lewin and Kathleen Hull have argued that same-sex wedding ceremonies are both acts of resistance against oppressive government policies and rites of conformity to mainstream cultural values. As such, creative rituals of commitment in the United States both cling to and depart from convention. These authors also contend that rituals function as vehicles for justice and institutional transformation by drawing attention to difference within the context of the familiar.⁸

By looking at a particular religious tradition, this study examines where the Jewish marriage ritual is situated on the resistance-conformity continuum when performed in an urban centre where equal marriage laws are available. My fieldwork with lesbian couples in the Toronto area and with clergy who officiate at same-sex Jewish weddings demonstrates the ways in which ceremonies appear, and are perceived to be, religious, creative, political, and transformational. I argue that the presence of legal entitlements diminishes the need for ritual innovation that draws attention to a couple's difference and issues of political justice. Instead, Jewish same-sex weddings in Canada resemble in most ways egalitarian ceremonies for opposite-sex couples. Their

⁸ Hull. *Same-Sex Marriage: The Cultural Politics of Love and Law*, 26; Lewin. *Recognizing Ourselves: Ceremonies of Lesbian and Gay Commitment*, 85

transformative potential does not reside in the performance of resistance as is evident in the United States, but rather in the event itself and on how the presence of law encourages social and religious receptivity to a new formulation of marriage that departs from traditional understandings.

Existing Literature

The scholarly literature on same-sex marriage is based largely on data from the United States and has focused primarily on the legal, political and theological debates surrounding the issue.⁹ At least three books document the process of legalizing same-sex marriage in Canada.¹⁰ With an emphasis on the politically charged nature of same-sex marriage there has been little attention given to the religious or ritual aspect of the practice outside of Christianity.

Only a few books emphasize the experiences of lesbian and gay couples themselves. Among them are Susanne Sherman's *Lesbian and Gay Marriage: Private Commitment, Public Ceremonies* and Gretchen Stiers' *From This Day Forward: Commitment Marriage and Family in Lesbian and Gay Relationship*. While Sherman's book has a narrative focus and Stiers' is more thematic, both authors draw from couples' personal stories and illustrate what it means for them to choose, or choose not to, marry outside the law, arguing in part, that public ceremonies are gestures of political resistance against legal oppression and discrimination. Becky Butler's edited volume, *Ceremonies*

⁹ See Andrew Sullivan, *Same-Sex Marriage: Pro or Con: A Reader*; Daniel Pinello, *America's Struggle for Same-sex Marriage*; Mark Jordan et al., *Authorizing Marriage?: Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions*; R. Claire Snyder, *Gay Marriage and Democracy: Equality for All*.

¹⁰ See *Same-Sex Marriage: The Personal and the Political* (2004) by Kathleen Lahey and Kevin Alderson, *Just Married Gay Marriage and the Expansion of Human Rights* (2002) by Kevin Bourassa and Joe Varnell, the first gay couple in Canada to be recognized as married in their church and the first to receive a government marriage certificate in the city of Toronto in 2001, and *Gay Marriage: The Story of a Canadian Social Revolution* by Sylvain Larocque (2006).

of the Heart: Celebrating Lesbian Unions, features women's own stories that specifically highlight their ceremonies' creativity, fluidity and potential for healing. Most of these rites draw from a number of spiritual and religious traditions as a way to reflect individuality.

In a more scholarly work, anthropologist Ellen Lewin looks at the function of these rituals in *Recognizing Ourselves: Ceremonies of Lesbian and Gay Commitment*. She cites a wide range of ceremonies from her fieldwork in California, focusing on the intersection of various communities of identity that come together through them. She points out that ceremonies both cling to and move away from familiar traditions surrounding marriage, arguing that they “embody complex ritual statements that make them meaningful beyond their particular significance for the shape of lesbian and gay culture.”¹¹ While Lewin's own Jewish commitment ceremony precipitated this book, her study does not provide insight into religious aspects or implications. Sociologist Kathleen Hull conducted fieldwork with mostly Christian lesbian couples in the Chicago area in *Same-Sex Marriage: The Cultural Politics of Love and Law*, but religious aspects of commitment ceremonies are understood as the appropriation of mainstream cultural symbols and practices. Most relevant to my study is Hull's suggestion that religious sanctioning is a significant symbol of legitimacy when state law renders the relationships of lesbian and gay partners as unequal to those of heterosexuals.¹² Only one author, Yoel Kahn, a Reform rabbi in San Francisco explores same-sex weddings from a Jewish perspective. He has written specifically about wedding liturgy for gay and lesbian Jews.

¹¹ Lewin, Ellen. *Recognizing Ourselves*. 31.

¹² Hull, Kathleen. *Same-Sex Marriage*. 24.

suggesting that rituals signify both their inclusion into the larger narrative of the Jewish people and also their difference from heterosexuals.

All of these American authors assume that gay and lesbian relationships do not have legal standing and contend their marginal status affects levels of conformity and resistance in particular commitment ceremonies. Missing in these analyses are thoughts about how these ideas may apply when the legal status of same sex couples change and whether civil rights impacts ritual composition and performance.

Context and Fieldwork Methods

Fieldwork for this study took place between August and December, 2007 in the Toronto area. Conducting research in one of the most multi-cultural cities in the world has its advantages and limitations. With close to three million people living in the metropolitan area alone, I was able to access participants fairly easily. My findings however, may not likely translate to smaller centres or rural areas where populations are religiously homogeneous and gay and lesbian couples are less visible. Toronto has a Jewish population of approximately 150,000 – the largest in Canada. Although almost half of the city's Jews are unaffiliated, almost fifty synagogues from various streams of Judaism operate throughout the general Toronto area (GTA), the majority of them are Orthodox and Conservative.¹³ Toronto Jews are more conservative than those in the rest of Canada and the United States. One rabbi told me that the city is by far the most traditional Jewish environment in North America even within the Reform movement, the most liberal of the

¹³ Information compiled from the City of Toronto website www.toronto.ca, the United Jewish Federation website www.jewishtoronto.net, The Jewish Virtual Library www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Toronto.html (all retrieved December, 2006). and from personal interviews and experience.

three major streams.¹⁴ With this fact in mind, I recognize that findings would be different if undertaken in another major Canadian city such as Montreal or Vancouver.

This is a study that features lesbians, but it was not intended to be a lesbian study. I sought to interview couples of either gender who were planning a Jewish ceremony. I imposed no other stipulations for inclusion.¹⁵ Participants were solicited through contacting local rabbis, an advertisement in the *Canadian Jewish News*, and personal referrals. Contact with almost twenty Reform rabbis yielded only one couple whose marriage was to take place within my time parameters.¹⁶ Other leads enabled me to be a participant observer at two additional weddings. The Secular Humanist movement of Judaism provided a second referral and a third materialized through community contacts. In addition to interviewing the women whose weddings I attended, I met with two more couples who were married in Jewish ceremonies prior to the commencement of my field research. All five couples spoke with me together, in their homes, about their weddings, the importance of Jewish identity, their motivation for getting married, challenges they faced, and why they desired what they called a “traditional Jewish ceremony.” Two Reform rabbis and one Secular Humanist rabbi were also interviewed about their role and experience with officiating at same-sex weddings. An additional officiant is a Jewish educator and an academic who leads an alternative egalitarian synagogue in downtown Toronto. The couples I interviewed range in age from thirty-two to forty-three and most of them requested that I use their real names. I have indicated those who have chosen a

¹⁴ Rabbi Michael Dolgin (personal interview March 6, 2007).

¹⁵ While I cannot speculate as to why only women participants came forward, it has been highlighted in other works that more lesbian women tend to get married than gay men (see Hull whose study included almost twice as many women than men 21).

¹⁶ While at least eight rabbis in the GTA agree to perform same-sex marriages, at the time I asked for participants virtually no weddings were booked until the following spring and summer.

pseudonym, by first presenting them in quotation marks. Where appropriate, I have also chosen to obscure the names of synagogues, specific rabbis, and Toronto businesses in order to maintain anonymity.

Unlike many who have written on this subject, I approach this research as a straight woman with no direct experience of being marginalized because of sexual orientation. While I am neither married nor a lesbian, I am an advocate of equal marriage and have studied and practiced contemporary innovations to Jewish ritual for many years. As a liberal Jew and a feminist I am situated both within and outside the boundaries of those participants I am studying. Throughout my more than forty years I have personally attended dozens of Jewish weddings, including my own, and sought to observe and describe what happens when the central players in this ritual performance are radically altered. Over the course of five months I accumulated more than twenty hours of interview recordings. Throughout my fieldwork and textual research I was constantly reminded of the complexity of discussion that this subject generates and therefore cannot hope to cover all the angles here. Issues surrounding same-sex marriage leap across a variety of disciplinary boundaries, and, as a student of religious studies with a focus on ritual performance, I approach it from a perspective not often highlighted. I recognize that by focusing on particular elements I am undoubtedly overlooking or downplaying several others. As is true with any fieldwork project, the author's location dictates how she or he presents the data.

Terms of Reference

Because this work is situated within a time and place embedded in a social and historical context, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by complex terms like Judaism, rites of

passage, and sexual identity. My first task is to define the segment of Jewish tradition that I will be drawing most heavily on since the spectrum of modern Judaism is vast. While all streams of practice are grounded in ancient texts like the Torah (the Hebrew Bible) and Talmud (oral law), the blessing of same-sex marriage is relevant only to the more liberal streams of the tradition. In the broadest sense, liberal Judaism refers to both the Reform and Reconstructionist movements in North America, but it also encompasses smaller, and younger movements such as Secular Humanism.

Reform Judaism grew out of German Enlightenment ideology in the nineteenth century, which led to sweeping changes in Jewish observance in secularized European society.¹⁷ Reform as well as Reconstructionist Judaism, which was founded in the 1920s, combines respect for Jewish heritage with acceptance of modern knowledge and regard for the realities of the world in which we live. Both streams stress the full equality of participation of men and women in every sphere of religious life, including spiritual leadership, and place an emphasis on ethical conduct over and above strict ritual observance, or *Halachah*.¹⁸ Contemporary liberal Jewish movements, whether or not they are affiliated with the Reform or Reconstructionist streams, share the principles of respecting individual autonomy in interpreting the Torah and Talmud as well as deciding which observances are most appropriate to follow.¹⁹

Secular Humanist Judaism developed in the 1960s and draws on ideas and philosophies of secularism that grew out of early twentieth century intellectual thought. This movement places Jewish history and culture as a source of identity rather than a

¹⁷ Kahn, "The Liturgy of Gay and Lesbian Jews," 184.

¹⁸ *Halachah* is Talmudic literature that deals with law and with the interpretation of the laws in the Hebrew Scriptures. *Halachah* guides not only religious practices and beliefs, but also numerous aspects of day-to-day life.

¹⁹ This data is compiled from material provided on the official websites for the Reform Movement www.rj.org, and the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation www.jrf.org (Retrieved December 2005).

theology or belief in a transcendent or supernatural God. Because of its emphasis on individuality, personal responsibility, and mutual respect, Humanistic Judaism supports intermarriage as a way to prevent Jews from rejecting their cultural identity.²⁰ While the Reform, Reconstructionist, and Secular Humanist movements are distinct from each other, I sometimes incorporate the plural term Judaisms to indicate a multiplicity of official and non-official liberal streams and their similarity in welcoming all Jews; regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation as full members of their congregations and communities.²¹ In liberal Judaisms, historical and sacred texts “get a vote, but not a veto” by informing religious decisions instead of driving them or setting the agenda.²²

Because marriage facilitates a change in status of two single people into a publicly recognized couple, a wedding is usually considered a classic rite of passage. Whether a ceremony is performed for an opposite-sex or same-sex couple, I draw on Ronald Grimes’ suggestion that wedding rituals function to “carry us from here to there in such a way that we are unable to return to square one.”²³ Grimes contends a rite of passage’s transformative impact can affect both the individuals taking part as well as the communities that create and perpetuate them. I suggest this statement is particularly true when a wedding unites two women or two men. Long held assumptions about what constitutes committed, loving relationships are dismantled at the same time as a couple’s change in status is established and affirmed. While a wedding falls within the boundaries of a rite of passage, I use two terms that refer to it, that of “ceremony” and “ritual.”

²⁰ From personal interview with Rabbi Eva Goldfinger (11/23/06), www.ifshj.org, and www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanistic_Judaism.

²¹ Jewish Renewal and Secular Humanist Judaism are considered liberal forms of the religion but their membership and organizations are smaller. For more information on Jewish Renewal see www.aleph.org and for Secular Humanism, www.ifshj.org. In the U.K. the progressive movement is known as Liberal Judaism.

²² This is a common axiom among liberal movements.

²³ Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone*, 6-7.

While some theorists such as Victor Turner make a distinction between ceremony as a gesture of conformity and ritual as its creative counterpart, I use both words interchangeably because a same-sex Jewish wedding both conserves and transforms the status quo, rendering the function between the two terms almost impossible.²⁴

The third clarification I wish to make is about the language I use to refer to my participants' ritual roles. Because same-sex marriage is a new phenomenon that attempts, for the most part, to adapt to a traditional paradigm, words that do not conform to heterosexual categories have proven difficult to find. While some of my participants refer to themselves as "brides," I have chosen not to use this designation unless I am quoting them or their liturgy directly. In most cases I will use the neutral term "marriage partners" in reference to the central ritual actors. I do this in part to provide a non-gendered alternative that may be applied to any couple and to resist perpetuating a label that is fraught with associations of ownership and inequality.

At the onset of this study I considered carefully the current labels devised for highlighting the complexities of human sexual orientation and identity. Umbrella terms such as GLBT, (referring to gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered), and "queer," while inclusive, are too broad and largely inaccurate when applied to the parameters of this study.²⁵ While many of my lesbian participants use the generic term "gay" in reference to themselves, I mostly resist the temptation of assigning this so-called neutral term to both women and men, unless it is attached to culturally recognized concepts such as "gay

²⁴ *Ibid.* 121. Grimes discusses Turner's contributions to ritual theory and writes: "In Turner's vision, ritual is a hotbed of cultural creativity; and its work is to evoke creativity and change, not to buttress the status quo." 121

²⁵ GLBTQ is another acronym, which adds "Q" for those questioning their identity. In my opinion, all these terms are associated with fluidity and non-conformity and are therefore inappropriate to the nature and scope of this study, which focuses on levels of conformity to normative cultural practice.

pride.”²⁶ Therefore, as much as possible, I will incorporate the terms “lesbian” and “gay” when I wish to specify non-heterosexual women and men. In simplifying my terminology I do not wish to negate the existence of alternative sexualities, only to posit that same-sex marriage partners have eschewed other sexual orientations and identities as part of their public commitment.

Chapter Summary

This study begins with exploring the cultural significance of marriage in contemporary North America and then its centrality within Jewish tradition. Chapter One, “Widening the Wedding Canopy,” establishes why lesbian and gay couples, who subvert the gender-complementarity paradigm, seek to gain entry into the institution. I stress that because of its tremendous symbolic significance, *marriage*, and not some other formulation, is a sought after designation that asserts a same-sex relationship’s equal status within the larger community.²⁷ A brief timeline of the legalization of same sex marriage in Canada will be discussed before I turn to the specific legal and liturgical challenges met by liberal Judaisms in making room for same-sex marriage to occur in a religious context. This chapter concludes with an historical overview of ritual elements in a typical Jewish wedding ceremony and how these elements have been adapted for contemporary individuals including same-sex couples.

²⁶ Although “gay” is the most convenient and popularly used term in describing the sexual orientation and relationships of non-heterosexual women and men, especially evident in “gay marriage.” I use the word as a generic only sparingly. In my view, these allegedly neutral terms cannot be extricated from their associations with androcentrism and male dominance in much the same way that “mankind” cannot simply be assumed to be an inclusive reference for human beings of both genders. Because language is a tool for suggesting positions of power and importance in society, often in subtle ways, I am conscious throughout this work of not simply adopting popular usage. Therefore I alternate between lesbian and gay, and gay and lesbian to illustrate that neither gender is given priority when referring to all.

²⁷ Proponents of this argument insist that alternative terms like “civil union” or “domestic partnership” are simply not acceptable.

Chapters two and three centre on my ethnographic research in Toronto. “Three Traditional Lesbian Weddings,” describes the ceremonies I personally attended in the summer and fall of 2006 that incorporate ritual elements outlined in chapter one. While each wedding is strikingly different, similar components are central to the ritual’s performance. As we meet the women featured in these ceremonies and others in chapter three, which I have called “Behind the Scenes,” I explore central themes that emerged from my interviews including legal recognition, Jewish identity, assertions of equality, challenges and disappointments, and perceptions of political activism.

Finally, chapter four, “Innovation and the Presence of Law,” analyzes the implications of my findings when comparing them to same-sex weddings in the United States where Jewish ceremonies remain, in part, acts of political resistance. This chapter suggests that the absence of legal tolerance in the United States facilitates a greater likelihood of ritual innovation that is centred on themes of justice and difference. I argue that legal entitlements recently granted by the Canadian government embolden those participating and officiating at ceremonies in this country, and particularly in Toronto, thereby minimizing if not dissolving the need to interpret or perform a Jewish wedding beyond its egalitarian boundaries. This chapter also considers the concept of cultural transformation and how this may be interpreted in light of differing political climates between the two countries.

This study attempts to move beyond the ideological and religious debates that have laid the groundwork for this research and into the lived experience of those planning a Jewish wedding within a newly established climate of legal and institutional tolerance. My sampling of participants is small but findings provide a window into an emerging

reality that is weaving itself into the rich tapestry of diversity that comprises this country.

What follows is a beginning that will hopefully complicate assumptions about same-sex marriage and its implications for society and an established religious tradition.

*Let us renew the old and sanctify the new*²⁸

CHAPTER ONE: Widening the Wedding Canopy

Why Marriage?

Discussion about same-sex weddings, religious or secular, often raises the fundamental question why gays and lesbians would even seek to enter into the institution of marriage. Many, in fact, argue against adopting a heterosexist and patriarchal practice that conforms to the dominant culture and is historically tied to women's oppression. Some activists and feminist critics oppose same-sex marriage because it perpetuates the social privilege of married people while undermining equality for those who make different relationship choices. They profess that mainstream assimilation threatens individuality and the basic goals of gay liberation, which is to address the inequities that all marginalized people face each day.²⁹ For many lesbian and gay couples in committed long-term relationships, marriage is simply not a priority nor is it a necessary step in establishing their credibility as a couple or their viability as responsible parents.

Despite opposing views, many same-sex couples who see themselves as part of the mainstream seek to reap the legal benefits of marriage and the symbolic privileges it affords them. Because the institution continues to be, as Stoddard aptly frames it, "the centerpiece of our entire social structure and the core of the traditional notion of 'family,'" an understanding of what marriage *means* in contemporary society is helpful in

²⁸ Kahn, "Creating New Lifecycle Rituals."

²⁹ Ettelbrick, "Since When is Marriage a Path to Liberation?," 24; Owen, *In a Queer Country*, 90-1. Each author refers to not only gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer individuals as being marginalized. They also highlight racial, ethnic and low economic class minorities as disadvantaged.

determining its significance for same-sex couples.³⁰ Sociologist Andrew Cherlin discusses two major trends since the end of World War II that have served to disengage the institution of marriage from its functional roots. The first is increased emphasis on the value of emotional satisfaction and the second is the rise of individualism.³¹ Although matrimony is no longer “necessary,” marriage and public weddings persist in contemporary culture because, Cherlin asserts, it has enduring symbolic power.³²

Although the modern “love match” emerged in Enlightenment Europe, the marital roles of husband and wife were valorized further with the rise of television and consumer culture in the 1950s. The middle-class lifestyle and the production of children were promoted as sources of mutual gratification. Marriage was considered the only socially acceptable framework in which to have a sexual relationship and raise a family up until the 1960s, when idealized standards began to change.³³ In the 1960s accepted norms of behaviour and institutional structures were challenged, and the dominance of marriage was called into question as the only acceptable path for a meaningful, loving relationship. The invention and availability of the birth control pill fuelled the sexual revolution, and childbearing outside of “wedlock” became less stigmatized than it once had been. As a result, cohabitation grew more commonplace, and the focus of the successful marriage shifted from being about maintaining idealized roles to self-development, the expression of feelings, and challenging conventional gender hierarchies inherent in traditional unions.³⁴

³⁰ Stoddard. “Why Gay People Should Seek the Right to Marry,” 17.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 851

³² Cherlin. “The De-institutionalization of American Marriage,” 855.

³³ Cherlin, 851; Coontz, *Marriage: A History*, 225-6.

³⁴ Cherlin 852; Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 68.

While the sixties launched a phase of renegotiation of marital responsibility and divorce rates began to rise, public weddings continued to be performed with regularity, and they remain a central life cycle event in North American culture. Indeed, the wedding industry is flourishing in the twenty-first century. The reason for the continuing popularity of weddings, Cherlin notes, is because marriage has evolved from a marker of compliance to a marker of prestige. Those who marry in large public weddings, particularly religious ones, are asserting their legitimate status and demonstrating their worthiness of respect from the larger community. Cherlin suggests that a wedding is especially important for those who are marginalized due to race, class, ability, and social standing, since many of these groups lack the resources needed to stage a big event. Their ability to do so, even on a modest level, symbolizes that the couple has reached a level of financial security and a milestone in their individual development.³⁵ In short, the wedding signifies a couple's admittance into the privileges of mainstream society.

As a symbol of authenticity and recognition, marriage and the performance of a public wedding ceremony has become an important goal for many same-sex couples to achieve as part of their struggle for social and legal equality. In the United States legal marriage and its symbolic benefits are largely denied because of a couple's difference from heterosexuals. As a result, lesbian and gay couples are prevented from gaining acceptance into their larger communities even if they are able to finance a big wedding. Because marriage, as a term and a concept, has cultural significance, the granting of lesbian and gay partnerships an alternative designation, like "civil unions" or "domestic partnerships," is considered by many to be profoundly unacceptable. These labels infer

³⁵ Cherlin, 857.

that committed and loving relationships between two people of the same sex are of lesser quality and importance than those of heterosexuals.³⁶ “The notion that one’s union is not quite legitimate, not exactly the ‘real thing’ casts a pervasive shadow over our lives,” writes lesbian anthropologist Ellen Lewin. As a cultural standard of legitimacy, marriage carries with it symbolic rewards that are absent in the so-called “equal but different” categories of acknowledgement afforded by most U.S. states.³⁷ Therefore, same-sex marriage advocates continue to fight for complete recognition – a privilege that has recently been provided to those who reside across the border in Canada.³⁸

In just two years changes to Canadian marriage legislation worked its way through the legal system. Marriage laws were first adjusted in the province of Ontario in June 2003 once the Ontario Court of Appeal decided existing regulations restricting marriage to heterosexual couples contravened the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The province of British Columbia issued a similar decision in July 2003 followed by Quebec in March 2004. New marriage laws were passed in all but four provinces by June 2003 and in February 2005, The Civil Marriage Act, known as Bill C-38, was introduced to the Canadian House of Commons by the Liberal government. Less than six months later, on July 20, 2005, Bill C-38 received Royal Assent and was immediately passed into federal law.³⁹

³⁶ Stoddard, 19.

³⁷ Lewin, “Why Marriage?” 4. Currently, only the state of Massachusetts has equal marriage laws in place. Elsewhere, the states of California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maine, New Jersey, Vermont, and Washington, and the U.S. District of Columbia (Washington, D.C.) offer civil unions, domestic partnerships or registered partnerships.

³⁸ Close to one thousand automatic federal and state protections, benefits and responsibilities granted to married people are not available to gays and lesbians in most part of the United States (New York Times Editorial April 24, 2007).

³⁹ Sources: Lahey and Alderson; Larocque and EGALIE Canada www.egale.ca (retrieved 5/2/07)

Despite the swiftness of legal changes the Liberal government brought to Canadian marriage laws, debate continued in the court of public opinion. Polls suggested the strongest support for same-sex marriage occurred in large metropolitan areas such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. The strongest opposition was found in the prairie provinces, the interior of British Columbia, parts of southern Ontario, and in southern and western New Brunswick. During the Canadian federal election of December 2005 same-sex marriage legislation became a political tool for the Conservative party, which promised to review the decision should Steven Harper defeat the Liberals and be elected Prime Minister. Almost one year after winning the election, Harper's motion to debate whether the traditional definition of marriage between one man and one woman should be upheld was defeated. The next day his minority government conceded that it would not revisit the issue.⁴⁰

Now that the Canadian federal government has made it possible for gay and lesbian couples to marry legally, the question can more readily turn to how unions are commemorated. Many choose to marry within a recognizable or religious framework.⁴¹ In this regard same-sex couples want the same thing as their opposite-sex counterparts. Ronald Grimes notes that even though the secularization of marriage might have been expected to lead to more civil ceremonies, around three quarters of North American heterosexual weddings are "religious" and officiated by members of the clergy.⁴² Cherlin

⁴⁰ Sources used for this section include Lahey and Alderson 2004. Canadians for Equal Marriage Resource web page: <http://www.equal-marriage.ca/resource.php?id=532> and EGALÉ Canada: www.egale.ca. (retrieved 5/2/07). Between June 2003 and October 2006, there were 12,438 same-sex marriages issued across Canada according to a study by Canadians for Equal Marriage. Most marriage licenses were issued in Ontario, followed by British Columbia and Quebec.

⁴¹ See Lewin, *Recognizing Ourselves*; Stiers; Sherman; Butler for examples of many ceremonies that both adhere to and depart from tradition.

⁴² Grimes cites Elizabeth Pleck's research findings entitled *Celebrating the Family: Gender, Ethnicity, and Consumer Culture in American Domestic Rituals* (1997), 153.

also contends that couples generally want “ritually filled” weddings to celebrate their commitment. Simply going to city hall for a civil ceremony is often not an acceptable option.⁴³ However, because western religions have historically been hostile toward homosexual relationships, advocates of same-sex marriage must still contend with obstacles and discrimination even if couples are afforded equal standing in civil law.

Making Room for Same-Sex Marriage in Liberal Judaisms

Contemporary liberal Jewish movements share the principles of respecting individual autonomy in interpreting sacred texts as well as deciding on which observances are most appropriate to follow. Therefore, liberal Judaisms can more easily deal with challenges raised by the emergence of same-sex marriage, compared to their more Orthodox counterparts. Indeed this process of negotiation is part of a continuing history of wrestling with tradition in light of changing social circumstances. In the latter third of the twentieth century, Jewish feminism had a tremendous impact on liberal Judaisms by calling into question the patriarchal and androcentric biases of the religion and by interpreting texts and redeveloping liturgy and symbols that reflect alternative metaphors and representations of the divine. Feminist critiques and innovations also made room to honour the experiences of women and other excluded groups, including gay and lesbian Jews as well as unpartnered, childless, divorced, widowed, and elderly members of the community.⁴⁴

Jews have held peripheral status throughout history and in virtually every part of the world. Many suggest they have survived as a people largely by engaging with and

⁴³ Cherlin, 857.

⁴⁴ For examples, see Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*; Frymer Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*; Falk, *The Book of Blessings*; Alpert, *Like Bread on a Seder Plate*; Orenstein, *Lifecycles*; Balka and Rose, *Twice Blessed*; Goldstein, *Ref'isions*; Gottlieb, *She Who Dwells Within*.

adapting to the culture and attitudes of their host environments.⁴⁵ With same-sex marriage becoming more widely accepted in mainstream society, liberal Judaisms have worked to revitalize traditional practices in order to accommodate the needs of a growingly diverse community population.⁴⁶ In 1984, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia established a policy of non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and passed a resolution in 2004 supporting civil marriage and rabbinic officiation at religious wedding ceremonies for same-sex couples.⁴⁷ The Reform Movement passed a similar resolution in 2003 affirming rabbinic autonomy regarding the decision to officiate at same-sex weddings.⁴⁸ Despite institutional sanctioning however, in the absence of civil law, many Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis in the U.S. conduct same-sex Jewish weddings in violation of the Jewish principle *dina d'malchuta dina*, translated as “the law of the land is law.” The rule was established hundreds of years ago to prevent a Diaspora people, like the Jews, from conflicting with the laws of their benevolent host culture.⁴⁹

The resolutions to perform same-sex marriage arose after years of debate around sacred texts that deny or reject homosexual behaviour, and the holiness of Jewish

⁴⁵ Alpert, *Like Bread on a Seder Plate*, 13. Rabbi Michael Stroh from his public lecture entitled *Jewish Identity* at the Biennial Conference for the Canadian Council for Reform Judaism, November 11, 2006. Roof argues that Judaism has been active in the “spiritual marketplace,” in which organized religion competes to retain membership and relevance to those interacting with their larger culture. Roof, *The Spiritual Marketplace*, 78.

⁴⁶ This diversity includes single Jews, intermarried and/or interracial families, converts to Judaism, those with mixed ethnic backgrounds, and individuals returning to Judaism as adults with little or no Jewish education or knowledge. Efforts made by liberal Jewish leaders address the ways in which the synagogue can be more welcoming through educational and social programs as well as prayer services that are more accessible to those unfamiliar with Hebrew (see Musleah, “Reinventing the Synagogue” and Hoffman, “Why Congregations Need to Change”).

⁴⁷ Alpert, “Religious Liberty,” 36; Phill Goldberg, (Director of Communications at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia, PA) in discussion with the author, December 2005, and unpublished press release to the Associated Press dated November 24, 2005.

⁴⁸ Rabbi Sharon Sobel, (Executive Director, Canadian Council for Reform Judaism in Toronto) in discussion with the author, December 2005. CCRJ is the Canadian arm of the Union for American Hebrew Congregations in New York. Sobel provided an excerpt from her yet unpublished article on same-sex marriages in Canada.

⁴⁹ Rabbi Daniel Gottlieb explained the origins of this principle in Medieval Europe. When the law of civil society is more stringent than Jewish law, the secular law applies. (From personal interview, January 18, 2007).

marriage.⁵⁰ The two most contentious elements in Jewish tradition challenging the full acceptance of homosexual Jews into the community are the prohibitions on sexual behaviour found in the Torah (Hebrew Bible) and the Talmudic concept of *kiddushin*, the theological designation for heterosexual Jewish marriage.

Because Judaism is intimately tied to its texts, laws, and ancient customs, the task for Jews has always been to struggle with their meaning in order keep the religion relevant and alive in every generation. Many sections of the Torah raise disturbing and problematic issues that conflict with modern understandings, especially passages about conquest, slavery, capital punishment, polygamy, and patriarchal oppression of women. Wrestling with these issues remains a central part of Jewish observance because the texts illuminate the complexities of human nature and highlight one's potential for corruption or holiness.⁵¹ In some ways, for both Jews and Christians, the Hebrew Bible endures as a blueprint for ethical practice, even if the words are no longer read literally. Understanding the social and historical conditions in which texts were constructed enables liberal Jews to challenge sections that conflict with contemporary realities. Modern interpretation is especially relevant when examining law codes in the Torah that pertain to acceptable sexual behaviour.

The main obstacle for conventional or traditional⁵² Judaism in accepting same-sex couples as equal members of the Jewish community, particularly for the purpose of sanctifying marriage, is rooted in a passage from the book of Leviticus. The book, which follows the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt and their subsequent desert wanderings, is

⁵⁰ Even though scriptures are not always the ultimate authority in making religious decisions in liberal Judaism, they must be carefully considered before the religion can bend to meet the needs of a minority group.

⁵¹ Friedman, "Position Paper," 4.

⁵² Pertaining to Orthodox and Conservative streams, which both insist on the ongoing authority of Jewish law.

largely devoted to ritual legislation and acceptable cultic practices. The Holiness Code contained within Leviticus deals specifically with what is considered pure and impure behaviour, and delineates a system of sexual boundary violations and their consequences.⁵³ The passage that has been the most damning for homosexuality is the prohibition appearing in verse 18:22 stating: “Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is a *to-evah*,” often translated as an abomination.⁵⁴ Later in Leviticus, the restriction is restated with the penalty of death (20:13). For observant gays and lesbians, coming to terms with this passage is probably the greatest barrier to finding an equal place and a home within the Jewish community.⁵⁵ Even though the verses do not specifically condemn lesbian behaviour, many have argued that the absence of a prohibition does not give Jewish lesbians any particular advantage for acceptance compared to gay men.⁵⁶ The critical aspect of these two Leviticus passages is that conservative religious leaders and institutional bodies continually evoke them as proof text for the rejection of homosexuality, which thereby undermines the full acceptance of gays and lesbians in the Jewish community and most certainly their right to marry.

As a response to a literal reading of these verses, rabbis such as Rebecca Alpert and Joan Friedman insist that one must first recognize the cultural environment in which texts arose in order to best understand the meaning of these prohibitions. In the ancient world, neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality was understood as an orientation, as it

⁵³ Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament*, 174; Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, 125.

⁵⁴ The meaning of this word is obscure. Although it is related to negative consequences, the English translation of abomination is considered by some to be an extreme interpretation (Alpert, 27). In the Hebrew Bible the term *to-eva* can also refer to idolatry, manner of dress, the imitation of outside customs, and dishonest business practices (Dolgin, 179).

⁵⁵ See Simcha DuBowski's documentary, *Trembling Before God* and Lili Alexander's *Keep Not Silent*. Both films provide moving portraits of the struggles of being Orthodox and lesbian or gay.

⁵⁶ Alpert, *Like Bread on a Seder Plate*, 26; Umansky, “Jewish Attitudes,” 183; Friedman, 1. It is not until later rabbinic texts when lesbian behaviour is identified specifically as socially deviant.

is today. In the Ancient Near East as well as in the Greco Roman world, sexuality was comprised of a wide spectrum of activity, which anyone might choose to engage in as a source of gratification. The kind of sexual behaviour one participated in was directly related to one's social status and not to her or his sexual "nature" or proclivity for a specific gender. Gratification was most widely available to free adult males and significantly limited for women, children and slaves.⁵⁷ Rachel Adler further contends that in the world of patriarchal kinships in the Bible, the act of (hetero)sexual intercourse was symbolic of dominant and submissive relations that males and females were expected to engage in as part of the social order in their daily lives. If the power differential of this relationship was complicated through homosexual sex, then the dominant role of the male was exposed and left vulnerable to conquest.⁵⁸ Thus, Adler asserts, it is the violation of these strict social categories of power and status through homosexual sex, which was of most concern to the patriarchal biblical authors of these laws, and not the sexual act itself.⁵⁹ Since the egalitarian movements of liberal Judaism contest hierarchical structures of social organization based on gender, many rabbis argue that the reasoning behind the Leviticus text is no longer relevant.

A thoughtful and contextual understanding of the sexual boundaries in Leviticus demonstrate how vastly different contemporary values about sexuality are from those of our biblical ancestors. Therefore, they must be taken into consideration when assessing the religious legitimacy of modern same-sex relationships. With current technology, couples can now have sex without having children and children without having sex.

⁵⁷ Friedman, 1.

⁵⁸ This statement presumes not only the forms of sex but also the position in which they are enacted.

⁵⁹ Adler, *Like Bread on a Seder Plate*, 131.

People can choose from a vast array of sexual options where few constraints are placed on the conduct of consenting adults. Judith Plaskow argues that confining sexuality to an ancient ideal is a futile exercise because “there are many reasons to question and even undermine the centrality of sexuality as a topic of religious concern.”⁶⁰ She insists that private sexual conduct is given far too much emphasis as a subject of religious debate at a time when it is no longer relevant. Therefore, Judaism today is in a “time of wandering” regarding sexual ethics. Adler believes it is the challenge of progressive Judaism to establish how holiness may be expressed through sexuality and not whether sexuality must be controlled by antiquated rules and regulations. Rather than promoting sexual promiscuity or irresponsibility, Jews have an “obligation to express their sexuality in a holy way,” and as communities, there is an obligation to keep regenerating the norms for how this can be accomplished.⁶¹ By recognizing the critiques presented about the Leviticus passages, current interpretations can help liberal Jews move beyond a literal reading of the text to make room for same-sex love and even imbue it with a sense of holiness.

The second issue that obstructs same-sex couples from obtaining a Jewish marriage is the concept of *kiddushin*. Rooted in Talmudic property law, the term literally means “holiness” and is the consecrated designation of a husband and wife as a sanctified entity.⁶² *Kiddushin* is the rooting of the human couple in the realm of the sacred. As partners in creation, a couple’s union is meant to mirror the relationship between God and

⁶⁰ Plaskow, *Decentering Sex*, 1.

⁶¹ Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, 26.

⁶² Friedman, 10; Adler, 169; Dolgin, 185.

Israel and the continuation of the Jewish people.⁶³ The metaphor of husband and wife in relationship to God through their sexuality is a powerful theological image, which poses a challenge to same-sex couples wishing to be blessed within the Jewish tradition.

Marriage's intended procreative purpose hearkens to the earliest biblical commandment to "be fruitful and multiply" and is embedded in conventional notions of maintaining and perpetuating a Jewish home.

Even though the significance of *kiddushin* is intimately bound to heterosexual marriage, Friedman and other liberal rabbis argue that the union of two Jewish women or men is equally deserving of this holy designation. The sanctification or exclusivity that the term *kiddushin* denotes is only limited to heterosexual couples as long as one refuses to allow for the possibility of committed and monogamous same-sex couples.⁶⁴ Since homosexuality as currently understood was not a functioning aspect of ancient and rabbinic culture, it therefore would have had little relevance for consideration by Talmudic writers.

Once the textual obstacles are interpreted so that same-sex marriage appears less onerous, the process of reframing a traditional Jewish wedding outside of a heterosexual model can begin. It appears that decisions about whether weddings should be the same or different from heterosexual ones is influenced by the existence of civil recognition. In the United States the emphasis on maintaining the sameness of Jewish marriage is balanced with a need to recognize the uniqueness of couples, who are not legally recognized in most parts of the country. Reform rabbi and liturgical scholar Yoel Kahn argues that

⁶³ The marital relationship between God (the husband) and Israel (God's wife) is a metaphor that is used frequently by the prophets Hosea, Jeremiah, and others (Friedman, 10).

⁶⁴ Friedman, 11; Levi Elwell, "Honor the Holiness," 11; Levinson, "Covenant of Same-Sex Nisuin," 15.

ceremonies for lesbian and gay couples must be analogous to those of heterosexuals in one sense but also entirely innovative in another. He cites two main principles at work in the wedding ceremonies he performs for Jewish same-sex couples in the United States. The first is the recognition that lesbian and gay relationships are equally valid and as worthy of Jewish recognition as their heterosexual counterparts. The second is the acknowledgment that relationships are not exactly the same and, as such, need not do everything in the same way.⁶⁵ In outlining this equal but different scenario Kahn suggests the addition of ritual elements that highlight both the same-sex nature of the marriage partners and their contested for status within the American legal system.⁶⁶

In Canada, rabbis who perform same sex weddings can understand marriage between two gay and lesbian Jews to be the same as it is for an opposite sex couple. Rabbi Michael Dolgin, a Toronto Reform rabbi, initiated a lengthy negotiation process with his congregation on the issue of officiating at gay and lesbian weddings. In a discussion paper published in 2005, he asserted that the desire of lesbian and gay Jews to marry was not motivated by a need for extra recognition, especially within a country where legal sanctioning is equally available to all couples.⁶⁷ Marriage, he writes, is a model covenant, or *brit*, that can be compared to the relationship between God and the people of Israel. This *brit*, in Dolgin's view, defines the basis for Jewish responsibility and in a modern context is based on the commitment to being monogamous, the establishment of a Jewish home, and the affirmation of the values and practices of the

⁶⁵ Kahn is citing Rabbi Janet Marder in "Why Union Ceremonies for Lesbian and Gay Jews?" 3.

⁶⁶ Specific ritual innovations to traditional liturgy are discussed in the following and final chapters.

⁶⁷ Dolgin, 188.

community. If two Jewish women or men wish to marry according to these precepts, he argues, there is no rational reason to deny them the access and the blessing to do so.

As a marriage that conforms to community expectations and standards, the wedding ceremony that Dolgin devised for same-sex couples is virtually identical to the egalitarian weddings he performs for opposite sex couples, with the exception of minor language changes, most notably the insertion of “loving friends” in place of bride or groom. Rabbi Daniel Gottlieb, another Toronto Reform rabbi, echoes Dolgin’s insistence on performing a parallel ritual for same-sex couples. He told me in an interview that the service he delivers is “almost identical” to the ones he does for opposite sex couples.⁶⁸ Although both rabbis may incorporate personalized elements in consultation with couples, neither Dolgin nor Gottlieb has been asked to provide any additional rituals or readings that highlight the difference of same-sex marriage partners or their status in the community.

A growing number of rabbis on both sides of the border now agree that accepting lesbian and gay Jews and blessing their unions is a logical step for liberal Judaisms, which have already embraced non-Jewish partners into synagogues and allowed for female, and a growing number of lesbian and gay, rabbis and cantors. Many feel that the openness to receive new kinds of leaders, and a different formulation of marriage strengthens rather than weakens the ethical precepts that Judaism is founded upon.⁶⁹ By welcoming same-sex couples into the synagogue, and blessing their commitments to each other, liberal Judaisms are not intending to compromise religious integrity. According to Jewish precepts, all married couples, regardless of their sexual orientation, are subject to

⁶⁸ Rabbi Daniel Gottlieb (From personal interview January 18, 2007).

⁶⁹ Friedman, 7; Levi Elwell, 11; Levinson, 15; Yoffie, 2; Zeplovitz, 4; Dolgin, 189.

the same standards of sexual morality and all relationships should ideally strive to be committed and sexually satisfying.⁷⁰ The issue for couples and their rabbis, then, ceases to be about *whether* same-sex relationships are valid according to the strict interpretation of Jewish law, but rather *how* to use tradition in a way that celebrates love within a faithful partnership of two Jews.

The Jewish Wedding Ceremony

In Judaism the ceremony of marriage is abundant with ritual action, prayers, and symbols that date back more than 2000 years. What follows are the core elements of the traditional Jewish wedding that can be traced back through history mostly from Eastern and Western Europe.⁷¹ While today it is customary for the wedding to be facilitated by a rabbi, Jewish law does not require such an officiant. Rabbinic officiation became more commonplace in the Middle Ages when marriage grew to be a public event, rather than a private ceremony for close family.⁷² A rabbi does not have the power to sanctify a marriage in the way a Christian priest or pastor does. She or he merely ensures that the couple is eligible to marry and that the ritual is performed correctly.

The canopy, or *chuppah*, under which the ceremony takes place, is probably the most recognizable symbol of a Jewish wedding. The word *chuppah*, means literally “to cover.” It became a fixture of the ceremony in sixteenth century Europe although

⁷⁰ Friedman, 7.

⁷¹ There are additional rituals that occur prior to the public ceremony that varies between levels of observance. These include the veiling of the bride, known as the *bedeken*, a separate reception for the bride and groom called a *tisch*, attended only by members of their same sex, and a ceremony called an *aufruf* on the Friday night prior to the wedding when the marriage partners are called up in front of the congregation for a special blessing by the rabbi. Since some of these practices are not usually included in egalitarian or same-sex settings, they are not focused on in this survey.

⁷² The event of marriage became a religious rite during the rabbinic period in the second century CE. Prior to this time marriage was more of a private transaction among family and close community and only required the presence of proper witnesses. By the Middle Ages the wedding took on a distinctly “sacred” tone and a rabbi was expected to officiate. Marcus. *The Jewish Life Cycle: Rites of Passage from Biblical to Modern Times*, 134. Hoffman. “The Jewish Wedding Ceremony.” 146.

Talmudic texts suggest that trees planted by some Jews at the birth of a child would later be used to construct their wedding chamber. Sometimes the canopy was made from the groom's prayer shawl, or *tallit*, and tied to four poles. The *tallit* could also be wrapped around the couple, covering their heads, or it could appear as free standing and decorated with flowers and greenery.⁷³ Today both hand-held and fixed *chuppot* appear at Jewish weddings. Several explanations may be provided as to its significance. Among the most common is that the *chuppah* symbolizes the tent of Abraham and Sarah, Judaism's earliest ancestors, and by extension, represents the home the couple will build together. By standing beneath the *chuppah* the marriage partners are a link to the past as well as future generations of Jews. Its openness on all four sides is said to signify hospitality and the willingness to welcome the stranger. With the wedding canopy as the focal point of the ceremony, the following sequence of ritual activities often takes place beneath it.

Circling

Jewish weddings, especially those in the Orthodox tradition, often begin with the bride circling around the groom seven times as she joins him beneath the wedding canopy. This practice dates back to medieval Europe when the ritual featured elements to ward off demons and customs related to death and mourning.⁷⁴ Despite its superstitious origins, this rite has grown in popularity for egalitarian weddings. Its significance has been reformulated in two ways. Firstly, instead of the bride circling the groom, each partner circles the other three times and then, holding hands, they circle once more together.

⁷³ Marcus, 164; Hoffman, 138.

⁷⁴ These include the bride and groom's fasting on the day of the wedding as on the day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), lighting candles of remembrance, observing seven days of wedding feasts in equivalence to the customary seven days of mourning (Shiva) There was also the practice of burial society members circling the open grave seven times before covering it over. Marcus, 154-6.

Secondly, this rite now draws more on mystical meaning rather than on repelling evil spirits. As a mirror of creation, the number seven is understood as significant in Jewish tradition because it is the number of days God used in which to create the world in the first chapter of Genesis. One interpretation of this ritual is that the circling symbolically enacts the creation of the couple's new life together.⁷⁵ Another explanation suggests the circling by each partner creates a sign of infinity and the hope of a lasting union.⁷⁶

Following the circle ritual the rabbi will usually welcome the wedding partners and their guests with a Hebrew blessing and an explanation of the *chuppah*.

Betrothal: Rings, Wine, Commitment Blessing

The betrothal segment of a Jewish wedding ceremony harkens back to Jewish antiquity when the marriage process had two parts separated from each other by one year. The first part, called *erusin*, was a betrothal rite, with roots in the Hebrew Bible. *Erusin* was essentially a business transaction that secured a bride for a man's exclusive use.⁷⁷ Wife acquisition adopted a more elevated tone in the second century CE, during the rabbinic period, and was given the name *kiddushin*, which means to sanctify, or make holy.⁷⁸ As a way to "set apart" a particular woman in a ritualized way, betrothal, or *erusin*, involved the groom's presentation of a gift, a blessing over wine, a formal declaration of intent to marry, and a special blessing, translated as: "Behold you are sanctified to me according to the laws of Moses and the people of Israel."⁷⁹ Most egalitarian Jewish weddings maintain elements of this ancient betrothal rite despite its associations with wife

⁷⁵ From the text of Alisa and Michelle's wedding at Temple Sinai performed by Rabbi Lori Cohen. Used with permission.

⁷⁶ Rabbi Eva Goldfinger (from personal interview, November 23, 2006).

⁷⁷ Noted in texts as ancient as the Book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible (Adler, 171; Marcus, 139).

⁷⁸ Adler, 172; Hoffman, 135

⁷⁹ Hoffman, 135; Marcus, 143.

acquisition. The exchange of rings, a blessing over the first glass of wine, and a mutual statement of sanctification, are all integral parts of the ceremony and the concept of *kiddushin* or holiness is now understood to apply to both partners.⁸⁰

Reading of the *Ketubah*

The *ketubah* is a legal marriage document with ancient origins. Initially it was a mechanism of protection for the woman, who was powerless in ancient society without the supervision of a husband or father. Before consenting to the marriage, the document had to be signed by the groom and two witnesses and then given to the bride. Originally, the *ketubah* promised financial compensation in the case of death, divorce or allegations of mistreatment or abuse.⁸¹ It also contracted the husband to provide his wife with food, clothing, companionship, and sexual gratification. By the twelfth century, when the ceremonies of betrothal and marriage were combined, the text of the *ketubah* was read aloud as a way to bridge one part to the other. Since Early Modern times, lavishly decorated *ketubot* became customary and they remain a special genre in both historical and contemporary Jewish art.⁸² The text of egalitarian *ketubot* reflects the marital obligations of both partners and is often written in both Hebrew and English. The signing of the document takes place beforehand in an intimate gathering in the presence of the officiant, close family members, and two Jewish witnesses. Portions of the *ketubah* are sometimes read midway through the wedding ceremony. The document, usually a

⁸⁰ The presentation of a wedding ring is rooted in the betrothal ritual when the husband would present the bride with an object of monetary value. By the Middle Ages a ring became the standard object. Jewish law stipulated that it had to be a simple, unornamented band, worth "at least a penny" and be the property of the husband. Marcus, 146; Hoffman, 135.

⁸¹ Hoffman, 131; Marcus, 159.

⁸² Marcus, 162.

striking piece of artwork, is often framed and later displayed in a prominent place in the couple's home.

The Seven Blessings

After reading the *ketubah* the second phase of the marriage ceremony begins. Known as *nisuin*, this second part of the marriage process literally meant “to pass” the bride from her father's home to that of her husband's.⁸³ To mark her transition, seven blessings were recited in Hebrew: one over the wine and six others extolling themes of creation, the restoration of Zion, and the happiness of the bride and groom. The blessings were customarily repeated at the wedding feast. Scholars have suggested that the Seven Blessings, or *Sheva Brachot*, are very old and likely date back to prophetic literature in the Hebrew Bible and the Babylonian Talmud.⁸⁴ There are now several versions of the Blessings based on, or adapted from, the original Hebrew liturgy; they include egalitarian language, contemporary themes, or the recognition of same-sex marriage partners (see Appendix 1).⁸⁵ Once the blessings are delivered, each marriage partner drinks from the second cup of wine.

Breaking of the Glass

The completion of a Jewish wedding is always marked by the breaking of a glass, which is usually preceded by the rabbi's final blessing for the couple. Although its origins are unclear, this custom likely dates back to other cultures with which Jews were interacting during the medieval period in Christian Europe. Its significance for Jews relates to the Talmudic reasoning of creating a moment of solemnity at times of great joy. It was later

⁸³ A woman's connection to the covenant of the Jewish people depended on her association with a dominant male. Hoffman, 130.

⁸⁴ Hoffman, 136; Adler, 180.

⁸⁵ In replacement of bride and groom, “loving friends” or “loving companions” will be used.

associated with the destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem.⁸⁶

Traditionally, the groom stomps on the wrapped glass to end the ceremony, but in egalitarian ceremonies both partners may smash the glass together, or there may be two glasses. This action is always followed by exuberant shouts of *Mazel Tov* (Hebrew for good luck), as the marriage partners retreat for a short time alone before they join the wedding reception to feast and celebrate with their guests.

Additional Parts of the Ceremony

The core ingredients of a Jewish wedding discussed here are often augmented with additional prayers and traditions that are drawn from the surrounding culture. A number of these, like the wearing of a white wedding gown and veil, the procession down the centre aisle by accompanying bridesmaids, groomsmen flower girls, and ring bearers, and the “giving away of the bride” have roots in British royal custom dating back to the nineteenth century.⁸⁷ Other ritual additions like the lighting of candles, the sharing of personal vows, and the proclamation of marriage by the officiant are adopted into Jewish ceremonies from customs associated with the dominant Christian culture under which Jews have most frequently lived.⁸⁸

Contemporary Challenges to the Traditional Jewish Marriage Ceremony

Modern Jewish weddings draw from a deep well of tradition while simultaneously embracing the present and reaching out to the future. In the last half-century innovations to Jewish ritual have evolved at greater frequency. One of the most significant influences

⁸⁶ Marcus, 167-8. The temples were destroyed in 586 BCE and 70 CE.

⁸⁷ Stemming from Queen Victoria’s marriage to Prince Albert in 1840. Grimes, *Deeply Into the Bone*, 155-6; Marcus, 183.

⁸⁸ Hoffman, 143. Customs adopted by Muslim host countries in the Middle Ages included henna painting on the hands and face of the bride. Jews borrowed distinctive patterns used in Arab wedding practices. Marcus, 149.

for change has been the growth of Jewish feminism in the 1980s and 1990s. As women in the liberal movements of Judaism assumed positions of greater influence and spiritual leadership, new interpretations of sacred texts began to take root and significant changes to liturgy developed that provided alternative ways to understand and perform Jewish ritual.⁸⁹ Building on feminist critiques and innovations, lesbian and gay Jews began adding their perspective; demanding greater visibility and equality within religious tradition.⁹⁰

In 1992, Rachel Adler sharply criticized the intention behind the betrothal portion of the Jewish wedding ceremony, arguing its sexist origins and incompatibility with the egalitarian nature of most modern relationships. Drawing on Talmudic partnership law instead, she developed a revised version of the Jewish marriage contract calling it a *Brit Ahuvim*, or a covenant of lovers, which emphasizes the mutual commitments each partner makes to one another.⁹¹ With a focus on equality and partnership, Adler's contemporary model of a Jewish wedding, whether in whole or in part, is attractive to many liberal minded brides and grooms and has been adopted frequently for use by same-sex couples.⁹²

As a way for lesbian and gay couples to further claim their social reality into the framework for a Jewish wedding, familiar elements are sometimes innovated further to convey messages of resistance and liberation, especially in the U.S. where equal marriage

⁸⁹ See Falk, *Book of Blessings*; Gottlieb, *She Who Dwells Within*; Orenstein, *Lifecycles*.

⁹⁰ See Alpert and Kahn.

⁹¹ See Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, 169-207. The mutual obligation model of a marriage contract is commonly used at liberal Jewish weddings although the word *ketubah* is retained despite its origins in bride purchase. The word *ketubah* provides a link to the past that a *Brit Ahuvim* does not.

⁹² Wedding liturgies I have reviewed maintain the word *ketubah* even though the text reflects a mutual commitment similar to *Brit Ahuvim*. For a full example of Adler's model in a lesbian wedding see "The Program for Tamara Cohen and Gwynn Kessler," Gainesville, FL, 2004, posted on the Jewish Women's Archive <www.jwa.org/feminism>

rights remain largely unavailable and the enactment of a Jewish wedding often stands in for the legal validation granted by the state. Some argue that legal ambiguity makes room for ritual creativity.⁹³ Familiar ritual actions like the breaking of the glass at the end of the ceremony can be newly explained as the breaking of the social order that rejects same-sex couples, the grief for the loss of friends and community members to AIDS, or the sadness at the absence of certain family who refused to attend the ceremony.⁹⁴ One explanation reads as follows:

Because so many gays and lesbians sadly still know the oppression and pain of hiding, because so many gays and lesbians lack equality of civil rights in our world, we break a glass/glasses on this day of celebration to remind us that even in this hour of great joy, our world is still incomplete and in need of healing. May the time be soon, and in our day, when all who are in hiding shall be free and all who are in exile shall come home.⁹⁵

Some same-sex wedding ceremonies bypass the sadness associated with breaking a glass and replace it with the blowing of a *shofar*, or ram's horn, to symbolize a call for freedom and the beginning of a new season of change.⁹⁶ Lesbian and gay Jewish commitment ceremonies may feature additional readings calling attention to the inequities of current society that link struggles for equality with times of oppression and intolerance in Jewish history.⁹⁷ Ceremonies might also feature readings from the Hebrew Bible that highlight the love between Jonathan and David (Sam. 18:3) or Ruth and Naomi (Rut. 1:16). Poetry by notable gay or lesbian authors may also be added. Yoel Kahn suggests that the Jewish ceremony between lesbian and gay couples is a "wonderful act of coming out" after having been rendered invisible by family, law, society, and Judaism for so long. Because

⁹³ See Ellen Lewin *Recognizing Ourselves*.

⁹⁴ Levinson "A Covenant of Same-Sex Nisu'in and Kidushin." 18; Kahn "Contemporary Challenges." 278.

⁹⁵ From Knobel et al. "Union Ceremonies for Same-Gender Couples." 12. www.huc.edu/tjso/jhvr.c.

⁹⁶ The *shofar* is a hollow ram's horn that is customarily blown at the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah.

⁹⁷ Kahn, "The Liturgy of Gay and Lesbian Jews." 186.

relationships in the U.S. rarely have legal standing their meaning is derived from religious and communal affirmation even though political undertones may be ancillary. Kahn's approach at personalizing each ceremony he conducts reflects the realities that couples face without compromising a grounding in tradition. While the content of weddings attend to difference, they do not dwell in it. In a personal correspondence with me Kahn stressed, "most people want their ritual to be focused on the sacred occasion, not a polemic about justice... the justice is in the occasion itself."⁹⁸

I have discussed how the institution of marriage has changed over the last several decades of the twentieth century. For many same-sex couples, marriage is a sought after designation because it is attached to notions of belonging and recognition within larger society. For Jews in particular same-sex marriage's challenge to religious understandings has encouraged leaders within the liberal movements of the tradition to tackle problematic texts and marriage theology that have inhibited the full inclusion of lesbian and gay couples. New interpretations have made room for same-sex weddings to occur more readily within a Jewish context although the issue of drawing attention to difference appears to vary depending on the existence of civil recognition. An examination of the elements and symbols associated with Jewish weddings reveal their ancient origins and malleability to fit into an egalitarian framework where both partners are considered equal subjects. In order to accommodate themes of same-sex love and justice within the ceremony itself, further innovations have been devised.

⁹⁸ Yoel Kahn, email correspondence, March 21, 2007.

While same-sex wedding ceremonies formulated in Canada lack distinct attention to the political or societal inequality of gays and lesbians, which are evident in U.S. accounts, their revolutionary status is worthy of consideration as this study moves into descriptions of lesbian weddings I attended in Toronto.

*I stand here in awe of this moment,
Surrounded by the love of those who celebrate this day with us.*⁹⁹

CHAPTER TWO: Three Traditional Lesbian Weddings

In Canada, where same-sex marriage is legal, weddings need not be acts of civil disobedience. While some liberal rabbis in this country disagree about whether these marriages are *kiddushin* in the strict sense of Jewish law, many are willing to officiate at weddings as they would for an opposite sex couple. My research revealed at least nine Reform rabbis and one Reconstructionist in the Toronto area are willing to officiate at same sex weddings, although many have not yet had the opportunity to do so.¹⁰⁰

What follows are descriptions from three wedding ceremonies I attended during the summer and fall of 2006 — one year after the federal laws were passed granting equal marriage to same-sex couples and several weeks before the debate about it was put to rest in the House of Commons. These weddings illustrate the variety of choices available to Jews living in a large, multicultural city such as Toronto. I begin with the most traditionally recognizable ceremony and then move to variations that demonstrate both the fluidity and continuity of traditional symbols and ritual action. I am intentionally withholding personal details about the individuals involved until the following chapter in order to highlight context and performance. Descriptions are compiled from my own observations, scripts of the proceedings, photographs, audio recordings, and videotapes.

⁹⁹ Adrienne Blenman (Adira), personal vows from her wedding, 2004. Used by permission.

¹⁰⁰ The general Toronto area, or GTA consists of the City of Toronto and four regional municipalities covering more than seven thousand square kilometers. From city of Toronto website: http://www.toronto.ca/toronto_facts/geography.htm and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater_Toronto_Area (retrieved 5/19/07). My initial contact with Toronto rabbis allowed me to glimpse the willingness of clergy to perform these weddings and also the lack of bookings they had for them in the time period I was conducting my fieldwork.

In sections where liturgical or ritual formulae have been altered significantly, I have provided comments in footnotes so as not to interfere with the flow of the narrative.

Alisa and Michelle

Alisa and Michelle were married on a hot and muggy August afternoon in the chapel of an established Reform synagogue in central Toronto that recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. With more than two thousand members and four rabbis, Temple Sinai is the second largest liberal congregation in the Toronto area. It houses a religious school, a gift shop, small museum, two reception halls, meeting rooms, administrative offices and a beautiful sanctuary that seats almost four hundred worshippers. The air conditioning was a relief when guests arrived in the spacious foyer of the sprawling building after passing the security guard at the door. As people assembled and greeted each other, they were given a scroll, tied with an organza ribbon, that outlined the afternoon's proceedings. The chapel is an intimate rectangular space in the heart of the synagogue complex, warmly decorated with large colourful paintings of Hebrew scripture. Along the west-facing wall, plaques of remembrance hung on a panel for deceased temple members, and set away from the east wall, there was the *Aron Kodesh*, the ark that houses the Torah scrolls. The chamber was constructed of smoked glass and wood so that the decorated coverings on the scriptures were subtly visible. Rows of wooden pews were situated on three sides facing the ark with aisles leading out to doors at opposite ends of the chapel. The table, or the *bima*, in front of the ark, was constructed of dark wood with silver carvings of grapes inlaid on its facing. The *bima* was covered with a delicate lace cloth and held a bottle of wine, two silver goblets, candles with holders, a folded prayer shawl, or *tallit*, and two glasses wrapped in white linen napkins. The *chuppah*, a large, embroidered tapestry,

hung in a diagonal slope –the high end attached to the ceiling and the low end to the top of the Torah ark so that it covered the space over the *bima*.

About seventy guests slowly took their seats while a pianist softly played a traditional Hebrew melody. There were mostly adults in attendance dressed in conservative, even formal attire. Several individuals appeared to be of senior age. Some men, and a few women, had placed a skullcap, or *kippah*, on their heads, as is tradition in a Jewish place of worship. Many of the guests appeared to be opposite-sex married couples although a greater number of women than men were present. As the music changed, the chatter died down and the rabbi and cantor entered the chapel taking their place behind the table in front of the ark signaling that the ceremony had begun.

Alisa and Michele entered the chapel next, at the same time, through separate doors at opposite ends of the room. Both were holding identical bouquets of orange and white calla lilies accented with soft greenery. Alisa was dressed in an ivory mid-length linen dress with a bright green and gold patterned silk shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Her lightly made up face looked fresh and happy, albeit a little nervous, as she walked slowly toward the *bima* in shoes that matched the green of her shawl. Michelle was wearing cream coloured slacks and a soft pink brocade jacket accented with a darker pink and green beaded corsage on her lapel. She too was smiling nervously as she walked toward her partner under the wedding canopy.

As the women arrived under the *chuppah*, Michelle stood as Alisa walked around her three times. When she was done, Alisa waited as Michelle walked around her. Finally, holding hands, the two women walked in one circle together until they were side by side in front the rabbi and cantor. The rabbi then welcomed all who had gathered for

this special occasion with a Hebrew blessing in honour of the wedding partners and those assembled in “this house of God.” Before proceeding with the ceremony, the rabbi explained the significance of the *chuppah*. She emphasized that God’s presence is felt most deeply beneath it, resembling, she said, “the tent of Abraham and Sarah, which was open to family and friends and those in need of hospitality and assistance.” The rabbi also recalled the memories of loved ones whose presence was keenly felt even in their absence.

The ceremony then turned to the lighting of candles and several explanations were offered. First, as a harkening to the custom of lighting Shabbat candles the practice was said to unite Jews across the world and through history. The lighting of candles was also cited as a symbol of remembrance for the dead.¹⁰¹ Quoting the Baal Shem Tov, a seventeenth century Jewish mystic, the rabbi then read the following words as an illustration of how lighting a flame unites two souls:

From every human being there rises a light that reaches straight to heaven.
And when two souls that are destined to be together find each other,
their streams of light flow together, and a single brighter light
goes forth from their united being.

Alisa and Michelle then each lit a candle, purchased especially for this occasion in the ancient city of Safed in Israel, and placed them in holders back on the table. The candle lighting was followed by a few moments of silent prayer and reflection, which lead to the sanctification of the first cup of wine in celebration of the *birkhat erusin*, or the betrothal blessing. The rabbi recalled ancient times when this part of the ceremony was separate – citing historical conditions that eventually merged two parts into one. Wine was poured

¹⁰¹ Note the historical connection to Jewish rites of mourning. It is also customary to light a candle at the anniversary of a loved one’s death, also called a *yahrtzeit*.

into a single goblet, the traditional Hebrew blessing over wine was recited, and each woman drank.¹⁰² At this point the rabbi recited an additional blessing calling attention to the holiness inherent in committing oneself to another and the couple's potential to enrich not only their families, but also "the whole household of Israel."¹⁰³

The betrothal segment of the ceremony continued with the customary exchange of rings explained in the following way: "A circle is the symbol of wholeness and perfection. You give and receive rings in the hope that you will always share an unbroken circle of love and life together." As each woman placed a ring on the other's finger she repeated after the rabbi, in Hebrew, this declaration to her partner: "You are consecrated to me by this ring according to the traditions and heritage of the Jewish people."¹⁰⁴ In addition, both Alisa and Michelle recited a line from the biblical Song of Songs in Hebrew (6:3): "I am my beloved, I trust that my beloved is for me."¹⁰⁵ To conclude the ring ceremony the rabbi cited the mystical text of the *Zohar*, which suggests that married couples as they stand under the *chuppah* reveal the divine spark in each other.¹⁰⁶

Because the *ketubah* was signed and explained in a short, intimate ceremony in the rabbi's study prior to the wedding, the customary reading of the text was omitted from the proceedings. As the wedding made a transition to the second half of the ceremony, the Seven Blessings were introduced as a mystical combination representing "a sacred number of blessings that surround the couple." The first four blessings extol the

¹⁰² The English translation: We praise You, our Eternal God, who creates the fruit of the vine.

¹⁰³ By the household of Israel, the rabbi is referring to the Jewish people as a united whole.

¹⁰⁴ I noticed a significant language change in this portion of the ceremony. An adaptation was recited based on the original formula for *kiddushin*, which translates to: "You are consecrated to me according the Laws of Moses and the people of Israel." Because this is a same-sex wedding and departs from codified Jewish law, a change in language was made. Some rabbis maintain that the word *kiddushin* is applicable to same-sex couples and use the traditional blessing of sanctification for each partner (Gottlieb, Friedman). Others do not and this remains a source of debate among them.

¹⁰⁵ A translation of the Hebrew: *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*.

¹⁰⁶ The original text states that the bride reveals the divine in the groom as the groom reveals the divine in the bride. The gender complementarity of this citation necessarily had to be obscured.

wholeness of God's creation and the seven days it took to make the world. Two of the blessings focus on the happiness of the marriage partners and the last on the restoration of wholeness and peace to the world.¹⁰⁷ Even for those unfamiliar with a Jewish ceremony and no knowledge of the Hebrew language, the *Sheva Brachot* when chanted by a cantor is clearly the liturgical high point of the ceremony. Taking about ten minutes to complete, the ancient words and distinctive melody of these blessings are the hallmark of a traditional Jewish wedding. The only change noticeable to the trained ear was the alteration in language from bride and groom to "loving friends."¹⁰⁸ After the *Sheva Brachot* were complete, Alisa and Michelle drank the second cup of wine.

In the segment following the Seven Blessings, the rabbi asked Alisa and Michelle to face one another. She then wrapped a *tallit*, or prayer shawl, around them before offering her wishes to the newly married couple. The *tallit*, was purchased especially for the wedding on Alisa and Michelle's recent trip to Israel. It was made of silk and painted with a rainbow of colours.¹⁰⁹ At what was the most intimate part of the ceremony, the rabbi recited the following blessing translated from Talmudic literature:

May you live to see your world fulfilled,
 May your destiny be for worlds yet to come,
 May you trust in generations past and yet to be,
 May your hearts be filled with intuition, your words with insight,
 May songs of praise be on your tongue,
 And your vision on a straight path before you,
 May your eyes shine with the light of holy words,
 And your face reflect the glory of heaven.

¹⁰⁷ Originally this seventh blessing referred to Psalm 126:1 and prophetic writings calling for the return of the Jewish exiles to Jerusalem to rebuild the destroyed Temple in Messianic times.

¹⁰⁸ Those unfamiliar with Hebrew would not have noticed a difference as the blessings were not translated into English.

¹⁰⁹ This practice has become popular in Reform Jewish weddings. It dates back to the thirteenth century when the groom would cover his bride's head with his prayer shawl in what was likely an early rendition of the freestanding chuppah (Marcus 163).

Many were deeply moved by this portion of the ceremony. Several people seated near me had tears in their eyes. I heard audible sniffing and people behind me reaching for a tissue. As I looked across the room, I noticed that some appeared uncomfortable and even averted their eyes from the two women wrapped together in an object of Jewish prayer. To me, the moment was impressive because it signified the legitimacy of Alisa and Michelle's relationship both as a legally married couple and as two Jews connected to the evolving history and significance of the Jewish people.

In the final part of Alisa and Michelle's wedding the rabbi placed her hands on the shoulders of both women and recited the ancient words of the Priestly Blessing that is customary to bestow on those who have reached a life cycle change. After she spoke the words in Hebrew, the rabbi translated them in English: "May God bless you and keep you. May God's presence shine upon you and be gracious to you. May God's presence be with you and give you peace." Everyone in the chapel completed the blessing together by saying, "Amen." The Priestly Blessing was followed by a Hebrew song for peace, which was especially poignant, given that Israel was in the midst of a military conflict in Lebanon.

As the two glasses wrapped in linen napkins were placed at the foot of each woman, the rabbi spoke of being mindful that all joyous occasions coexist with brokenness in the world. She reminded those present to be aware of everyone's responsibility to help repair the world as the shattering of the glass is heard.¹¹⁰ With that, both women stomped on their wrapped bundles, and as they kissed, the assembled guests shouted a hearty "*Mazel Tov!*" The cantor began singing a lively Hebrew song of blessing

¹¹⁰ Recalling the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem was not mentioned nor was there an emphasis on injustice or liberation.

and good luck, others joined in enthusiastically and several people got up to dance forming a circle around the happy couple. Even Michelle's ninety-seven year old grandmother joined in the celebration.¹¹¹ Following the ceremony the guests made their way to an elegantly decorated reception hall where they enjoyed a festive meal in honour of the newly married women. Several days later, Alisa and Michelle left on their honeymoon cruise to Scandinavia.

Hila and Natasha

Hila and Natasha were legally married at city hall several weeks before their Jewish wedding ceremony at the Ward Island Clubhouse – a twenty-minute ferry ride across the Toronto harbour. It was a mild fall evening in mid-October when about thirty guests boarded the flat watercraft, sated from a festive restaurant meal on the mainland. They were accompanied by about fifty other passengers, mostly island residents, traveling with their bags, bikes and strollers heading home at the end of the weekend. I was sitting in one of the long passenger compartments with Aviva Goldberg, the woman hired to conduct Hila and Natasha's wedding service. Aviva is a professor of Religion and Women's Studies at a Toronto University and the spiritual leader of a downtown, unaffiliated synagogue. Hila's aunt approached her a few weeks earlier and asked if she would officiate at a ceremony for two women. Although not a rabbi, Aviva has been a ritual facilitator at same-sex life cycle events since the early nineties. She has officiated at lesbian commitment ceremonies, funerals for gay and lesbian Jews, Jewish baby namings, and Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Michelle's grandmother passed away only a few months after the wedding.

¹¹² A baby naming ceremony is a ritual developed for baby girls that publicly welcomes them into the covenant of the Jewish people. A Bar or Bat Mitzvah is a coming of age ceremony marking a child's full inclusion into the Jewish

As the ferry pulled away from the Toronto docks, a quick scan of the passengers indicated to me who were likely Hila and Natasha's wedding guests. Several people seated next to us were dressed in conservative and formal attire. Most were of middle age or older and were speaking Hebrew to each other. I had heard that a number of Hila's family had made the trip from Israel to be at the wedding. Some guests, of a much younger generation, were interacting in English and much more enthusiastically. Many were sporting cropped hairstyles in vivid colours, face and body piercings, and ample tattoos. There were even a few who took up the suggestion on the wedding invitation of coming in costume. One young woman with straggly white hair was wearing a top hat and tails. Her face was painted a ghostly white except for her eyes, which were shaded black. Two heavy young women wearing striped mini skirts and fishnet stockings were standing close to the door, their bright, contrasting heads were locked in multiple kisses that other passengers were trying not to notice. Amidst the celebrants old and young, conservative and alternative, Aviva and I were feeling a little awkward. Neither of us knew a soul. Aviva was a little nervous about officiating at this ceremony. She barely had a chance to meet Hila and Natasha in the three weeks since they asked her to officiate. Five minutes into the trip across the water, the couple had not yet materialized. Hoping for the best, Aviva was consulting her liturgy manual to review the prayers for the ceremony. At that moment, a woman in her late forties seated next to me with dark red curly hair and thick green plastic rimmed glasses leaned over and said to us, "Excuse me, I don't mean to be rude but I'm Jewish and I have been living on this island for twenty

community at age 12 (for girls) or 13 (for boys) when she or he is called to read from the Torah for the first time in front of the congregation.

years. I have never seen anyone read a Hebrew book on the ferry before. I'm curious, are you a rabbi?"

After I jokingly replied that we were missionaries, Aviva explained that she was going to officiate at a wedding for two women at the Island clubhouse. Upon hearing this, the woman paused for a moment, and then seemed to suggest that the wedding was in a secluded location as a way to hide from prying eyes. "Is this hard on the family?" she asked both with levity and compassion. In response, Aviva looked over at a well-dressed couple near the door to the passenger galley, and said, "You can ask them, they're sitting across from you." Before the surprised woman could respond, Hila and Natasha, entered the narrow passenger area and sat on the bench directly across from us to go over last minute arrangements with their officiant. Hila, a soft-featured woman with a strong and confident frame had long brown hair, pulled gently away from her face. Her dark eyes were earnest with concern about making sure all of the details of the ceremony were under control. Natasha, six months pregnant, had a bad cold. Her nose looked red and sore but she seemed in good spirits. Her blond hair was set in dozens of small braids intertwined with sparkly ribbon. Large round glasses magnified the shape of her eyes, which were focused on Aviva who was asking for the whereabouts of all the ritual items she was going to need. Shortly thereafter the blasting of the foghorn announced our arrival at Ward Island. Hila and Natasha reached for each other's hand, and together with Aviva, myself, the curious Jewish island resident, and the whole motley crew of wedding guests, we disembarked the ferry along with the other passengers.

The view of the Toronto skyline from the Island was extraordinary. It was an unusually mild and windless evening for the middle of October and many of us stopped

to take in the expanse of the city lights beyond the still water of the harbour. The clubhouse was a short walk from the ferry but the guests moved slowly, looking at the view and chatting with each other in English and Hebrew. When we arrived at the venue it was only fifteen minutes before the scheduled start of the ceremony. As we walked up the steps and through the double doors Aviva, who was scheduled to be back on the mainland in an hour, was concerned about the time.

Inside the clubhouse a group of people who had arrived early were still putting balloons along the windowsills and setting snacks out on long wooden tables. There were potato chips, cookies, peanuts and lollypops in brightly coloured disposable bowls. Another table was ready with big bottles of soft drinks, wine, and plastic cups. The clubhouse room was cavernous and mostly empty except for some folding chairs set up along the sides of the hall. Built in 1937, the space was originally used as an auditorium and dance hall. It had well-worn hardwood floors, high vaulted ceilings with heavy wooden beams, large casement windows, and a raised stage area where a fiddle player with thick braided pigtails was tuning up. Most of the wedding guests had arrived on the same ferry as Aviva and I, so the hall filled up quickly in a flurry of activity. Natasha raced off to a back room to change, Aviva was tracking down the ritual items she needed for the ceremony, coats were being strewn in big piles on an old bench near the door, and the older guests were finding places to sit where they would be sheltered from the night's chill coming through the open door. The sound of people talking reverberated loudly in the empty space and no one seemed to know when the wedding was going to begin or even where it was taking place. The only indication to me that a wedding was about to occur was the existence of a folded up *chuppah* leaning against the wall next to the stage.

It consisted of four long poles, two of them decorated branches from real trees with a corner of a large prayer shawl tied to the top of each one. People were talking and drinking. Several older guests and other well-dressed people were seated together in a cluster where the chairs were placed. Some were talking, others were not, one woman with a fur stole was chatting on her cell phone. Across the room the large, brightly coloured young women were kissing again near the beverage table while a very tall tattooed man in corduroy overalls, undershirt, and black knitted cap, was unpacking wine bottles. Another person of indiscernible gender, in a bright blue shirt and orange and brown argyle vest with a metal rod through the nose was walking around the hall videotaping. Standing next to me, near the snack table two grey-haired men in expensive suits nervously struck up a conversation with me about what a happy occasion it was.

Amidst the festivities and confusion, Aviva was anxious to get the ceremony started. She has a surprisingly commanding presence despite her small frame. Not much taller than five feet she wore a tailored grey wool pant suit and white blouse with a black leather *kippah* clipped securely to her short brown hair. Since there was no table on which to put the ritual items for the ceremony, she unfolded a chair on the empty floor space in front of the stage. On it she put two glasses wrapped in white tissue paper, tied with pink ribbon, along with her prayer book. Beneath the chair she placed a bottle of red wine and a single glass goblet. Once she established which four people would be holding the *chuppah* during the ceremony it was retrieved from its resting place and given to the attendants who were arranged in a square formation. They then expanded the prayer shawl over the chair with the ritual items. The attendants included the man with the knitted cap who was now wearing a lumberjack shirt, the person with the argyle sweater,

a young woman in dress pants whose long, blonde hair was arranged in a bun neatly behind her head, and a man in corduroy pants and a dress shirt. They jostled together for a few minutes until the *chuppah* was stable and in place.

From the stage, the fiddler who was now joined by an acoustic guitarist, began to play a Russian melody and slowly the chatter in the room began to subside. Aviva walked over to a side room where she gave the signal she was going to begin and then gestured to Hila's Israeli mother and father to join her under the *chuppah*. Natasha and Hila then emerged from the side room and walked to the *chuppah* with their arms linked together. Hila was wearing a shiny burgundy skirt with a black blouse and cardigan accented with pearls around her neck. Natasha was dressed in a full-length white wedding gown, fitted at the bodice with extra room to accommodate her round, pregnant belly. She wore a veil over her face and carried a woven basket filled with dried flowers.¹¹³ As the two women arrived under the wedding canopy, the music stopped playing. Stray guests finished up conversations and began to assemble and stand around the *chuppah*, shifting around here and there to find a good spot. Hila and Natasha stood facing each other while Aviva sang a traditional Hebrew prayer of welcome. Her commanding voice emerged deep within her diaphragm and easily projected across a room of this size. Once attention was focused on her and her clearly articulated words of prayer, Aviva officially welcomed the marriage partners, their friends, and their family to the wedding, explaining the significance of the *chuppah* as being a "uniquely holy place," one symbolic of the home that Hila and Natasha will build together:

¹¹³ At Orthodox and traditional weddings, the bride is veiled before the ceremony by her groom. This custom of *bedeken* was inspired by the biblical story of Jacob, who married the veiled Leah by mistake instead of his beloved Rachel. The practice of *bedeken* ensures the groom is marrying the right woman. (Eisenberg and Scolnic, 15). In my discussions with her, I learned that Natasha wished to adhere to this tradition (as much as possible) in her efforts to appear as a traditional bride.

Some say it is to remind us of Abraham and Sarah whose tent was open in all four directions, similarly we trust that Hila and Natasha's home will be welcoming to all who enter it.

Aviva made only one remark as to the same gender of the marriage partners, by calling them "two brides" who wished to have their ceremony as "traditional as possible." As Aviva explained the meaning of the *chuppah*, it occurred to me that many who were present had never seen a Jewish wedding ceremony, let alone a same-sex one, which explained why some were listening intently with smiles on their faces. Others, mostly older men, were standing on the periphery of the circle not seeming to pay close attention to the ritual action.

The service began with the Hebrew blessing over wine. Aviva then passed the glass to Hila who took the first drink. Hila then lifted Natasha's veil so that she could also drink from the cup.¹¹⁴ Since the women were married at city hall previously, both were already wearing wedding bands. However, in keeping with the Jewish custom of exchanging an article of value, the women had a gift for one another. At this portion of the ceremony Natasha reached into her basket and presented Hila with a bracelet while Hila gave Natasha a small gift-wrapped teddy bear. After the exchange of gifts, the women were asked to hold hands and repeat an adapted version of the betrothal blessing sanctifying each other according to the "customs of the people of Israel."¹¹⁵ Because the *ketubah* was signed prior to the ceremony, it was not read as a way to transition into the second half. Instead, Aviva introduced the Seven Blessings and offered her personal remarks for the couple's well being:

¹¹⁴ In an opposite-sex wedding the groom takes the first sip of wine, then the bride's veil is lifted so she can also drink.

¹¹⁵ As in Alisa and Michelle's wedding, the traditional prayer was altered from "You are sanctified to me according to the Laws of Moses and the people of Israel" because it was felt by the officiant that asserting Jewish legal sanction would not be accurate. This is a view that is debated among rabbis who preside over same-sex weddings.

May your home be one of continued love and respect, may you bring up your children with pride and a sense of the beauty and significance of the Jewish tradition, which you both hold so dear.

She then made reference to the mystical meaning behind the *Sheva Brachot*, suggesting that the number seven in a wedding symbolizes seven shells of solitude that surround each wedding partner. According to the *kabbalists*, or ancient Jewish mystics, when the blessings are recited each of the shells softens so that two souls may encompass each other by mutual love and understanding. Aviva then recited the blessings in Hebrew with appropriate changes to the language incorporating two brides.¹¹⁶ Without the aid of a cantorial soloist, the delivery of these blessings was swift and lacked an emotional quality. However, the familiarity of the Hebrew words appeared to have significance for Hila and Natasha who looked deeply into each other's eyes during this part of the ceremony. When the blessings were completed, each woman drank from the second cup of wine.

Nearing the end of the ceremony, the wrapped glasses were placed at the foot of each woman. Aviva reminded the guests that the breaking of glass is symbolic of remembering the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and also that life brings both joy and sadness.¹¹⁷ After reciting the Priestly Blessing in Hebrew, the gathered guests repeated "Amen." Then Hila and Natasha stomped on their glasses and kissed each other to shouts of *Mazel Tov* and whistling and cheers.

With the ceremony complete, the music began to play. The *chuppah* was removed and everyone began to dance in a circle according to Israeli folk custom. As the

¹¹⁶ The couple wished to be referred to as "brides" both in English and Hebrew. Although this wedding appears to be extremely alternative, in many ways, it was the most traditional.

¹¹⁷ Again, reference to the destruction of the Temple is the most traditional interpretation of this rite. No new formulations were incorporated.

celebration continued Aviva and I made a discreet and hasty retreat just in time to catch the next ferry back to the mainland. Hila and Natasha had a short honeymoon on the island in a cabin that friends had rented them as a gift for their wedding night.

Naomi and Chris

“Naomi” and “Chris” were married on a blustery and rain-soaked Sunday afternoon in the ballroom of a luxury downtown hotel. Their ceremony was the culmination of a weekend-long celebration including a lively Saturday night reception at a trendy shoe museum. Most traveled from the Eastern United States, while some came from as far away as California. Naomi and Chris are from Washington DC. They insisted on a Canadian wedding because they wanted their union to be legal as well as Jewish. As an inter-faith couple, they hired a Secular Humanist rabbi who regularly adapts Jewish wedding ceremonies for partners from different religious backgrounds.¹¹⁸ Instead of including prayers or blessings, secular humanist rituals emphasize individuality, personal responsibility, and mutual respect.

When I arrived at the entrance to the Royal Sutton ballroom, a well-dressed man greeted me with a wedding program that matched Naomi and Chris’s invitation. It was a two-layered booklet with the order of events printed on the inside and a faded image of a maple leaf in the background. The cover was made of delicate hand-made paper in deep burgundy inlaid with flecks of natural fiber and another small gilded leaf. The paneled ballroom was elegant and spacious with a classic European feel. Square mirrored pillars were positioned throughout the wide room, which featured a grand piano at the far end. Along the walls there were paintings of rural European life hung in ornate golden frames,

¹¹⁸ In the city of Toronto, neither Reform nor Reconstructionist rabbis will officiate at a marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew, regardless of gender. The non-Jew must first convert to Judaism, which takes at least ten months.

the colours of which complemented the richly patterned carpet. The ceiling had three large domes housing exquisite crystal chandeliers. Beneath the centre one, on a rectangular riser, stood a large freestanding *chuppah*. An abundance of silky white fabric was draped delicately over the four poles, which were covered in thick green vines accented with fall leaves and yellowy orange roses. Each pole was set into a narrow black ceramic pot that matched the colour of the riser. Beneath the *chuppah* there was a small round table layered with white linen cloth that reached to the floor. On the table was a crystal decanter filled with white wine beside two silver cups that formed the shape of a heart. Next to the wine there stood a large, thick candle placed in a raised crystal holder, a thin, braided candle surrounded by two white tapers set in small glass holders, and a wine glass wrapped in a linen napkin. Situated just behind the table was a black music stand. Two rows of soft beige chairs, enough for around 150 guests, were positioned on either side of the *chuppah* adjacent to the long walls.

As guests were arriving, a musician began playing on the grand piano. I noticed that most people were adults of varying ages although some children and even a couple of babies were present. The attendees appeared to be in traditional family constellations and all were dressed in conservative and formal attire. After the wedding planner and her assistant ensured that all was in order for the ceremony to begin, they left the room and the piano player, now joined by a trumpeter, began to play a classical melody marking the commencement of the ceremony and the processional.

The rabbi was the first to enter. She was a short, slender woman in her late fifties with shoulder length grey hair and glasses.¹¹⁹ Upon arriving under the *chuppah* she lit the large, thick candle, then took her place behind the musician's stand as the rest of the wedding party entered the ballroom. First came the four *chuppah* pole attendants, then two "best dames" followed by two "best men." Chris was the next to enter, accompanied by her Catholic father who walked her to the *chuppah* and then took his seat in the front row. Chris is a tall, substantially sized woman with short brown hair and glasses. She has a gentle face and a smile that was simply beaming with joy and warmth. She was wearing a tailor-made taupe pantsuit made of silk, and on the lapel of her long jacket, there was a delicate corsage of dried and fresh flowers. Naomi was the next to enter; her arms linked with both of her smiling parents. She is about a head shorter than Chris, with a medium frame and shoulder length light brown hair. Naomi was wearing a fitted dress with a V neckline and a gently flared skirt, which was made of the same fabric as Chris's ensemble only in a deep, burgundy colour. She carried a bouquet of flowers that matched the corsage on Chris's lapel. Naomi somberly escorted her parents to their seats in the front row and then joined her partner under the *chuppah* along with the rest of the wedding party.

The rabbi began the ceremony with words of welcome to friends and family. She spoke in a warm, velvety tone, reading each sentence from her script with great care and measured accuracy into her cordless lapel microphone. In language that emphasized secular values, the rabbi asserted that Naomi and Chris had chosen to share their love and

¹¹⁹ Rabbis in the Secular Humanist movement do not undergo the five years of academic training required by clergy in both the Reform and Reconstructionist movements. This particular individual is the first such ordained rabbi in Canada. She trained as a psychotherapist and still advertises her services for counseling. In a personal interview, it was estimated that she performs between 100 and 120 weddings per year and approximately 80% of those are for intermarried couples (Eva Goldfinger from personal interview November 23, 2006).

lives together while supporting one another's individual goals. In a brief moment that called attention to their gender, she highlighted the legality of their marriage as being a testament that, "in a few countries at least, the world is becoming a more ethical and loving place." The next part of the service featured the singing of Burt Bacharach's *That's What Friends Are For* by two close friends of Naomi and Chris who stepped up to a microphone behind the music stand. People seemed very moved by this "gift of song," which preceded the official opening of the ceremony when the rabbi stressed the importance of friendship and emotional intimacy and the significance of the *chuppah*.

The rabbi explained the wedding canopy as symbolizing the home that Naomi and Chris will build together. "Marriage is like a home without walls," she lilted. "Open to the wayward winds that toss you about, but open also to the warmth and healing rays of the sun." She then remarked on the *chuppah's* ancient connection to the "legend" of the tent of Abraham and Sarah, which was a sign of hospitality to weary travelers and those in need. In extending this theme, the rabbi wished for Naomi and Chris that their home be open to the "spiritual potential in all life," and to be a place where "seasonal festivals and important milestones are celebrated with family and friends."¹²⁰ Lastly, the rabbi affirmed Naomi and Chris's pledge to make their home a place filled with a "reverence for learning, loving, and creativity," where building a strong family would remain a priority.

The next part of the ceremony featured the lighting of candles. The rabbi referred to the large "heritage candle" she lit before the ceremony, explaining that the flame represents the "love, enlightenment, memory, and ethical values passed down from

¹²⁰ Note these are wishes and not blessings. There is purposely no mention of God.

generation to generation,” calling particular attention to Chris’s late mother who died nine years ago. Naomi and Chris were then asked to each light a taper from the heritage candle and then to take those candles to light the taller, braided candle. The rabbi offered the following explanation: ¹²¹

When two people decide to join their lives, they bring together all that they were and are. Once together however, the potential of each to blossom to the fullness of her promise, grows dramatically. . . . Note how the light of your love and spirits is joined in a single flame that is stronger and brighter than your individual flames combined. ¹²²

During the exchange of vows and rings that followed, Naomi and Chris were asked to face each other and hold hands. The rabbi then asked them: “Do you come of your own free will and without reservation to share your lives in marriage during painful as well as joyous times?” The women were asked to respond with “We do.” In a similar fashion, they were asked to respond separately to the question: “Do you accept each other in equality, as best friends, lovers and spouses... to fulfill each other’s personal dreams?” ¹²³ They each answered, “I do.”

At this most somber and serious segment of the ceremony, loud sounds were heard from beyond the adjoining wall where there was obviously a kitchen in full swing. The clanging of dishes and the dropping of tableware were competing with the ritual action and obviously disrupting the attention of some of the guests. Despite the noise, the ceremony continued with the exchange of rings.

¹²¹ This braided candle is called a *havdalah* candle, traditionally lit at the end of Shabbat as part of a special service. Its Hebrew name and significance are not mentioned in this ceremony.

¹²² Note the resemblance to the Baal Shem Tov passage recited at Alisa and Michelle’s wedding: “From every human being there rises a light that reaches straight to heaven. And when two souls that are destined to be together find each other, their streams of light flow together, and a single brighter light goes forth from their united being.” Because of its reference to heaven, the language is dramatically restructured but its intention remains.

¹²³ Note that the formula for vows here closely resembles the structure used in most Secular and Christian weddings. This kind of responsive vow is not often a part of Jewish ceremonies because the betrothal blessing is recited in its place.

After explaining that a circle is the symbol of continuity, security, and harmony, each woman placed a ring on the other's finger speaking these identical words to each other: "With this ring we are united, in love and loyalty."¹²⁴ The rabbi then referred to the *ketubah* signing that took place prior to the ceremony where both women committed to their marriage contract "in accordance with Jewish tradition." As the sound of piano music played in the background the contents of Naomi and Chris's *ketubah* were read. It was highlighted that the women wrote the document themselves with great care and intentionality.¹²⁵

To seal the vows, the first glass of wine was poured from the crystal decanter into the silver goblets. As a way to enter into a secularized rendition of the Seven Blessings, or *Sheva Brachot*, the rabbi explained that wine is the "universal symbol of joy and life." She characterized the Seven Blessings as traditional at Jewish weddings in expressing joy, hopes, and blessings for the couple.¹²⁶ Two women were asked to approach the music stand. One woman lifted the glass of wine while she read the blessings in Hebrew. The other translated them in English.¹²⁷ After the blessings were recited Naomi and Chris each drank from their separate cups of wine while the rabbi said: "Although you are two separate individuals and will continue to be so after your wedding, you have willingly chosen to seek and build happiness together. Raise your cup therefore in a toast to a

¹²⁴ Note the similarity of the Jewish betrothal blessing formula: With this ring you are sanctified to me according to the Laws of Moses and the people of Israel." For theological reasons the traditional elements of this blessing are obscured.

¹²⁵ For the contents of this document, please see Appendix 2-1.

¹²⁶ This explanation omits the centrality of God in these blessings. Naomi and Chris insisted on including these even though they are generally not recited at Secular Humanist weddings.

¹²⁷ Because the version of the Seven Blessings used here omits the name of God they only barely resemble the original form. This was the only time during the ceremony where Hebrew was spoken. See Appendix 1-3 for full text.

lasting and fulfilling marriage.”¹²⁸ Next, the women were asked to link arms and drink again, this time from each other’s cup as a way to symbolize the sharing of their lives.

As the ceremony approached its conclusion the rabbi introduced the custom of breaking a glass at a Jewish wedding. “The world is far from perfect,” she intoned. “It is only through the work of *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, that the world can become a better place for everyone.” The rabbi remarked that the breaking of the glass could be interpreted as a “breaking down of barriers in order to create a world of peace, respect, and unity.” Before she placed the wrapped glass at Naomi and Chris’s feet, the rabbi pronounced that their marriage is valid and binding according to the laws of the Province of Ontario and the principles of Humanistic Judaism. She gave the women some final wishes¹²⁹ before the two of them turned, faced their guests, and stomped on the glass together with their inside feet. Shouts of *Mazel Tov* followed as the two women kissed. The piano began to play and Naomi and Chris left the ballroom for some time alone before joining their guests for a reception on the 33rd floor of the hotel. Naomi and Chris’s guests were treated to an exquisite luncheon featuring a live *klezmer* band and dancing.¹³⁰ Each of the beautifully decorated tables were named after Canadian provinces.

What is most obvious about these three lesbian weddings is their difference in setting, guest constellation, officiation, and religious content. As diverse as they were, all included similar ritual elements like the *chuppah*, the drinking of wine, a *ketubah*, the

¹²⁸ The standard Hebrew blessing for wine was not recited because it includes the name of God. The more innocuous term “toast” fits more into a secular framework of drinking wine.

¹²⁹ Note not the customary Priestly Blessing.

¹³⁰ *Klezmer* is traditional Eastern European Jewish dance music.

Seven Blessings and the breaking of a glass (see chart). All are evidence of the egalitarian precepts of liberal Judaism by incorporating gender inclusive language and the recognition of Jewish historical custom. What is noticeably absent from these weddings is any overt attention given to the sexuality of the marriage partners. Except for a brief sentence at the beginning of two of these ceremonies, the focus was placed solely on the couple's uniqueness as two equal subjects making a public commitment to each other, and sometimes in the presence of God. There was no evidence in the proceedings acknowledging or resisting patriarchal undertones inherent in the betrothal ritual. Additional readings that might have highlighted the same-sex nature of these unions were also not present. Creative elements were incorporated into the ceremonies, like the wrapping of the *tallit* around Alisa and Michelle, and the singing of *That's What Friends Are For* at Naomi and Chris's wedding but they were not associated with anything political or feminist. Even Hila and Natasha's ceremony, in which one partner wore a long, white wedding dress, was not subversive in calling attention to difference. Indeed, in terms of content, theirs was the most closely aligned with Jewish tradition.

With lack of legal discrimination it seems as though same-sex couples are less likely to call attention to themselves as different, especially when they seek inclusion within a traditional institution like marriage. Weddings are constructed and performed like any heterosexual wedding in a liberal Jewish context; drawing both on tradition and also the individuality of the participants involved. As we will see in the next chapter when the personal lives of these women are revealed, Jewish tradition is understood in many ways and the complexity of planning a lesbian Jewish wedding at a turning point in history has many twists and turns.

Comparison Chart of Three Weddings

This chart illustrates at a glance how each ceremony incorporates variations of cultural and traditional elements.

Wedding Elements	Alisa & Michelle	Hila & Natasha	Naomi & Chris
Location	Reform Synagogue	Toronto Island Clubhouse	Luxury Hotel Ballroom
Constellation of Guests	Mostly heterosexual Canadian Older (some kids) Christians and Jews	Many from Israel Older people from Toronto (some kids) Queer & Alternative communities Variety	Mostly Americans Mostly straight adults (some kids) Christians and Jews
Officiant	Reform Rabbi	Jewish Ritual Facilitator	Secular Humanist Rabbi
Circling	Yes	No	No
Ring Exchange	Yes	No (exchange of gifts)	Yes
Betrothal Blessing	Yes	Yes	No (Secular/Christian format for "I do" vows)
Wine Drinking	Yes	Yes	No (see below)
Ketubah Reading	No (signed and read before ceremony)	No (signed and read before ceremony)	Yes
Seven Blessings	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wine Drinking	Yes	Yes	Yes (twice after blessings)
Priestly Blessing (Benediction)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Breaking Glass	Yes (1 glass)	Yes (2 glasses)	Yes (1 glass)
Reception	Catered lunch in Synagogue social hall	Snacks at clubhouse	Catered lunch on 33 rd floor reception hall
Additional Elements	Candle lighting Tallit wrapping	No	Candle lighting Song by friends
Self-Conscious Elements	"special occasion"	"special wedding"	"ethical" laws of Canada referred to

*[The wedding is Jewish] because Jewish people are doing it.*¹³¹

CHAPTER THREE: Behind the Scenes

I have intentionally withheld the personal details of the lesbian couples involved in the above ceremonies as a way to highlight my focus on ritual performance and illustrate the consistency and fluidity inherent in egalitarian Jewish weddings. My strategy is to move from the general context of the wedding performance to the particularities of the marriage partners themselves in order to understand their motivations and unique struggles and triumphs. This chapter begins with an introduction to Alisa and Michelle, Hila and Natasha, and Naomi and Chris. Two additional couples, Adira and Lainie, as well as Michal and Leah, were married prior to the commencement of my field research and are introduced in this chapter as a way to add further texture to this study. My thematic analysis starts with introductions to the personal lives of participants in order to establish their histories, their cultural and religious backgrounds, and their motivations for seeking a legal marriage. As this chapter progresses, central themes that emerged from my interviews are discussed including legal empowerment, ritual equivalency, challenges and struggles behind the scenes, transformative effects, the significance of Jewish continuity, and elements of political activism.

Personal Backgrounds

Alisa and Michelle

I sat down to meet with Alisa and Michelle on the backyard deck of their attractive middle class back split home, on a sunny afternoon two days after their wedding. Their

¹³¹ Humanistic rabbi, Eva Goldfinger in response to my question about how secular humanist weddings can be Jewish in the absence of prayer and the recognition of God (from personal interview, November 23, 2006).

house is nestled in a well-established, predominantly Jewish neighbourhood in north Toronto where most of the homes are single-family dwellings with two car garages. The couple's two small dogs, Noodles and Nellie, greeted me upon my arrival and stopped barking only after I was well into the spacious foyer. Once the dogs settled down, Alisa and Michelle lead me through their house and into the back yard, which backed out onto a treed ravine. Goodies left over from the wedding were laid out on the glass patio table along with a pitcher of iced tea. After settling in and ensuring that the umbrella was shielding us all from the mid-day sun, and the dogs were contented in the shade chewing on their bones, I set up my equipment and began our interview.

I felt very comfortable with Alisa and Michelle almost from the moment I first met them at Starbucks near their home two weeks before to discuss their involvement in my project. Theirs was the first lesbian wedding I had the opportunity to attend as they responded to my request for participants shortly after I sent word out to Toronto rabbis about my research.¹³² Alisa is a forty-three-year old high school teacher in the public school system and Michelle is a forty-two-year old airline special services agent. The two have been together for eight years and have been active members of their Reform synagogue since their engagement.

Alisa was born and raised in a secular Jewish home, the same house, in fact, that she now owns with Michelle. As a child Alisa attended the Conservative synagogue in her neighbourhood and maintains a certain comfort level with their style of services even though she recognizes its inequities and sexism. When she and Michelle were first

¹³² I sent out letters to all of the Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis in the GTA in July, 2006 asking if they were officiating at any same-sex weddings in the coming months. Alisa and Michelle were the only couple to whom I was introduced despite the interest that rabbis showed in this project. Many responded to me with word that no same-sex marriages were booked.

engaged Alisa was hoping that the Conservative congregation she grew up with might accommodate their wedding. In the absence of their support, she maintained a commitment not to depart too far from the Judaism she was familiar with. Her needs entailed belonging to a congregation and having her ceremony officiated by an affiliated rabbi. While Alisa's ambivalence about religious practice was evident during our interview her identity as a Jew and convictions about its importance were unshakable.

Michelle converted to Judaism as an adult. Although she grew up Catholic, she had a number of Jewish friends and admitted she always wanted to convert. "When I was a kid I used to go to Holy Blossom with my friends. I'd sneak into the *shul* and they'd try to sneak out." Michelle even attended Hebrew classes when she was twelve but was told at the time she was too young for conversion. Once she had been involved with Alisa for a number of years she began the process of becoming a Jew within the Reform movement.

Alisa and Michelle's decision to get married was tied to politics. During the 2005 Canadian federal election campaign, then Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper promised to revisit the same-sex marriage issue if he were elected Prime Minister. To attract his right-leaning constituents, Harper suggested that his party could overturn the Liberal government's decision the previous summer to extend marriage rights to gay and lesbian couples by offering a free vote on the issue in the House of Commons. When Harper won the election and was sworn in as Prime Minister in February 2006, many same-sex couples feared their civil rights would be taken away. Not having an option to marry was simply unacceptable to Alisa and Michelle and the threat of losing their

freedom sparked their impromptu engagement. Even though initially marriage was not important to Michelle, she later reconsidered its significance:

It was an important statement for Alisa, and it actually turned out that it became important to me [even though] I didn't feel the need as much. Then when it looked like that option was going to be taken away, I became more adamant that I should have [the right to marry] too because I believe I'm like anybody else.

Marriage, to Alisa and Michelle, represented their equality with other couples. If the legal designation was not available both women agreed they would not have pursued a commitment ceremony as "second best." "Have you ever heard of a commitment ceremony for a straight couple?," Michelle remarked. "There's no such thing. So we don't believe it should be that way for us." And so, after a very informal decision to marry, which they both admit lacked a premeditated or romantic component, the two began planning their Jewish wedding as a way to commemorate and augment their legal union.

Hila and Natasha

I met Hila and Natasha at their downtown apartment almost a month after their October wedding ceremony on the Toronto Island. They live in a basement apartment far west of the downtown core in an older part of the city, a block away from the shoreline of Lake Ontario. Their densely populated neighbourhood features a mixture of historic and more modern architecture situated along the main road and a number of one-way streets lined with mature maple trees that were about to shed the last of their fall colours. It was a mild day for this late in the fall and so the sidewalks were busy with people of all ages and ethnicities out walking, pushing baby carriages and carrying grocery bags home.

I met Hila at the corner of her street and she escorted me around the back of her four-storey graffiti-covered building complex and down four steps to a narrow entranceway. Natasha greeted us at the door, which opened up to a small kitchen. I was taken to a small living room just beyond the kitchen, which faced the main street. It was pleasantly cozy and bright even though it was several feet below street level. I noticed many plants along the windowsill and hanging from the ceiling. There was a fish tank in one corner next to a guitar leaning against the wall. At the other corner of the room there was a packed, narrow bookshelf with what looked to be an ornately decorated accordion on top.¹³³

After offering me a choice of teas from a variety box from Israel, Hila and Natasha nestled into a well-worn, floral patterned fabric-covered couch while I sat across from them on a velvety recliner. The two women sat close to each other through the whole interview, often holding hands. Natasha's eight-year-old daughter, Sarah was out for the afternoon with her father and so the apartment was rather quiet except for the sound of traffic and those walking by on the sidewalk just beyond the window.

Hila is a thirty-two-year old Israeli citizen raised in a secular family in Tel Aviv. She has a number of family members living in the Toronto area and first met Natasha during a visit to the city in 2004 when she attended a cousin's same-sex wedding. Since that time, Hila has been allowed to stay in Canada on student and visitor's visas. In Israel Hila trained as a graphic artist and she is also a painter and an illustrator.¹³⁴ Unable to legally work in Canada, Hila has been involved in her art and looking after things at

¹³³ Natasha told me the instrument is called a *bayan*. The one she has belonged to her grandfather who was a magician in the Russian circus at the turn of the century. His wife, Natasha's grandmother, was a tightrope walker (from personal interview, November 4, 2006).

¹³⁴ Hila painted the artwork on her *ketubah*. Also, a number of her paintings are displayed in their apartment, including two watercolours in the kitchen.

home; caring for Sarah and getting ready for the new baby to arrive. When we met, Hila had begun the process of applying for landed immigrant status. The Hebrew language and Jewish culture were part of Hila's daily life in Israel even though neither was connected to religious practice. She, her family, community, and school would study and celebrate the Jewish holidays and never worked on the Sabbath. In Toronto, she told me, she misses the pervasiveness of Jewish culture and has struggled to find a place within the Jewish community that is not connected to synagogue attendance or religious observance.

Natasha is also thirty-two years old. At the time we met she was completing her fourth year of university and hoping to continue on at the graduate level. She was born in Russia and immigrated to Canada at the age of nine. In Russia, Natasha's family kept their religious identity secret due to fear of persecution. Once arriving in Toronto however, her mother and father moved to a Jewish neighbourhood and sent their daughter to an ultra Orthodox religious day school even though the family remained secular.¹³⁵ Often Natasha was in conflict with her non-observant parents because they did not acknowledge the holy days or maintain a kosher home. While she is not religious, Natasha identifies strongly with tradition and stays in contact with the Lubavitch rabbi from her school who is apparently aware of her recent marriage and the baby she is expecting.

Unlike Alisa and Michelle, Hila and Natasha's decision to marry was strikingly more pragmatic than political. In June 2006, after spending a year in Israel where Natasha was attending university, the couple returned to Canada. Three months earlier, Natasha

¹³⁵ According to Natasha, it is quite common for Russian immigrants who were denied the practice of their religion, to send their children to religious school as a way to reclaim their hidden heritage (11/4/06).

received artificial insemination at a Jerusalem hospital and became pregnant.¹³⁶ With a baby on the way and Hila's visitor's visa set to expire, the couple decided that marriage provided the best option for keeping the family together. For Hila, getting married in a legal or ritualized way was not a necessary symbol of her commitment. Marriage was simply not a priority until she realized it would have practical benefits:

To be married is to live with Natasha and take care of her, not to do the ceremony or the signature. But we thought *now*, getting married would help me stay here legally. In Israel we could have a big party but it wouldn't *mean* anything.

Two months after their arrival in Toronto, Hila and Natasha had a civil ceremony at city hall witnessed by a few friends. They always knew that a Jewish wedding ceremony would follow, and so, after arranging a time when Hila's family could make the trip to Toronto, they quickly began to plan the details.

Naomi and Chris

Naomi and Chris met with me on a rainy autumn morning at the home of a close family friend in the upscale Annex district of downtown Toronto. At ten in the morning the large Victorian house was alive with activity. As I arrived through the oak-paneled foyer, my senses were greeted by the sounds of laughter and the enticing aroma of baking and freshly brewed coffee. About twelve people were assembled in the richly decorated living and dining room. Some were just visiting while others, seated around the dining room table, chatted joyfully as they glued together the program booklets to be handed out at the wedding. Both women were extremely gracious to take the time to meet with me that morning. After having arrived in Toronto the day before they were busy receiving out of

¹³⁶ Hila and Natasha told me how easy it is for individuals to access fertility services at Israeli hospitals. They reported that they were asked very few questions and the process was easy and affordable (11/4/06).

town guests and making final arrangements for their wedding. Without further discussion we retreated to a sitting room and library just beyond the kitchen with a beautiful view of the garden still vibrant with late fall blooms. The room was warmly decorated in patterns of deep burgundies, browns, and greens. It featured three overstuffed chairs upholstered in brushed cotton that sat atop a lush woolen carpet. Throughout our interview Naomi and Chris were competing with the sounds of joyful reunions, spirited conversation, and the aggressive hiss of the nearby cappuccino maker. For the time being we were left undisturbed except for a few waves and blown kisses from the door. I was struck by how calm both women seemed to be in the midst of the revelry all around us. Despite the distractions, they offered me their complete attention and appeared enormously happy and respectful of each other as they thoughtfully responded to my questions.

Naomi is thirty-seven. She was born a Jew and raised in Berkeley, California by parents who are both academics and life-long social activists. Naomi is a professor of Women's Studies at a Washington DC university. Her father, with whom I spoke later that morning, provided useful insight about Naomi's upbringing. He was raised in an anti-religious communist household in Montreal, the son of poor immigrants from Poland. As a "red diaper baby" he admits that growing up in a Jewish neighbourhood was the height of "parody and satire." He laughingly remembered:

Even though Yiddish is my first language and I'm very culturally identified as a Jew, I have very little truck with religion. ... As people were going to synagogue when I was a kid, my father would say to me, 'on Saturday they go to [pray] and the rest of the week they exploit the workers.'

Much like her father, Naomi considers herself to be culturally, not religiously Jewish.

Naomi was raised in a secular community in Berkeley and associates Judaism with

celebrating the holidays with family, her love of learning, and the pursuit of social justice. She occasionally lights Shabbat candles on Friday nights and usually attends High Holy Day services once a year at various synagogues where she has “shopped around.”¹³⁷ Although her religious affiliation is limited, she admits an intention to raise her children with a “moral education” grounded in Jewish tradition.

Chris, also thirty-seven, grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. After deciding to change careers several years ago, she recently passed her bar exam and is employed as a public defender in a DC area law office. She was raised in a strict Catholic home and many of her family members remain devout. While Chris does not consider herself to be religious in any way, she respects the beliefs that much of her family adheres to and the memory of her mother who died nine years ago. Since being with Naomi for almost three years, she has been learning more about Judaism and has not ruled out the possibility of converting, especially if the couple has children.

For Naomi and Chris the decision to get married was both political and symbolic. Their engagement arose casually one night when Chris admitted she loved Naomi so much “she would marry her if she could.” After careful consideration they agreed to “really” get married and plan a wedding that was both legal and culturally recognizable. Chris asserted that obtaining an actual marriage license, even if outside her own country, would carry a lot of weight with her Catholic family, “The actual term of marriage, in my impression, will be taken more seriously by my family, which is one of the things that was important to me.” In addition, Chris admitted that her new career as a lawyer

¹³⁷ The High Holy Days are *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year followed ten days later by *Yom Kippur*, the Jewish Day of Atonement. It is customary for most Jews to attend synagogue services during this time even if they don't consider themselves to be observant the rest of the year.

requires that she attest to honesty and truthfulness, and so the symbolism of a legal marriage was important. Since Massachusetts is the only state that offers equal marriage rights to gay and lesbian residents, Naomi and Chris decided to come to Canada.¹³⁸

Although neither woman is religious in the practical sense, Naomi and Chris wanted to have a traditional ceremony as a way to bridge any discomfort felt by Chris's relatives. Because a Catholic wedding was not an option, the two decided to have a Jewish ceremony. After attending a cousin's wedding at a Reform synagogue, Naomi recognized that the ceremony had resonance for both of them: "It was traditional in a lot of ways and Chris was saying that she liked a lot of the elements, and since [Judaism] is my heritage we decided to go that way."

Having a Jewish wedding in Toronto however, proved to be a challenge for the couple. While several liberal rabbis in the Toronto area will officiate at same-sex weddings, virtually none within the Reform or Reconstructionist streams will perform an inter-faith marriage.¹³⁹ After emailing and calling several synagogues that turned them down they became frustrated and angry until one person finally said, "Oh, but have you looked at the Secular Humanists?" Shortly afterward they connected with a rabbi from the movement who happily agreed to work with them in planning an inter-faith wedding within a Jewish context.

Alisa and Michelle, Hila and Natasha, and Naomi and Chris are among five lesbian couples interviewed for this project. Two others, Adira and Lainie and Michal

¹³⁸ American citizens living outside the state of Massachusetts do not have access to legal same-sex marriage.

¹³⁹ In the United States it is not uncommon for Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis to officiate at an inter-marriage. I was told by many participants and rabbis that Toronto is very conservative in this regard.

and Leah were already married when I met them. Their ceremonies were officiated by the same Reform rabbi and videos I screened revealed similarities in liturgy and ritual action.

Adira and Lainie

Adira and Lainie were married on the Canadian Thanksgiving weekend in 2004, shortly after the Ontario marriage laws were extended to include same-sex couples. Their wedding took place in the party room of friend's condominium with close to seventy guests in attendance. Adira is a forty-two-year old social worker and a second-generation Canadian of Caribbean descent who converted to Judaism in her late thirties. Her Presbyterian mother raised her in a single parent household, although she strongly rebelled against the church from her early teens. During the process of conversion Adira encountered resistance not only from friends but also experienced racism and homophobia within the Jewish community.¹⁴⁰ Two years after becoming a Jew, Adira met Lainie at a *Tu B'Shevat Seder*, celebrating the Jewish new year of the trees, at a downtown community centre.

Lainie is a forty-one-year old psychotherapist and dance teacher. Her mother is a Holocaust survivor. She was born in the U.S. and raised in a liberal Jewish environment. At the age of eight, her father passed away and she, along with her mother and brother, moved to Toronto where she reluctantly attended a Reform synagogue. Although Lainie rejected religion as a young adult, she continued to celebrate the holidays with her family. Judaism became more important to her after having two children and separating from their non-Jewish father. Finding feminist approaches to understanding the tradition

¹⁴⁰ Adira is triply marginalized: as black woman who is also a lesbian and now a Jew.

through classes she enrolled in at a liberal Jewish learning centre assisted Lainie in finding ways to make Judaism relevant and meaningful in her life.

When Adira and Lainie had been together for three years, they decided to marry. Their priority was to have a Jewish ceremony, not necessarily the benefits of legal entitlements. “It was personal, it was spiritual, it was communal.” Lainie told me. “It wasn’t about making a political statement.” Liberal and feminist Judaism had become important to Adira and Lainie’s lives and they wanted to mark their commitment in a meaningful way. Because their public ceremony was precipitated by a need for community support and religious recognition the two did not wish to draw attention to themselves as the first Jewish lesbians married under the new laws. Lainie insisted: “I couldn’t have cared less about the law going through... If we would have been able to have just the Jewish ceremony without the civil we would have done that.” Their reform rabbi, a long-time advocate of equal marriage, was unwilling to officiate without legal sanction. When the laws were changed Adira and Lainie became the second Jewish same-sex couple in Ontario to take advantage of the new regulations.¹⁴¹ As a way to celebrate their marriage, the couple submitted their wedding photo for publication in the “Family Moments” section of the *Canadian Jewish News*, the country’s national community newspaper.¹⁴² I was introduced to them through an acquaintance and first interviewed them on their second anniversary. Adira and Lainie own a modest downtown home that

¹⁴¹ Many rabbis were unwilling to perform a Jewish marriage before the provincial laws changed in order to not put their licensing at risk. Adira and Lainie’s rabbi conducted a lesbian wedding prior to theirs, which was given attention and media coverage because it was a first.

¹⁴² The CJN is a national community newspaper that reports a national readership of more than 200,000. When I began my research and realized we had an acquaintance in common, I asked him to make an introduction.

they share with Lainie's two daughters. At the time I conducted our interviews the couple was in the process of adopting a child together.¹⁴³

Michal and Leah

Michal and Leah were married under the *chuppah* in a relative's garden on a spring afternoon in 2006 in front of eighty guests. Michal is a forty-three-year old computer consultant, born to Holocaust survivors and raised in an Orthodox home in Israel. After serving for three and a half years in the Israeli army, she moved to Toronto in her early twenties. All of her relatives still live in Jerusalem. Although Michal does not attend synagogue on a regular basis, she considers herself observant. She is guided by Jewish principles and ethical teachings, maintains a kosher home, and remains very close to her religious mother and sister despite their discomfort around her Jewish marriage to Leah.¹⁴⁴ Leah is a thirty-five-year old Technician Supervisor who grew up in Toronto in a moderately observant, conservative Jewish family. Although she does not consider herself to be religious, some members of Leah's large, extended family are Orthodox. Regardless of their affiliation, all of Leah's family have been supportive and accepting of her long-term relationship with and marriage to Michal. The two women have been together for twelve years and own a home in a middle class suburb of Toronto.

Unlike Adira and Lainie, Michal and Leah's decision to marry was directly tied to changes in Canadian politics. In this way they have a closer similarity to Alisa and Michelle who were motivated by Prime-Minister Stephen Harper's campaign promise to

¹⁴³ At the time of writing this, the couple was in the process of adopting a baby through the Children's Aid Society.

¹⁴⁴ When Michal and Leah visit Israel their relationship is acknowledged but family have requested that they do not share with others that they have been married in a Jewish ceremony.

revisit the issue of equal marriage once he was elected in 2005. Leah explained how legal marriage only mattered once there was a threat of losing her right:

When it first became legal [in Ontario] we thought, 'No, we don't need to get married,' because a lot of people were asking us for a long time. But when Harper was voted in, that's when Michal felt more of a need for us to do it.

The two remarked how uneventful their engagement was. "We were literally watching TV one night eating dinner," Leah told me. "Michal just turned to me and said, 'Do you want to get married?'" My response was, 'Yeah, okay.' There was no big fancy proposal."

Almost immediately after their impromptu engagement, questions arose about *how* the two were going to get married. Out of respect for her Orthodox family Michal was reluctant to pursue a religious wedding and initially envisioned only a city hall service. But as the process unfolded, the couple realized what they really wanted was a traditional Jewish ceremony. Because they intend to have children, the symbolism of starting a Jewish home under the *chuppah* was important in signifying to all who were present the foundation for their family.

Thematic Analysis

The women involved in this study clearly represent a wide range of religious, cultural, and economic backgrounds. Despite their differences, however, their decisions to get married, for the most part, were precipitated by the existence of legal entitlements followed by their sense of Jewish identity. While legal marriage was not a pre-requisite for all the women in this study, none of them had to contend with resisting state law that excluded them. Because attention needed not to be focused on legal inequality at wedding ceremonies, an apt starting point for my thematic analysis is in examining the significance of law and its potential for empowering participants.

Legal Empowerment

*I am getting married. It's not pretend, or the lesbian version.
I'm really getting married.*¹⁴⁵

Sociologist Kathleen Hull contends that the symbolism of law wields tremendous power in rendering the relationships of same-sex couples socially and morally equivalent to those of heterosexuals, even if the practical benefits of law remain a political goal for most same-sex couples in the United States.¹⁴⁶ Hull's assertion is demonstrated in Canada where lesbian and gay marriage really *is* legally equivalent to opposite-sex marriage. Supported by state law, Jewish same-sex couples may now proclaim, with more confidence, that their relationships are as equally worthy of inclusion in their religious communities as well. The wedding photo of Adira and Lainie in the *Canadian Jewish News* illustrates this. "I thought how I'd love to be a fly on the wall on some of those houses," Adira laughingly remembered as she thought of people seeing the picture of an inter-racial, married lesbian couple in the pages of a conservative newspaper. While it undoubtedly may have raised some eyebrows, the picture appeared shortly after new marriage legislation was passed in the province of Ontario. The legal status of this Jewish lesbian marriage warranted the photo's inclusion alongside other community social announcements. I suggest the support of state law facilitated greater receptivity in the community. It helped confirm that same-sex marriage is no longer an abstract concept to be debated but a reality to get used to.

Rabbi Michael Dolgin, the spiritual leader of a large Reform synagogue in Toronto, the second largest in Canada, affirms this view. While he admits his congregants

¹⁴⁵ Naomi (from personal interview October 20, 2006).

¹⁴⁶ Hull, 24

were divided over the same-sex marriage issue, he feels they were more receptive to discussing it once the laws were changed. He remarked:

It's amazing how much of an impact it had to be able to say to people, 'It's the law.' ... It's easier to focus on the religious issues when the society has done the political work.

After a series of debates, discussions, and educational programs about the religious aspects of Jewish marriage, Dolgin's congregation voted in favour of same-sex officiation at their synagogue. This "growth opportunity" was precipitated once the civil marriage laws were passed and two men – long-time members of the temple – approached Dolgin to officiate at their wedding.

For Michal, it was easier to enter into a religious ceremony knowing that the law supported her. Even though she wrestled with her own Orthodox understanding of Jewish marriage, simply having the right to say, "We're married" empowered her: "And we can say, 'wedding.' It's not a commitment ceremony. It's a wedding. We could say we're getting married and that was the best part. I loved saying that."

For Naomi and Chris, who live in the U.S., the value of a legal marriage seemed to supercede the significance of enacting a traditional wedding ceremony precisely because it was not recognized in the state where they live. Both women emphasized that really being "married" was worth crossing the border for because it reinforced their equivalency to heterosexual married couples. "My family will at least be able to see that I'm understanding this relationship in the same way they consider their marriages to be," Chris admitted, adding, "If it wasn't for the legalization aspect of it, we wouldn't be in Canada."

In a similar way, Ellen Lewin, a U.S. anthropologist, traveled to Toronto to legally marry her partner twelve years after their Jewish commitment ceremony in California. The significance of the event caught them by surprise: “Nothing prepared us for the emotional impact of having government officials process our paperwork,” she noted in an academic journal. “We were moved far more deeply than either of us expected; we came home [to the U.S.] feeling like we were really “married,” and that feeling has persisted.”¹⁴⁷

Whether or not law has symbolic or practical effects on same-sex couples, these few examples demonstrate that its presence facilitates feelings of acceptance within the larger community. For my participants, legal recognition was the starting place for making their marriages a reality. Commemorating the union in a meaningful way was often the next step in the process in which issues of equality were raised.

Ritual Equivalency

*We didn't want to create our own ceremony.
We wanted a Jewish ceremony.*¹⁴⁸

The existence of legal entitlements was a significant motivator for most of the couples in this study. Participants chose to have a Jewish wedding *because* they were able to have a legal marriage. As Michal aptly stated: “I think because we were going to be legally recognized we wanted to do it our way; the Jewish way. If it wasn't legal I don't think we would have went to that much trouble.” Since both civil and liberal religious authorities recognize their legitimacy, lesbians in Toronto may claim their Jewish marriages as equivalent to heterosexual ones without drawing attention to political oppression or their

¹⁴⁷ Lewin, “Why Marriage?” in *Anthropology News*, www.aaanet.org/press/an/0405if-comm3.htm (retrieved 2/22/07).

¹⁴⁸ Lainie (from personal interview, October 4, 2006).

difference as same-sex partners. It was clearly important to all of my participants not to depart from what they understood to be the standard ritual practice available for heterosexual couples.

The Toronto rabbis I spoke with were emphatic about the equivalency of same-sex ceremonies to other egalitarian weddings they perform, even if the main actors are different than what people are used to. Daniel Gottlieb, a Reform rabbi, has performed several weddings for lesbian and gay couples. He does not advocate for calling attention to difference and suggested that the power of performing a parallel ritual is that it helps facilitate acceptance of change. “In every single way it looks like a Jewish wedding,” he told me, adding:

People come to see two partners stand side by side facing the rabbi, and the *chazzan* chants the *brachot*, and they drink wine, and they smash the glass. ...If I thought I was doing something that was not equivalent to opposite-sex marriage, either I wouldn't do it or I wouldn't call it marriage.

Gottlieb insists on using the same liturgical formulation, including the declaration in Hebrew and English, that the couple is consecrated to each other “according to the laws of Moses and the people of Israel” in the betrothal segment of the ceremony. Although he acknowledges that some rabbis see this as a contentious decision, he understands it as an important component in asserting equivalency.¹⁴⁹ Gottlieb also refers to same-sex weddings as *kiddushin*, the holy and legal designation traditionally attributed to opposite sex couples:

¹⁴⁹ Among liberal rabbis who perform same-sex marriage there is no consensus as to whether or not this liturgical formula is appropriate for lesbian and gay couples. Rabbi Gottlieb is among those who do not change the language in any way. Because same-sex marriage departs from *halacha*, or Jewish law, other versions of this declaration have been devised, for example: “You are consecrated to me *before God and the spirit of our people*,” or “You are consecrated to me *according to the customs of the people of Israel*.”

For me what I'm performing is a Jewish marriage not a same-sex marriage. ... I don't believe in creating a whole liturgy, which is focused on the fact that these are same-sex couples. I think to do that we're saying we're doing something different and unique... that's not my approach. We're doing the same for them as we do for everyone because as human beings [lesbians and gays] are the same and entitled to the same *kiddushin*.

With the exception of minor language adjustments, the wedding service that Gottlieb delivers to lesbian and gay couples is virtually identical to those he provides for opposite sex partners. Rabbi Michael Dolgin also designates same-sex marriage as *kiddushin* as a sign of legitimacy and equivalence with other marriages:

What I do is *kiddushin*. Plainly put, if any egalitarian wedding is *kiddushin*, then the same-sex weddings that I do are *kiddushin* also. ... To say that same-sex weddings are not and that egalitarian weddings are is not intellectually honest in my opinion. ... I can't think of any Jewish reason to give it a different name unless I stopped calling what I do for everybody by the name of wedding or marriage.

Even though couples in this study may not have been aware of the theological nuances of Jewish marriage, the recognizability of their weddings as equivalent to others was among the highest of priorities. Hila's family traveled from Israel for her and Natasha's wedding. She wanted to demonstrate to them that she was not disrupting their traditional understanding of marriage:

To me [recognizability] mattered because I wanted my parents to see that I'm also having a Jewish wedding. I'm also like my sister. Even though she was marrying a man, it's no different. I felt that it would maybe make them feel that my relationship is also like any other and so is the wedding.

In a similar way, Chris intended that the performance of a wedding ceremony with Jewish symbols and secular elements would demonstrate the equivalency of her and Naomi's relationship to any other married couple:

We have as much as possible, with the rabbi we have, laid things out in what I would consider a very traditional ceremony. That was intentional

on my part to show my family that even though you see us as different, we're the same.

For all the couples involved in this project, the Jewish wedding with its familiar symbols was meant to assert same-ness rather than difference. Michelle explained it as a classic performance with a new flare:

The wedding had the same essence, the same feeling... That's why people felt so comfortable because it wasn't something big, bad and scary, it was something that they've seen before over and over, just with a slight twist.

For a couple like Adira and Lainie whose difference is also visible because of race, their Jewish wedding emphasized how seriously they took their relationship as Jews. Lainie admitted that Jewish continuity mattered a great deal to her family:

My family... really liked the idea that we were going to do something traditional because I haven't been the most traditional of people in my family. This [wedding] was something they could recognize.

It is clear that all the weddings in this study were meant to facilitate acceptance and stress the equivalency of same-sex love. Yet, to assume that weddings were always received in the way they were intended would be naïve. It is true that most of the elements and staging of these ceremonies were the same as any other liberal opposite-sex Jewish wedding, but the reality is that the central players *were* radically different. A change in ritual subjects renders the wedding unfamiliar, even if the script does not call attention to it.¹⁵⁰ In the weddings I observed, some guests appeared to be uncomfortable at moments during the ceremony while others seemed tremendously moved. While rabbis and couples may wish to assert sameness by adopting a recognizable ritual structure, not

¹⁵⁰ I was reminded of the 1960s sitcom *Bewitched* when the actor in the main character of Darren was switched midway through the series. It was impossible for the viewer not to notice the different performer, even though the character and story-line remained the same.

all agree that this is indeed effective in stemming the tide of discrimination and prejudice that exists beneath the surface.

“Rachel” is a Jewish lesbian in her fifties whom I consulted during the course of my research. She has been with her partner for eighteen years and raised two children with her, yet neither has a desire to marry. Adopting a more cynical approach, Rachel suggested that the discourse of acceptance and equality around same-sex marriage is suspect. A Jewish wedding for two lesbians may look the same in many respects, but the appropriation of ritual symbols and the heterosexist structure of marriage produces, in her view, a spectacle that will never be fully embraced:

Perhaps it is my bias, perhaps it is my internalized homophobia but my sense is that you have to be careful whom you choose to come to your commitment ceremony or wedding. I don't think it's as acceptable [as one might expect]. I think there are still people who say, 'Isn't this strange?' And one becomes a monkey in a zoo. I do not wish to be a monkey.”

While Rachel's comments contrast sharply with my other participants', I include them because they complicate the view that a lesbian wedding is understood by all to be fully equivalent to a heterosexual one. Many women in this study pointed to some level of drama behind the scenes of their wedding process, suggesting that the fissures of discrimination run deep despite the perception of institutional and cultural acceptance.

Behind the Scenes

*I didn't get a 'Mazel Tov', I didn't get anything. I was being very naïve thinking they'd be happy for us.*¹⁵¹

Ronald Grimes characterizes life cycle ceremonies as having many complex layers that often belie the idealism of the rite itself:

¹⁵¹ Michal (from personal interview October 14, 2006).

Rites of passage can seem perfectly magical – but only if you keep your eyes and ears trained on what transpires center stage. Backstage, there often seethes a morass of spiritual stress and social conflict.¹⁵²

Many women I interviewed experienced negative reactions from family, even from those who were outwardly supportive. Some were absent from ceremonies altogether while others only attended reluctantly. The resistance came mostly from those with strong religious convictions and predominantly from participants' mothers.

For Michal the rejection by her Orthodox mother in Israel was unequivocal and heart wrenching. While seeming to “tolerate” the idea of a city hall ceremony, she perceived a Jewish wedding between two women as an affront to the religion. Michal, choked back tears as she recounted a phone conversation she had with her mother about her unwillingness to travel from Jerusalem to Toronto to attend the wedding:

[My mother] said, ‘I can never accept this. This is not how we were raised. This is not what you saw. There are no rabbis who will ever accept this. Why do you need to do this?’ And I said, ‘Because, Judaism is important to me.’ She said, ‘That’s fine, I understand that and I’m very proud that you still hold onto it. But why can’t you just go to city hall? Go to city hall and that’s enough.’ I said, ‘No, it’s not.’ She said, ‘... Your making a mockery of this with the *chuppah* and the rabbi.’ She said, ‘I cannot accept this. I’m set in my ways... you cannot change my mind.’ ... I was in tears. ... I said, ‘Why can’t religion be part of *our* lives? And she said, ‘Any rabbi I talk to will not accept this and so I can’t.’

Even though Michal and Leah are welcome in Israel and have stayed with Michal’s mother as a couple, the reality of their relationship and their marriage must remain largely a secret to those outside of the immediate family. Because Michal is extremely close with her mother and sister their lack of support was extremely hurtful. Further, having to remain hidden to most of her family was a source of shame that plagued Michal, even in Canada, during the wedding planning process.

¹⁵² Grimes *Deeply into the Bone*. 11.

In a similar way, some devout members of Chris's Catholic family were unwilling to accept or attend her secular Jewish wedding to Naomi, not because of its religious content but because she was marrying a woman. Chris recalled her sister's ambivalence until days before the event and her necessary complicity: "My sister doesn't want [her kids] to think this is an acceptable lifestyle as far as what she sees is appropriate to raise her family in, so I tried to be respectful of her decision not to bring them to the wedding." Although Chris and Naomi tried their utmost to make their ceremony traditional and non-threatening, the intentional absence of Chris's nieces and nephews was taken as a rejection of their relationship. At the time we met, two days before the wedding, Chris had just learned that her sister brought the children after all. "It's a really big deal," she told me with a catch in her throat. Although the decision clearly broke through a barrier with her sister, I learned later that not everyone in Chris's family was in attendance. Many did not come. Even though she felt supported during the ceremony, the unwillingness of some to attend had an impact on Chris. "There were many members of my family that didn't come," she told me. "So even among the joy I felt in the room, there was still a hole."

Like Chris, Adira encountered resistance from her Christian family when she announced her marriage to Lainie. The wedding, she almost jokingly remembers, was simply added to her mother's list of disappointments: "My mom is very Christian, so the conversion [to Judaism] was a problem and being a lesbian was a problem. Therefore having a Jewish, lesbian wedding was a problem." Like Chris's sister, Adira's mother did not decide to attend until the last minute, but the fact she was there meant a lot to her daughter: "I don't think she returned her reply card until the weekend of the wedding..."

but she ended up coming, which was a huge thing.” Adira’s brother, however, did not come to the ceremony, and her relationship with him has never been the same since.

For women in this study whose families are not as religious, expressions of discomfort were more subtle. Michelle recalled that although her parents fully accepted her long-term relationship to Alisa, her mother’s initial reaction to the engagement lacked the enthusiasm afforded to her heterosexual brother:

I know my mother. Appearances are a big thing and I knew she was tense about telling people and all the stuff that went with it. ... When my brother popped the question to my sister-in-law, she was on the phone to 750 million people within three and a half seconds. Yet with us, I know she didn’t tell people for quite a long time.

In a similar way, Alisa’s mother kept her daughter’s engagement a secret until shortly before the wedding. “My mom’s been a little strange with it,” Alisa admitted. What helped was hearing from Michelle’s parents that they had to work through it as well. Michelle added: “It’s easy for your parents to say, ‘Their daughter [is part of a lesbian couple]’, but it’s a different thing for them to say, ‘They’re getting married.’”

As members of a Reform synagogue, Alisa and Michelle were encouraged to present themselves as a couple each week when they attended Shabbat services. By doing so the couple walked a thin line between supportive acceptance and hurtful rejection by the congregation. They once overheard cruel and homophobic remarks made by two elderly men and were shocked to learn about the initial discomfort their rabbi experienced when she was asked to officiate at their wedding ceremony. In the end, Alisa and Michelle were satisfied with how warmly their marriage was received at the temple but the reality remains that, as lesbians, they have to struggle to assert their equal place in

the community and go through a process of “coming out every time they walk through the doors” of their synagogue.

Natasha spoke little of her mother, or her family for that matter, during our interview but their absence from her wedding ceremony was apparent. Although she never elaborated on why they were not there, Natasha made it clear her family was not supportive of her marriage to Hila. Far from seeming hurt by their position, she approached the subject with humour. Natasha laughingly indicated that family rejection was to be expected, in fact, she saw it as a sign of fortitude: “One of my rules to living my life is that if my family doesn’t like it, it’s probably the right thing to do,” she told me. “So the fact that they were against us getting married really said to me, ‘Yeah, this is good.’”

All of the couples I interviewed insisted that their weddings were intended to be conducted in the same as any straight one, yet most experienced some difficulty with others perceiving them as completely equal. Because the women in this study walk in the footsteps of very recent advancements in Canadian human rights and adaptations to religious rites, their struggles indicate that change on the ground does not occur swiftly. However, by simply being visible and appropriating the cultural practices associated with marriage, these lesbians who marry in traditional ceremonies are contributing to a process of transformation that not only impacts them personally, it also leaves a lasting impression on their families and wider communities. Despite her discomfort, Chris’s sister *did* attend with her children and Adira’s mother *was* present at her daughter’s wedding although she had resistance to being there. In attending a same-sex wedding one acknowledges the commitment of someone they care about through a lens that they

recognize as valid. Daniel Gottlieb suggests that change is facilitated through the ceremony. “The role of ritual is helpful in enculturating a religious community to a new reality,” he told me; even if it makes some initially feel uneasy.

Transformation

*The union we are celebrating today represents a step in the right direction because it exemplifies the diversity, which I believe will increase harmony among [different] groups of people and the dissolution of prejudices.*¹⁵³

Although there were individuals missing at ceremonies, and some who attended were uncomfortable, all the weddings I observed and heard about were attended by dozens of family members and friends who reported to be quite moved by the proceedings. In much the same way that law functions symbolically as a sign of social legitimacy, a life cycle ritual, when effective, reaches out to the hearts and minds of those present, creating a sense of community and warmth that binds people together even in their differences. Victor Turner calls this social bonding during ritual *communitas*, a group liminality that occurs during heightened moments where the pretense of social roles falls away. He writes:

Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure [...]. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or ‘holy,’ possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency.¹⁵⁴

Turner claims that *communitas* carries with it the potential to reclassify humanity’s relationship to society, nature, and culture. It can also incite action to break down

¹⁵³ Excerpt from the speech Naomi’s father delivered at her and Chris’s wedding reception (10/22/06). Used by permission.

¹⁵⁴ Turner. *The Ritual Process*. 128

barriers, strengthen society, and bring about change.¹⁵⁵ I suggest *communitas* is especially evident during a same-sex wedding, not only because the gendered roles of bride and groom are dismantled but also because there are those present who support and bless this new formulation of marriage. “I thought the warmth and the happiness I felt from the people around me was the best,” Michelle remarked in response to what she thought was the most memorable element of her wedding. In a similar way, Hila shared that what mattered most to her was that family were there and that everyone came “to experience something together.” For Naomi and Chris, the participation of friends and family came up repeatedly in our interviews as a central theme.¹⁵⁶

As an observer at all these weddings, I noticed how significant it was that guests were witnessing first hand, and often for the first time, an event that signals a transformation in the understanding and definition of marriage. Whether or not they were consciously aware of it, those planning, watching, and performing these rituals were participating in affirming social change initiated both by the Canadian government and liberal movements of Judaism.

One of the central features of the contemporary wedding ceremony is to bring people together to acknowledge and support the transition of an already established relationship. From the perspective of the ritual subjects, or marriage partners, the public ceremony facilitates their individual change in status from two single women to a married couple. Grimes suggests that in North America, weddings are *the* rites of passage because of their potential to change participants and the perceptions of those who witness them:

¹⁵⁵ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 96-7, 129.; Turner, E., “Communitas. Rites of.” in *Encyclopedia of Religious Rites, Rituals, and Festivals*, 97-100.

¹⁵⁶ It is noteworthy that Chris’s father gave the couple the heart shaped chalice they both drank from during the ceremony.

Rites of passage are stylized and condensed actions intended to acknowledge or effect a transformation. A transformation is not just any sort of change but a momentous metamorphosis, a moment after which one is never again the same.¹⁵⁷

Although few could articulate the change that had taken place as a result of their ceremony, virtually all of my participants said they felt differently about their relationship as a result of having one. Exploring how her wedding functioned as a rite of passage, Hila was able to identify its component parts:

Somehow this ceremony works. It makes you understand that you have different responsibilities. That's what I felt. It helps you realize that you're stepping from one part of your life to a different part of your life.... It did make a change in the end in spite of what I thought. It does matter.

Hila and Natasha's wedding officiant, Aviva Goldberg, who has conducted lesbian life cycle events since the mid 1990s, confirmed that a Jewish wedding, with its time-honoured symbols, is a "classic rite of passage" that facilitates change:

All the stages are there. They really happen under that *chuppah*. ... They walk down the aisle and they enter into a special place. Under the *chuppah* there is contemplation, a moment of sharing vows, a moment of looking at each other, a moment of touching each other, of passing one thing to the other, a token. And there's prayer and words that are spoken. And then they physically leave that sacred space and something happens. Whether consciously or unconsciously, something happens that changes their status. I, as the ritual facilitator sense that. I do sense that.

As a vehicle for transformation, same sex weddings effect change both for individuals involved and at the level of the larger community. When I asked couples how people reacted to the news of their engagement, they were mostly delighted, and even surprised, by the positive support they received from those outside their immediate circle. One memorable story came from Michal who recounted her nervousness about coming

¹⁵⁷ Grimes, 6

out to the religiously observant, kosher caterer she chose to provide the food for her and Leah's wedding:

We went to "*B'Tayavon*"¹⁵⁸ where we ordered all our food from and we spoke to the owner. She finally asked, 'What's it for?' And we said, 'It's for an occasion, it's for a wedding.' And she said, 'Oh, *Mazel Tov*, whose getting married?' We said, 'We are.' And it took her a second. At first she asked, 'Two weddings? And we said, 'No.' And then I explained, 'We're getting married to each other.' And then she said, 'Oh! Well, then I'm going to add a special dish, for free!' She said, 'I'm going to do something really special for you girls and it's on me.' We were shocked. I was shocked.

While Michal and Leah admitted that positive reactions from service providers might be attributed to the fact they were paying customers, they also recognized its deeper meaning. The welcoming responses they received from members of the Jewish community represented, in their view, growing cultural acceptance for legalized same-sex marriage, especially during a time when the issue was back in the news. A year after the new marriage laws were passed, public opinion polls indicated that most Canadians did not wish to revisit the issue for another vote even though the federal Conservative party was determined to keep their campaign promise.¹⁵⁹ Leah told me about a woman from Nova Scotia whom she met at a cake shop. "I don't know what the big deal is!" the woman told her. Leah was gratified to feel, "Most everyone we ran into was supportive and celebratory." While the couple had to come out in virtually every store they went into, I could not help but notice how empowered Michal appeared to be, as an Orthodox woman who was rejected by her own family, to assert the nature and legitimacy of her marriage to Jewish suppliers she dealt with in the course of planning her wedding.

¹⁵⁸ This phrase is the Hebrew equivalent of *Bon Appétit*.

¹⁵⁹ From EGALE Canada website (<http://www.egale.ca/index.asp?lang=E&menu=1&item=1335>). EGALE Canada is a national organization that advances equality and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-identified people and their families across Canada (retrieved 8/23/06).

Responses I noticed from indirectly involved individuals abounded during the process of my research that indicate a change in perception is also taking place on a societal level. The most notable example was from the woman on the ferry sitting next to Aviva Goldberg and I as we made our way to Hila and Natasha's wedding. After learning that Aviva was about to officiate at a lesbian wedding, the woman assumed that family members did not support the couple. She was noticeably surprised to learn that Hila's parents, sitting across from her and dressed in formal attire, were celebrating with their daughter and her pregnant marriage partner. I would suspect that this woman's negative assumptions were altered. By simply being witness to the reality that was in front of her, an abstract concept she heard debated in the news was suddenly real and familiar. A Jewish wedding ceremony and a Hebrew prayer book were things she could relate to even though the situation was somewhat different than expected.

Another memorable moment came after Alisa and Michelle's wedding ceremony once guests were seated in the reception hall of the temple for lunch. I was lingering outside the room and noticed two building custodians watching through the small window in the door to the hall as the newly married women welcomed their guests. The two men said something to each other lightheartedly in Spanish and then one of them walked away. When the other turned around, he seemed surprised to see me there. I smiled and then spontaneously asked him what he thought about two women getting married. He responded indifferently: "Love is love," he replied. "That's all that matters." Perhaps he was telling me what he thought I wanted to hear – after all he had no idea who I was. But even if he was hiding his disapproval of same-sex marriage in his comment, or if he was simply checking with his co-worker about the room set-up at the time I spotted

him, the reality was that his job exposed him to a different kind of marriage. His rationalized response to my question indicated that, regardless of his personal opinion, religious convictions, or cultural background, marriage of any kind is really about love – a concept most can relate to.

A similar experience with venue staff occurred just before Naomi and Chris entered their reception room on the top floor of the hotel just after the wedding. As the woman who was staffing the coat check handed me my jacket, she asked me in thickly accented English whether I knew which woman was the bride. I assumed that because neither woman was wearing the traditional white wedding dress this might have caused some confusion. When I told her that both women were “brides,” she paused and then smiled uncomfortably. I asked her if she had ever been to a wedding where there were two brides. She said she hadn’t. I responded with a smile and confirmed that now two women can marry each other and have a wedding just like anyone else. The woman smiled back at me and said nothing. Although the concept of same-sex marriage may have been hard for this staff member to comprehend, it was a reality she was now exposed to, which encouraged her, even if for a moment to change her assumptions of what constitutes a wedding. Whether or not this woman agrees with lesbian marriage does not erase the fact that a wedding between two women is recognized and celebrated by some in the same way as any other.

I suggest that in the presence of civil law, and as same-sex couples marry more frequently and in more visible and familiar ways, perceptions, assumptions, and judgments cannot help but change over time. Although many may not condone same-sex marriage for personal, cultural or religious reasons, it can no longer be denied that the

practice is becoming part of the cultural landscape, which is Canada. “Just being there changes attitudes,” Naomi and Chris’s rabbi told me. “Just by being there you change the world because people can no longer ignore you. People will pay attention and attention in and of itself will make change.”¹⁶⁰

Jewish Continuity

*My Jewish identity is stronger than my gay identity.*¹⁶¹

For all Jewish participants the gratification of having their marriages supported by government, friends, and family cannot be separated from the importance of having weddings sanctioned by a religious authority within a Jewish context. “They’re Jewishly validated when the rabbi says it’s okay,” Daniel Gottlieb told me. As such, the recognition of a couple’s worthiness in the eyes of Jewish tradition was often understood as a crucial aspect, despite varying ways of understanding what tradition means. A famous *midrash*, or rabbinic commentary, states, “There are seventy faces to the Torah.”

¹⁶² This verse is often evoked as testament to the variety of Jews who have lived throughout history. Rabbi Perry Rank argues that scholars and historians have consistently pointed to many Judaisms: “[...] Some were elitist, some popular, some short lived and some enduring, some passionate and others restrained.” Rank suggests that regardless of their level of observance or knowledge, all Jews account for their authenticity by acknowledging their cultural and ancestral history.¹⁶³ Many of my participants identified Judaism with celebrating Shabbat or the Jewish holidays with

¹⁶⁰ Eva Goldfinger (11/23/06)

¹⁶¹ Alisa (from personal interview August 18, 2006)

¹⁶² From the Torah commentary on the Book of Numbers: Bemidbar Rabbah 13:15.

¹⁶³ Rabbi Perry Raphael Rank. President, Rabbinical Assembly. New York in “Thoughts on the CLJS Teshuvot on Homosexuality” http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/docs/Rank_Intro_to_Papers_on_Homosexuality.doc. (retrieved 3/19/07). CLJS is the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly.

family and friends, eating particular foods, or simply engaging in respectful debate. For a few it was about knowledge of sacred texts, Jewish law and their peoples' history. The weddings described and the women introduced confirm there is no single, monolithic way to be Jewish. As Rank suggests, this fluidity of understanding is not new to contemporary Judaism but has roots that date back thousands of years.

Even though the weddings I observed were quite different from each other, all couples took part in similar ritual actions. Each stood under a *chuppah*, drank from a cup of wine, signed a *ketubah*, heard the Seven Blessings, and stepped on a glass. Whether or not they were aware of their religious or historical significance, all couples were conscious that these elements are emblematic of a traditional Jewish wedding. Including them in the ceremony was a sign of engagement with the tradition and a gesture of authenticity. Ritual studies theorist Catherine Bell confirms this need for authenticity is a fundamental dimension of ritual. She calls working with time-honoured elements a process of *traditionalization* and argues it is especially necessary when a rite must be adapted to a new circumstance. Bell insists that the absence of familiar elements compromises authenticity, suggesting "a ritual that evokes no connection with any tradition is apt to be found anomalous, inauthentic, or unsatisfying by most people."¹⁶⁴ As a powerful tool of legitimation, traditionalization assists in converting familiar practices into a new setting by evoking a link with the past.

As Jewish lesbians who are positioned in many ways outside the parameters of religious tradition, the women in this study sought to enact familiar wedding practices as a way to link themselves to the continuing story of the Jewish people. In other words, the

¹⁶⁴ Bell. *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions*, 145

Jewish wedding validates couples as Jews and ensures the same for future generations.¹⁶⁵

Rabbi Yoel Kahn suggests that every Jewish life cycle event, even if modified, is a statement of “covenantal loyalty,” a concept that has roots in the text of the Hebrew Bible. Even for those who are not religious, and may indeed struggle with the concept, covenantal loyalty revolves around a committed, *relationship* with the “Jewish people’s historically binding tradition.”¹⁶⁶ With the exception of Chris, the only non-Jewish participant, women in this study revealed their relationship to Jewish tradition in differing ways depending on their individual and cultural background, level of Jewish knowledge, and religious observance. For Hila, her wedding ceremony was a way to connect to generations of Jewish women in her family:

The ceremony helps you feel that you’re doing it like your mother did before you, and your grandmother, and you’re doing the same thing, more or less of course. You’re doing the same actions, the same prayers and it makes you feel like you’re a part of something that continues. ... I want to be also like a link in the chain and not be different because I’m marrying a woman.

For Hila’s partner, Natasha, it was the mystical power inherent in the Hebrew prayers that had the most resonance in linking her with more esoteric qualities of the tradition:

Hebrew is the original language of the prayers. In a *kabalistic* sense that is the language that these prayers are supposed to be said in. That’s the magic. The magic is language. The words will change the meaning once you change the language.... [To me] the language of the Jewish people is the tradition. We discussed that not everyone at the ceremony will understand and then we thought, ‘Well, not everything is for everyone to understand.’ We really wanted the prayers to remain in Hebrew.

¹⁶⁵ For most of my participants Judaism was less about religious observance than it was about their heritage. Many Jews in the Toronto area are the immediate or generational descendants of immigrants who fled pogroms from Eastern Europe at the turn of the 20th century or survived the Nazi Holocaust in WWII. Therefore, continuity of Jewish culture is often perceived as a responsibility to this generation regardless of how religiously observant one is.

¹⁶⁶ Kahn with Lawrence Hoffman “Contemporary Challenges to Jewish Life Cycle Ritual,” 265. Kahn sees the covenant as being more than a relationship with God. It also includes a relationship with Torah and with the history of the Jewish people. It is interesting to note that questions pertaining specifically to religion were often the most difficult for participants to answer.

For Lainie and Adira negotiating a place within Judaism as feminists and as lesbians was often a struggle. But when it came to their wedding, they told me they did not feel excluded. In fact the ceremony facilitated belonging. Their regard for honouring history was important and neither one wished to alter the traditional ritual in any significant way:

Lainie: I thought, this has meaning for me because of that connection to history and family. And so [the wedding] was about honouring the importance of tradition and history while also working with it. A lot of it was about making those adjustments that say, 'No, we do belong here, we do get to fit in to this.' ... I wouldn't have wanted to go and reinvent something because that whole sense of tradition would be missing for me.

Adira: For me, because I had chosen the tradition I didn't want something that didn't look traditional. [Because there] had been so many places in Judaism where I had to fight for a place, I thought I don't actually need to fight for this place because what exists feels okay.

For Michelle, her loyalty to tradition was simply a matter of fact: "I see myself as a Jew and so I get married accordingly," she told me plainly. Her spouse, Alisa, echoed this view by asserting her unwavering commitment to Judaism even though she remains ambivalent about practicing the religion. She told me: "I may be secular but I'm very Jewish... My Jewish identity is stronger than my gay identity." Alisa felt strongly about not altering what she understood to be authentic Judaism because she is a lesbian. For this reason she was uncomfortable with attending services at a predominantly "gay" synagogue or even in seeking the officiation of a rabbi who was not affiliated with an established movement of the tradition: "I wanted to fit into what I thought was Jewish. ...I want to be proud of being Jewish and have *it* accept me rather than take an offshoot and just call it Judaism."

As a contrast to these examples, “the Jewish aspect” of Naomi’s wedding was the third priority next to having her and Chris’s friends and family present and obtaining a legal marriage license. For Naomi, who grew up in an American, communist family with anti-religious views, Jewish identity was primarily cultural. Therefore, it did not matter that her officiant was unaffiliated with a Reform or Reconstructionist synagogue.¹⁶⁷ Naomi told me that hiring a secular humanist rabbi and incorporating Jewish and mainstream cultural elements facilitated the authenticity of her inter-faith ceremony while also respecting the lineage of her family. Judaism was simply an ingredient in a much larger compilation:

When we first were talking about [getting married] we were saying we would have a non-religious ceremony. But we had gone to my cousin’s wedding that was in a synagogue and traditional in a lot of ways and we started talking. Chris was saying that she liked a lot of the elements and [Judaism] is my heritage and so we decided to go that way based on those things.

The absence of prayer and references to God from Naomi and Chris’s Secular Humanist wedding raises the issue of how participants understood there to be a sacred component to their weddings. Questions pertaining to God were undoubtedly the most difficult for participants to answer because the words “religion” and “spirituality” were perceived as too abstract. For Naomi, who was moved mostly by the presence and participation of her family and friends, the non-theistic approach was appropriate:

I don’t believe in God in a regular kind of way. I don’t think God is some guy in the sky. For me working with [a Secular Humanist rabbi] was fine because I don’t care if the word *Adonai* is in my wedding ceremony. That doesn’t matter to me.

¹⁶⁷ There are no Reform or Reconstructionist rabbis in the GTA who will perform an inter-faith marriage. This unwillingness seems to be specific to Canada as U.S. Reform rabbis are known to officiate between a Jew and a non-Jew (Rabbi Michael Dolgin, personal interview March 6, 2007).

Naomi's perspective was noticeably different from the other women I interviewed whose ceremonies all included the recognition of God and the explicit blessing of their unions. Three of my couples were very critical of the Secular Humanist atheistic approach, which they encountered as an option for officiation in their process of "shopping around" for a rabbi. Alisa called it an "offshoot of Judaism," which she did not feel was authentic.

Michal remarked:

At first, I had no idea what [Humanistic Judaism] was so I went to the website to read up on it a bit. Once I learned more, I thought, 'Okay, what's Jewish here?' There's no mention of God in the ceremony. Well, that didn't sit well with me.

Hila and Natasha had a similar reaction: "The Secular Humanists don't want anything to do with the word God or prayers. ... Even though I'm not religious," Hila said, "I started to ask, 'What is Jewish here?' I felt that the tradition would slip away, if you're taking those parts out of the ceremony." It is interesting that both women posed the question, "What is Jewish here?" in regards to Humanist Judaism, which suggests that understanding of Jewish marriage is inextricably linked to receiving God's blessing, whether or not one is understood to be religiously inclined.

The concept of holiness, or *kiddushin*, and the delivery of the Seven Blessings characterize for most couples the essence behind having a Jewish wedding. Based on the content of ceremonies I viewed and observed, Jewish marriage to lesbian couples is more than just an acknowledgment that they belong in the community. Part of that belonging seems to include the recognition of their worthiness on a sacred level as understood within Judaism by receiving God's blessing for their union.

For Michal, whose Jewish marriage was rejected by her religious family, the inclusion of prayers and blessings affirmed her legitimacy. As an observant and Jewishly

educated woman, including these elements meant that God was not shunning her because of her sexuality. She told me how reassured she was when her rabbi affirmed the holiness of her partnership with Leah, and that invoking God's name was a necessary part of the ceremony:

I thought, 'I'm not doing anything wrong!' So I'm going to have a *chuppah*... and the *Sheva Brachot* that [our rabbi] rewrote for females and I was getting excited... I started thinking, 'Yeah, this is what I want. I want the rabbi to say these blessings, I want to be able to stand under the *chuppah* and have God recognize us and I want our friends and family to be there and see how important Judaism is to us.

The acknowledgment of God was not only important for many of the couples I interviewed, it was also comforting to family members who attended ceremonies with ambivalence. Lainie suggested that Adira's Presbyterian mother felt reassured knowing that a rabbi was conducting her daughter's wedding ceremony, which meant to her that "At least God was there." In a similar way, Naomi shared how Chris's Catholic father resolved his discomfort with the wedding by admitting that, "God wants everyone to be happy." Rabbi Daniel Gottlieb, who has performed about five same-sex weddings since 2005 was unequivocal in his assertion that this new formulation of marriage is as equally deserving of God's blessing:

Judaism understands marriage as the ideal human condition. If this is true then it should be available to all human beings who are created in God's image. ... I believe that what I'm doing in this place and time is a reflection of God's will for humanity.

Regardless of whether weddings focused on the presence of friends and family or the blessings of God, the lesbians in this study understood their ceremonies to be heightened moments in which they connected to a sense of being Jewish. I would suggest that by simply having a religious authority, or one who goes by the name of rabbi,

officiating at the wedding, the couple demonstrates a desire for blessing that is linked to a time-honoured tradition and the continuity of the Jewish people.

Political Activism

The advantages that accompany equal marriage laws in Canada renders the weddings in this study as significantly different from commitment ceremonies taking place in the United States. As acts of political resistance Hull and others argue that whether or not couples are aware of it, culturally familiar same-sex wedding rites in the U.S. are linked to a larger struggle against injustice. By complicating traditional notions of love and family weddings facilitate a process of social awareness and ultimately political change.¹⁶⁸ While Hull speaks directly to political change in the sphere of civil law, I sought to apply her thinking to a Canadian context by asking participants how they perceived their legal ceremonies to be political. Not surprisingly, the most direct response came from the only American couple in this study, Naomi and Chris. Naomi saw crossing the border for her wedding as resistance to government oppression that will hopefully not be necessary in the future:

I think that leaving our country to get married makes it a political statement in and of itself. I can imagine saying to our children [long after the practice is legal in the States], ‘Can you believe we had to go to Canada to get married?’

Leaving the United States to get married was a theme that emerged several times in our interviews. Naomi and Chris’s gratitude to the Canadian government even made its way into their wedding décor. Both admitted that incorporating a maple leaf, Canada’s national symbol, on their wedding invitations and naming each table at their reception

¹⁶⁸ Lewin. *Recognizing Ourselves*, 34; Hull, *Same-Sex Marriage*, 70-1; 243. (See also, Stiers and Sherman)

after a Canadian province was a gesture of thanks for the country's tolerant position on equal marriage.

Naomi's father, a life-long socialist and academic, did not hesitate to mention the political significance of his daughter's wedding when he delivered his speech to (mostly American) guests. He clearly understood the legal marriage of Naomi and Chris as not only revolutionary, but also a necessary step in the evolution of civilized society:

[...] My own view is just as Americans decided some eighty years ago that civilization would not collapse if women were given the right to vote, fifty years from now, weddings between two individuals of the same sex will be legalized and accepted by most people in many parts of the world.

Naomi's father was emphatic that legalized same-sex marriage spoke volumes about the kind of country Canada is. "I have always considered Canada to be far more civilized than the United States," he told me during a short interview two days before the wedding. "I admire this country's social network, the number of people covered for health care, the refusal to go and attack other countries. How long a list do you need?" His pride in his daughter's statement against her government by coming to Canada for her legal lesbian marriage was apparent and so was his gratification for being born in this country.

Other participants had more trouble identifying how their weddings were political, especially in reference to their civil rights. For Alisa and Michelle, politics around their wedding were more evident on an institutional level. It was important for Michelle, a recent convert to Judaism, to be affiliated with a synagogue. Simply hiring a rabbi to perform the ceremony was not acceptable. The couple found out quickly once they decided to get married that not all reform congregations in the city of Toronto were willing to embrace them fully. The large, established temple where they attended services at the time of their engagement has a specific policy in place against officiation at same-

sex weddings. Deeming this position exclusionary and unfair, Alisa and Michelle had to struggle to assert their rights within another established synagogue. They hoped that the visibility of their traditional Jewish marriage at Temple Sinai would help to change oppressive policies elsewhere. Participating in this study, I learned, was part of that effort to become visible even though their ceremony was intentionally non-political. “You are doing something that I think is very important,” Alisa told me. If [this project] can move rabbis a little bit to change their stance then what you’re doing is important from an activist standpoint.” While Michelle agreed that their wedding ceremony had a political backstory in regards to the local Jewish community, she stressed, as a convert to the tradition, it was more important to be accepted within the Reform movement of Judaism than to make a statement about inequity.

Hila and Natasha’s wedding was not political on either a national or a community level. As an Israeli woman whose language and culture are fundamentally tied to her country, Hila said changes she made to the Hebrew text in her *ketubah*, or marriage contract, made a political statement of a different kind. She painted the artwork on the document and worked on the calligraphy of the Hebrew script that featured the traditional seven marriage blessings, or *Sheva Brachot*. One of these blessings celebrates the happiness of the bride and groom in a restored Jerusalem. Hila perceived changes she made to the text as having more of a prophetic significance rather than an immediate political one. After reciting the blessing to me in Hebrew, she explained:

There’s a phrase you say in the Seven Blessings: ‘May it soon be heard in the mountains of Judea and the streets of Jerusalem, the sound of joy and gladness and the voice of the groom and bride.’ I changed it to both bride

and bride. I took it and changed it. For me it was a prayer for the future that marriages like mine will be legal [in Israel].¹⁶⁹

Hila suggested the change in wording is quite radical from a political perspective because it alters a sacred text. Both she and Natasha were adamant about not using revised or adapted liturgy. They felt that making something new was a betrayal of their validity and so they decided to only make superficial linguistic changes and not metaphorical ones.

It appears that in the presence of legal entitlements Canadian same-sex couples need not focus attention on politics in the same way as their American counterparts do. Since same-sex marriage laws are relatively new in this country the Jewish lesbians I interviewed are pioneers in claiming both their civil rights and religious rites simultaneously. Because they are fortunate to live in a time and place that allows them the freedom to live openly in their relationships, simply being involved in this study and having their stories recorded, can be interpreted as an assertion of political freedom and national pride. For Adira and Lainie, their participation in this project was viewed in part as the responsibility they have, as an interracial and lesbian couple, for being lucky enough to live in a climate of relative tolerance and safety when so many others do not.¹⁷⁰ At the end of an interview with Alisa and Michelle I asked them if they present themselves as married when they travel. They shared their delight in crossing the border back into Canada after visiting the United States. At the Toronto airport the two may approach the customs counter together as a married couple – a privilege they are not

¹⁶⁹ While same-sex marriage is not legal inside Israel, it is interesting to note that the Israeli Supreme Court ruled in November 2006 to register same-sex marriages performed outside the country (*Globe and Mail* 11/22/06).

¹⁷⁰ Adira and Lainie felt especially lucky because they are doubly marginalized by race and sexuality. These women spent several hours with me sharing their individual religious life histories in addition to their wedding narrative as part of a separate project. Both agreed that if opening their lives to others, even in a small way, to gives hope to those who feel marginalized within their religious tradition because of their sexual orientation or race, then it was well worth the time spent. (Personal interview 11/24/06)

afforded when they enter into the U.S. While it may seem like an insignificant event to most people it symbolized political freedom for Michelle.

We come back to Canada, I fill out the form, we both sign it and then we walk up to the counter together. No one has batted an eye. No one has questioned us ever. I'm proud to be a Canadian. I'm very thankful and lucky, there's no question about it.

The weddings described in the previous chapter feature varied settings, guest constellations, officiation, and religious content. Similarly, the women who took part in these ceremonies reach across a wide spectrum of diversity. Despite varying levels of religious knowledge or observance, it is evident that couples in this study sought to lean on the side of tradition rather than innovation even though they understand tradition in differing ways. While adaptations to existing Jewish wedding liturgy were made to suit the same-sex nature of marriages, signs of significant ritual change were largely absent. Because weddings were mostly precipitated by the availability of legal marriage the purpose of a Jewish ceremony was to enhance civil rights and reinforce Jewish identity rather than make a political statement against inequality.

Whether or not ceremonies emphasized God or concepts of the sacred, Jewish weddings and the symbols inherent in them meaningfully link participants to an historical and cultural narrative of the Jewish people. While discursive reactions to the couple's heterosexual equivalency were evident, especially by religious family members, most showed receptivity to this new formulation of marriage because it was performed within a recognizable context. In the next chapter I explore the connection between ritual innovation and the presence of law by comparing my findings with examples from the

U.S., suggesting that legal entitlements granted by the state encourages conformity to traditional norms while its absence promotes assertions of difference.

*Because it wasn't legally recognized, this was our opportunity to create something that was exactly what we needed.*¹⁷¹

CHAPTER FOUR: Innovation and the Presence of Law: A Canada/U.S. Comparison

It is apparent that the lesbian couples who participated in this study sought to have what they believed to be a traditional Jewish wedding, and their ceremonies did not depart significantly from the standard egalitarian framework discussed in chapter one. Because of their relative conformity, Toronto weddings contrast with those in San Francisco, where ceremonies appear much more creative and intentionally linked to a couple's difference and lack of legal status.¹⁷²

Ellen Lewin writes about "Marcia" and "Betty," a lesbian couple whose wedding she witnessed in a chapel at a San Francisco college campus. The ceremony incorporated many creative elements that drew on interpretations from Jewish tradition and the overall theme of inclusion. Marcia and Betty's freestanding *chuppah* of white fabric and lace had long lavender ribbon winding up each of the four poles. As the ceremony began, the ribbons were extended from the top of the *chuppah* to each of the four corners of the chapel while two people lead the congregation in the singing of a *niggun*, a traditional wordless melody. The rabbi then began the proceedings by recognizing that the wedding was not only a community gathering, but also a political statement about Marcia and Betty's right to hold this kind of ceremony in a Jewish context. He drew a parallel

¹⁷¹ "Miriam" in Lewin, *Recognizing Ourselves*. 78.

¹⁷² The available literature on the commitment ceremonies of same-sex couples features participants predominantly from the state of California and western coastal regions of the United States. While it is not clear as to why this is the case, the Jewish weddings described here conveniently took place in the San Francisco Bay area.

between the couple's commitment to each other and the holiday of *Shavuot*,¹⁷³ suggesting that the couple may draw many lessons from the ancient story of when the Ten Commandments were first presented to the Jewish people. They included the value in pledging one's loyalty, the acknowledgement of varying interpretations of what happened at Sinai, and that caring for one another is a key Jewish value.¹⁷⁴ The wedding continued with familiar Jewish rituals and symbols along with creative and theatrical innovations contributed by the couple, their friends, and colleagues. For example, a male guest chanted the Seven Blessings in Hebrew while seven pairs (and one foursome) offered interpretations of the traditional texts that revolved around themes of family, continuity, partnership, community, and gay pride. As the rabbi delivered his final benediction, also known as the Priestly Blessing, he wrapped Marcia and Betty in a *tallit*, touched each of them on the shoulder, and reiterated their wish to have "non-sexist" children. He then asked the congregation to hold hands so that everyone could symbolically embrace the couple and send them their own blessings. The breaking of the glass that followed drew from five interpretations offered in the wedding program and an invitation for guests to make up her or his own.¹⁷⁵ The attendees at Marcia and Betty's wedding included many members of their gay and lesbian synagogue in San Francisco, both straight and "queer" friends, and the couple's "kin" relatives. Lewin stresses in her account how tremendously moved people were throughout the ritual's performance. The ceremony's focus on inclusion made all who were present feel like they were family members.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Also known as the Feast of Weeks, *Shavuot* commemorates the biblical revelation of the Ten Commandments to the Israelites on Mount Sinai.

¹⁷⁴ Lewin, *Recognizing Ourselves*. 107.

¹⁷⁵ Lewin does not include what these interpretations are in her text or which one was given during the ceremony (108).

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

Lewin also writes about another San Francisco couple, “Miriam” and “Hannah,” who went to “great lengths” to construct their commitment ceremony with the most traditional Jewish wedding elements, acknowledging that they could be as creative as they wished because their marriage was not legally recognized. Like many of my Toronto participants, it was important to Miriam and Hannah to link themselves, through their ceremony, to the ongoing story of the Jewish people and to validate publicly their commitment and entry into the Jewish community as a family.¹⁷⁷ Miriam and Hannah were adamant that they were no less entitled to the same “words and wisdom” that any Jew would have just because they are a lesbian couple. While they were consciously conforming (as much as possible) to the traditional framework of a Jewish wedding, they also intentionally departed from tradition by asserting that the ceremony was uniting them as two women. The best way to highlight the uniqueness of their marriage was to add an extra blessing to the *Sheva Brachot*. Therefore, once their rabbi recited the blessings in Hebrew he delivered this “explicitly gay” formulation in the middle of the translated sequence. The blessing suggested that a multitude of partnership constellations are worthy of celebration in the eyes of God:

Blessed is *HaShem*, Source of All Creation, creator of love and passion between woman and woman, man and man, woman and man. Blessed are You, *Adonai* our God. You open our hearts to love, and strengthen us to walk with dignity among those who are different from us.¹⁷⁸

While Miriam and Hannah understood their wedding to be a gesture of Jewish continuity, they were not willing to conform completely to the traditional standards set for heterosexual couples. They were keenly aware of their difference as lesbians, and their

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

status as second-class citizens in society. Instead of focusing on the controversial issue of legal recognition within the ceremony itself, the couple decided to make their political statement in their wedding invitation by including a stamped post card to the governor of California urging him to advocate for the equal rights of gay and lesbian couples. Lewin contends that Miriam and Hannah's traditional Jewish wedding had a twofold effect on those who witnessed it. Firstly, it highlighted the contradictions it posed both to Jewish tradition and the larger society and, secondly, it enhanced respect for and adherence to the time-honoured practices that have been part of Jewish history for thousands of years.¹⁷⁹

In "Breaking Ground: A Traditional Jewish Lesbian Wedding," Inbal Kashtan writes about marrying her partner Kathy in Berkeley, California. Like Marcia and Betty and Miriam and Hannah, Inbal and Kathy thought very carefully about how to create a recognizably "normal" looking Eastern European Jewish wedding while also boldly asserting the uniqueness of their lesbian partnership. Fuelled by their need to develop a meaningful relationship to Judaism, the two women sought to ground their ritual in Jewish tradition by "wrestling" with as many Orthodox texts as they could find pertaining to rituals of marriage. Their intention was not only to devise solutions that made their older, heterosexual, predominantly observant, guests feel comfortable with them as a legitimate couple, it was also meant to be a project in cultural transformation by contributing to moving those beyond their own experience of Judaism into a realm of deeper understanding of what the tradition can offer. To Inbal and Kathy, their wedding was a continuation of an ancient practice, as much as it was something "new and different

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

and radical and traditionally inconceivable.”¹⁸⁰ The innovations they formulated mostly involved reinterpretations to the text of the traditional *ketubah* and the Seven Blessings. In much the same way Marcia and Betty added contemporary and personally relevant themes to accompany the Hebrew recitation of the *Sheva Brachot*, Inbal and Kathy consulted traditional Torah commentaries, which guests drew from in formulating their personal blessings. In the end, however, it was the changes made to the betrothal blessing accompanying the exchange of rings, which had the most impact to the couple and their guests. Inbal and Kathy consciously departed from the traditional declaration: “You are hereby sanctified to me according to the laws of Moses and the people of Israel.” Since they did not believe their wedding to be in complete accordance with *halacha*, or Jewish law, the couple changed the formulation to read: “You are hereby sanctified to me according to the *tradition of the Jewish people*.” The decision to present their actions outside of Jewish law was one their conservatively ordained rabbi contested, and the topic became the touchstone for social justice at their ceremony. The rabbi disagreed with the assumption that a lesbian wedding is not in accordance with Jewish law, and highlighted during her remarks to the couple that unfair circumstances have always forced the re-interpretation of law, suggesting that the blessing of a marriage between two Jewish women marks the direction *halacha* is destined take:

If *halachic* principles, followed strictly, yield unjust conclusions, then it is our duty, according to *halacha* to exercise civil disobedience. At such times brave individuals and communities must be willing to stand in front of the *halacha*, to walk as Abraham did in front of God, and to say, ‘this is where we’re going,’ trusting that *halacha* will catch up with us. We stand on the edge of a *halachic* limb and assert stubbornly that this limb is part

¹⁸⁰ Kashtan, “Breaking Ground.” 149-150.

of the tree. We say, *this is halacha, this is Torah*, and we wait for the rest of the community to join us.¹⁸¹

Inbal and Kathy believed that in making this bold statement, they and their rabbi were making history by positioning a lesbian wedding within the context of traditional Judaism. In order to gauge the impact the ceremony had on their guests they invited feedback when they mailed out their thank you cards. “It wasn’t just a wedding, it was a political rally,” one friend wrote. Another relative told them, “Your wedding was truthfully one of the deepest and most beautiful I’ve seen. Every little bit of exposure I get to gays and lesbians expands my vision of what is ‘normal.’”¹⁸² Inbal and Kathy were delighted to learn that most of their guests grasped the political message that was inherent in enacting a lesbian or gay marriage within a Jewish context and within a state that does not legally recognize them. As Jews who grew up disconnected to their tradition because of their sexuality, Inbal and Kathy’s wedding forced them to engage with Judaism in new ways so that they could meaningfully link themselves to the chain of Jewish history. For Kashtan, her struggles yielded ways in which to “find threads of dissent and internal critique” so that she and her partner may participate more freely in Judaism’s ritual traditions while also claiming their uniqueness as queer Jews.¹⁸³

All of the women in these three American examples thought very carefully about how they wished to perform their lesbian Jewish wedding, intentionally treading between their respect for tradition and their need to express their difference. Although they may not be representative of all same-sex ceremonies in the United States, several relevant aspects allow for a comparison between these San Francisco weddings and those from

¹⁸¹ Rabbi Rona Shapiro, cited in Kashtan 151.

¹⁸² Kashtan, 149.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 155.

Toronto highlighted in chapter two. As a point of similarity, it seems that whether Canadian or American, Jewish lesbians strongly identify with their cultural heritage and wish to commemorate their unions in ways that signal their respect for Judaism and its traditions. While obvious adjustments had to be made to the standard, egalitarian wedding liturgy in order to accommodate two women as marriage partners, the social and political climate in each country appears to affect the degree to which innovations are devised and assigned meaning.

The Presence of Law

In most of the U.S., same-sex marriages officiated by a rabbi under the *chuppah*, are considered religiously valid only within a (liberal) Jewish context through the signing of the *ketubah*. Couples are not civilly recognized nor do they have access to all the benefits and protections afforded to opposite-sex married couples. As a symbol of legitimacy, the *ketubah*, and by extension religion, stands in for what the state is not willing to provide. As Kathleen Hull observes in her study of same-sex couples in Chicago, lesbians and gays are “using cultural practices to construct a kind of legality for their relationships outside of official law.”¹⁸⁴ In her brief reference to a “traditionally Jewish” ceremony, Hull cites the rabbi’s emphasis on the *ketubah* as a legal document, telling the congregation: “While [this marriage] is not yet in accordance with the laws of this state, it *is* according to a much higher authority – the love and justice-proclaiming law of the living God.”¹⁸⁵ In a general sense, Hull argues further that in the absence of law, same-sex weddings are political acts of resistance, even though couples often do not consciously perceive them as such.

¹⁸⁴ Hull, 24.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

In Canada, lesbian and gay partners who partake in a Jewish wedding ceremony are now sanctioned both by their religious community and by their government as fully married couples, thereby disarming two points of contention simultaneously.¹⁸⁶ Whether or not some remain uncomfortable with the practice, it can no longer be denied that two levels of authority recognize this new formulation of marriage. Because a major difference in legal standing exists between Canada and the United States, I suggest that the absence, or presence, of law impacts the ways in which the same-sex wedding ceremony is thought about, performed, added to, and innovated.

Attention to Difference

Because marriage, as a rite of passage, is a vehicle for transformation, Rabbi Yoel Kahn suggests that Jewish gay and lesbian couples look to the familiar wedding ceremony as a way to affirm their relationship's change in status. The ceremony, he contends, provides the opportunity to receive the blessing of family, friends, and community, as well as from God. It recognizes the couple's commitment through the signing of the *ketubah*, and links them to Jewish history and their larger community. In these ways, same-sex ceremonies are analogous to those of heterosexual couples. However, Kahn contends there is also a "same but different principle" in place during lesbian and gay weddings due to their status in society. Firstly, relationships in the U.S. have no legal standing, and secondly, internalized homophobia coupled with feelings of unworthiness absorbed from the surrounding culture, weakens the confidence of gay and lesbian couples in asserting that

¹⁸⁶ A wedding between two women or two men asserts legal entitlements granted by the government of Canada, and the long contested for space within Jewish tradition that has made room for lesbian and gay Jews. For more see chapter one, and Lash, "Struggling with Tradition."

their committed partnerships are as valid as those of heterosexuals'.¹⁸⁷ As a source of pride and empowerment, a public wedding between two lesbian or gay Jews is a meaningful way of “coming out” after having been rendered invisible by family, law, society, and Judaism for so long. Kahn, who recently celebrated his sixteenth wedding anniversary with his male partner, writes: “Celebrating and honoring our lives and relationships in the face of continuing oppression and discrimination affirms our faith, ourselves, our love, and our community.”

As a vehicle for communicating pride in being gay in the face legal and social discrimination, the San Francisco weddings cited above highlighted the difference of the marriage partners at the same time as they adhered to elements of a traditional Jewish wedding. Marcia and Betty included many creative features that emphasized inclusivity, and their rabbi suggested the event was more than a wedding but also a political statement affirming their right to a ceremony of this kind. Miriam and Hannah emphasized their difference as a lesbian couple by embedding a personally relevant blessing into the traditional framework for the *Sheva Brachot* that celebrated sexuality within a variety of partnership choices. Finally, Inbal and Kathy’s wedding featured a moving commentary by their rabbi about the unfairness of *halacha* and the need to expand its parameters.

By contrast, no such innovations were present in the Toronto weddings I witnessed. Neither were other augmentations to the service discussed in chapter one such as the addition of gay and lesbian poetry, biblical passages about Ruth and Naomi, or a reinterpretation of the breaking of the glass as a call to justice. It could be argued that

¹⁸⁷ Kahn, “Why Union Ceremonies.” 1. Kahn also argues that the lack of appropriate models in which to organize and name relationships is a contributing factor to feelings of disempowerment.

lack of ritual creativity is due in part to the cultural differences between northern California and southern Ontario. The former is known for its liberalism, creativity and vibrant gay and lesbian population and the latter, for being polite and conservative. However, the fact remains that Jewish lesbian weddings cannot be separated from the larger political issue surrounding the legalization of same-sex marriage by both civil and religious authorities.

Regardless of whether cultural oppression and discrimination continue to exist, Canadian lesbian weddings are now recognized by civil law to be equivalent rituals. Therefore, it is reasonable to surmise that the presence of law diminishes the need for intentional innovation or rituals of resistance that highlights elements of critique regarding social norms. Simply put, in Canada, less of an emphasis needs to be placed on difference, because there is no longer the requirement to assert the equal rights of the couple.¹⁸⁸ Jewish Lesbian and gay partners may now more easily find a rabbi to officiate at their weddings, and adopt more readily the egalitarian framework devised to accommodate most opposite sex couples.

Pre-legal Canadian Lesbian Weddings

As a way to explore the relationship between law and intentional ritual innovation more deeply, I asked Aviva Goldberg about the lesbian weddings she officiated at during the 1990s long before same-sex marriage was legalized. Her role as ritual leader began in 1992 after she was asked to conduct a funeral for an unaffiliated Jewish lesbian. Her experience highlighted the disenfranchisement homosexuals felt from the Jewish

¹⁸⁸ Before the laws were changed, liberal rabbis in Canada did not partake in acts of civil disobedience by openly conducting same-sex wedding ceremonies. Instead, a group of twenty-five formed a coalition to lobby the government in support of same-sex marriage rights for gay and lesbian couples until the laws were changed in 2004 (*Canadian Jewish News* article: www.cjnews.com/viewarticle.asp?id=2762; and Egale Canada, www.egale.ca).

community at the time and she vowed to facilitate at whatever ceremony was needed as a way to affirm that Jewish identity need not be separate from one's lesbian or gay identity.

I discovered that a number of lesbians I worked with had not been educated Jewishly... and once they came out they didn't have the strength to realize that there was room for them in the liberal movements of Judaism. ...So it really struck me that there was a need that I could hopefully fill in connecting them back to their roots.

Although she is not legal clergy, Goldberg continued her ritual work by creating and conducting baby naming and adoption rituals for gay and lesbian couples as well as their children's Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies. She was approached to officiate at her first same-sex commitment ceremony in 1994 and remarked that highlighting the lesbian aspect of their union was extremely important to the couple. Goldberg worked with them for close to six months preparing for the ceremony, which included traditional elements and the addition of special readings that highlighted their identity as lesbian Jews. "It was important for them to do this within the context of Judaism and to be publicly recognized for their commitment," she told me. "It didn't seem to matter that it wasn't legally sanctioned. I would say that their decision was a radical one for that time because it was so new. The ceremony was more about pride and Jewish continuity and expressing individuality."

Another lesbian couple Goldberg worked with had a *chuppah* created by one of the women's mother and grandmother. It featured a rainbow of colours appliquéd to the top of the canopy, which was made with material that family and friends contributed as a way to symbolize wholeness and unity. The *chuppah*'s significance was written into the ceremony:

These vivid colours represent all of us including the symbols of the gay and lesbian movement. They are reminders of the unbelievable efforts,

sacrifices, and strength of those who enabled us today to share and celebrate the diversity of love, and stand here openly proud and strong.¹⁸⁹

Other lesbian weddings Goldberg conducted involved similar elements that celebrated the same-sex nature of the marriage partners while acknowledging their inclusion within Jewish tradition. In this way these pre-legal Canadian weddings resemble more closely the U.S. ceremonies described above rather than the Toronto examples in chapter two, which stressed equivalency rather than difference.¹⁹⁰ While pre-legal lesbian ceremonies in Toronto lack the explicitly political elements evident in the U.S., their marginal status demanded more intentionality and allowed for greater creativity.

As a further illustration, I looked to my own participants who were married early in the legalization process. Adira and Lainie planned their wedding ceremony before they knew that the marriage laws would indeed change. As mentioned in chapter three, theirs was the only wedding in this study motivated primarily by the need for community and Jewish recognition rather than legal entitlements. When I met with them Adira and Lainie emphasized the need to make very conscious decisions about how to present themselves as Jews precisely because they are both a lesbian and an interracial couple. They carefully considered each detail of their Jewish wedding and created many of the ritual objects themselves, admitting that their “utilitarian” civil marriage, was a necessary prerequisite but not the “main event.” The couple delighted in sharing how the wedding was a community event that affirmed their commitment to each other and to their religion. As we looked over their wedding photos Adira enthusiastically remarked:

¹⁸⁹ Aviva Goldberg. Used by permission.

¹⁹⁰ Note for example, Rabbi Daniel Gottlieb’s comment from chapter two: “What I’m performing is a Jewish marriage, not a same-sex marriage.”

We just had amazing support from so many people like the friends who gave us the space [for the wedding]. My mother-in-law's a potter, and she made our *kiddush* cup. We made our own *chuppah*, Lainie sewed and beaded our *kippot* to match our clothes, and friends of ours made my jacket.

Like everything else in their wedding, their choice of clothing was intentional. Both women decided to wear red because they saw it as a colour of passion and life. Adira and Lainie's decision to submit their photo to the *Canadian Jewish News* was also intentional as a way to show their pride in being a lesbian married couple who belong to the Jewish community. "When you live outside of the norm, things are really conscious," Adira admitted. "That's kind of what I like about living in a queer space, ... you really have to be thoughtful and plan in ways that maybe you don't when you live on the inside of the circle." Lainie confirmed this view when comparing it to her previous life as a heterosexual: [Coming out] was like coming awake," she told me about her early days with Adira. "Everything about the way we live our lives, about the way we parent, about the way we become parents, about the way we get married, all of these things that are significant need more thought, and for me, that's not an effort, that's a gift.

Adira and Lainie's wedding story demonstrates the need for greater intention when crossing over into a traditionally heterosexual cultural practice as two very different ritual subjects. Although they insist that legal recognition was not a motivator, I would argue that it enabled them to conform more easily to the expectations of their society and community. Being legally recognized, their chosen rabbi was able to officiate, and their equal status likely facilitated greater receptivity in the community despite the relative

uniqueness of their union.¹⁹¹ It is noteworthy that prior to the laws changing, Toronto rabbis affiliated with established movements were reluctant to officiate at same-sex ceremonies, which explains why someone like Aviva Goldberg, who is not an ordained rabbi could more freely provide ritual solutions outside of traditional or institutional norms.¹⁹²

These early Canadian examples indicate that marriage, to lesbian women, was understood as markedly different during a time when the path to equal marriage was still being forged. Couples had to carefully consider components of their weddings that opposite sex couples would take for granted and therefore, many embraced their communal ceremonies with a great deal of pride in their difference. Jewish ceremonies were more important than the civil legality of their marriages because through them a couple could claim their equal rights to tradition. Meaning was clearly marked by incorporating symbols and liturgy that linked them to Jewish history rather than on the larger struggle for liberation.

Due to their lack of political content, these early Canadian ceremonies differ from their American counterparts, in which explicit references to inequality and the need for justice are featured. All three American weddings cited above highlight, in some way, the political nature of the event, whether through an opening remark by the rabbi, the reformulation of a blessing, or the suggestion that Jewish law needs to be more inclusive. Even as self-proclaimed feminists, Adira and Lainie were satisfied with focusing on what tradition could provide and were hardly interested in what their government and society

¹⁹¹ It is impossible to know whether the *Canadian Jewish News* would have published Adira and Lainie's wedding photo had the Ontario marriage laws not been passed, but I suspect they were compelled to include it because the couple was considered legally as well as Jewishly married.

¹⁹² Since Goldberg does not have a license to perform legal marriages she is now referring couples to an ordained rabbi who may validate both religious and provincial documents.

would not. Perhaps in true Canadian fashion, couples in these early lesbian ceremonies were politely making a small place for themselves rather than demanding that the rest of society, or the religion of Judaism for that matter, take notice. By contrast, the premise for much of the writing on this subject out of the U.S. stresses that ceremonies are transformational in changing society and refashioning Jewish tradition. Inbal Kashtan unabashedly asserted that her ceremony, based on Orthodox texts, was positioned “squarely into the sphere of cultural transformation.” It was not intended to be simply a wedding, it was also a “radical political statement.”¹⁹³

In the United States, same-sex marriage is still a political goal even though many liberal rabbis routinely perform Jewish marriages for gay and lesbian couples, in part, as acts of civil disobedience. Because of their extra legal status, it is reasonable to assume that ceremonies will continue to be more creative and self-conscious about their difference from heterosexual weddings. In Canada however, the scenario has become quite different. Now that same-sex couples have access to equal marriage it appears the need to call attention to the uniqueness of their relationship diminishes, if not dissolves completely. Unlike their predecessors who proudly walked before them, Jewish lesbian couples in Toronto, at least, no longer have to carefully think through the meaning behind their traditional Jewish weddings, rather they may simply walk into the egalitarian model that has already been modified for them by the liberal movements of Judaism. These weddings can more readily be considered rituals of conformity more than rites of resistance.

¹⁹³ Kashtan. “Breaking Ground.” 149.

Cultural Transformation

The existence of equal marriage in Canada appears to impact the ways in which a ritual conforms to a traditional religious framework, rendering same-sex weddings, at least in principle, as equivalent to those of opposite sex couples. Whereas in the United States incorporating, or appropriating familiar wedding elements obtains “virtual equality,” in Canada, actual equality is provided to couples, in both symbolic and legal terms, which enables them to obtain religious sanctioning more readily and downplay elements of difference. The contrasting political climates of the U.S. and Canada impact not only the performance of same-sex weddings but also perhaps the meaning inherent in them.

U.S. authors who have written on this subject stress that ceremonies, whether traditional or secular, dance along a continuum of resistance and conformity. Couples through enacting culturally similar rites are both challenging a heterosexist institution while also seeking entry into it.¹⁹⁴ Hull in particular argues that increased visibility of same-sex commitment ceremonies will result in the transformation of marriage itself because lesbian and gay weddings, through their “creative cultural agency,” disrupt conventional understandings of what the institution means.¹⁹⁵ Through the complicity, acknowledgement, and support of those who witness these events, Hull asserts, there is a “mutual reconstruction” of marriage under way in contemporary American culture. Even though some guests do have private misgivings and discomfort, simply “showing up,” she contends, displays a willingness to admit the possibility that marriage may be defined in different ways.¹⁹⁶ In a similar way, Lewin observes that same-sex wedding

¹⁹⁴ See Lewin; Butler; Stiers; Hull; Sherman.

¹⁹⁵ Hull, 75.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

ceremonies, because of their extra-legal status, are “tools of socialization” as much as they are cultural performances.”¹⁹⁷

The assertion that a same-sex wedding facilitates social transformation illustrates Victor Turner’s theory of *communitas* discussed in chapter three, in which he suggests a bonding experience occurs during a rite of passage that empowers the breaking down of social structure to achieve a shared vision or goal. Hull’s suggestion of cultural transformation aptly stresses the potential same-sex weddings have to challenge existing understandings of marriage and what constitutes a legitimate, loving relationship. She and others repeatedly raise the point that these events are tremendously powerful, emotional experiences for both participants and their attendees, precisely because couples face continued oppression and social resistance to their love.¹⁹⁸ Indeed, this interpretation of why same-sex weddings are so moving is a compelling one because I sensed the truth of it during my own fieldwork. I would agree that the visibility of a new set of marriage partners will help to dispel fear and change minds about the validity of committed lesbian and gay relationships. Public and culturally recognizable weddings are already having a ripple effect on the greater communities in which they take place. In chapter three I discussed that even those who are on the periphery of a wedding event are exposed to this new formulation of marriage, which cannot help but expand conventional perceptions, even as it may be troubling for some, at first, to accept.

However, based on my own evidence, I would argue that the ceremony’s potential to facilitate cultural transformation takes on a slightly different tone in Canada than it does in the United States, where weddings, for the most part, are performed outside of

¹⁹⁷ Lewin, *Recognizing Ourselves*, xx.

¹⁹⁸ Hull, 65.

official legal sanction. U.S. authors seem to assume that same-sex weddings are transformational, to a great extent, *because* they are acts of civil disobedience. Due to their extra legal status, ceremonies help to envision social change by either explicitly or implicitly embedding elements of resistance or messages of liberation. In Canada, social change has already occurred through the passing of provincial and federal laws that enable lesbian and gay couples the same access to marriage as their heterosexual counterparts. Therefore, there is no longer a need to assert difference or disempowerment. It is no longer necessary to make a same-sex wedding into a symbol of gay pride or a call for justice. I suggest these characteristics make them transformational in a different way. As same-sex weddings become more commonplace within the landscape of Canadian society, especially in big cities like Toronto, and in established religious traditions like Judaism, lesbian and gay marriage will lose its revolutionary status and become just another way to celebrate the love between two people.¹⁹⁹ Because the battle over legalizing same-sex marriage has been won, over time, one may not simply assume that wedding partners are of the opposite sex, or that they are making some sort of a statement about their difference. These weddings will cease to be a novelty and a source of fear, and the prospect of seeing two women or two men standing together under the *chuppah* or in any other sacred place, will come to be expected as a representation of diversity and not deviance. In the United States, where the battle for equality is still being waged, the hope for a more just future remains in the forefront. The writing and insights that U.S. authors have provided gives us a window in which to see

¹⁹⁹ I distinguish between Canadian citizens who live in this country and residents from elsewhere who travel to Canada to obtain civil marriage licenses in order to make political statements in their own country. Couples may then have a commitment ceremony as a way to meaningfully augment their "legal" marriage. See Lewin "Why Marriage"; and Siri Agrell. "A 40 Year Wait for Wedded Bliss."

the struggles that must still play a role in the ritualizing of same sex unions. While weddings in Canada may lack the creativity and intentionality that are still necessary in the United States, the subjects of this study represent what is possible when the door to equality has been opened and provide a glimpse of what Americans may find once lesbian and gay couples are finally permitted the freedom to walk through it.

Concluding Reflections

Ritual performance may only be a small part of the complex and continuingly controversial issue of same sex marriage, but it may also be a barometer that measures the impact of recent, or potential changes, to its legal definition. Especially when some consider the institution to be threatened by including same-sex couples into this seemingly last bastion of heterosexual exclusivity, a study of this kind gives an indication of what actually happens on the ground when both religious and political authorities have made room for a new kind of marriage. Although this work provides evidence based on a small group of Jewish lesbians in an urban centre with a community reputation for its religious conservatism, it suggests that legal entitlements encourage a tendency to conform to institutional expectations of ritual performance rather than asserting difference, attention to sexual orientation, or political injustice.²⁰⁰ Through establishing why *marriage*, and not some other designation for proving the authenticity of relationships, continues to be important in contemporary society, I have suggested that the institution's symbolic nature makes marriage a sought after goal for same-sex couples to achieve.²⁰¹ Because weddings are often religious events, I have chosen to explore the

²⁰⁰ Further study would determine whether similar results would be found if the focus were on other religious traditions in other Canadian cities.

²⁰¹ Especially those who see themselves as part of mainstream culture.

ways in which the reality of same sex unions challenges biblical texts and theological concepts that have previously obstructed the recognition of lesbian and gay relationships within Judaism. As a religion that has always been informed by the surrounding culture, and more recently by the critiques and innovations of feminism, the liberal movements of Judaism have adapted historically grounded wedding practices in order to reflect the egalitarian nature of most modern relationships. While many same-sex couples draw on the egalitarian model for their Jewish weddings, some recognize within their ceremony that their struggle for equality is ongoing.

My fieldwork examples of Toronto lesbian weddings indicate both the diversity of performance and the consistency of traditional ritual elements. While each individual understands and experiences her tradition differently, all showed a commitment to maintaining a link to culture and history through enacting the familiar and time-honoured rites associated with Jewish marriage. Participants and rabbis interviewed for this research stressed that weddings were intended to be equivalent to any other, and that the presence of legal recognition enabled the performance of a parallel ritual. While the roads that lead to weddings were not always smooth or obstacle-free, couples in this project agreed that having the law behind them made it easier for both their families and communities to accept their relationships as authentic. While my Toronto examples contrast with those from the U.S. in their level of conformity and self-consciousness, all these weddings indicate that the tradition of Jewish marriage is being reshaped simply by the existence and visibility of same-sex partners as central ritual subjects. Grimes observes how rites, even as they adhere to tradition, are never static. They borrow from the past, mix with the present, and reach out toward the future in a process of reinvention:

Rites are not givens; they are hand-me-downs, quilts we continue to patch. Whether we call this activity ritual creativity, ritual invention, ritualizing, ritual making, or ritual revision does not matter as much as recognizing that rites change, that they are also flowing processes, not just rigid structure or momentary events.²⁰²

I suggest that Jewish same-sex weddings in Canada, because they are both religious and legal, are participating in a process of reinvention simply by being. It is not necessary for them to look radically different from an opposite-sex wedding because, by featuring different actors, the rites themselves are fundamentally altered.

When I first embarked on this research I expected to find evidence of thoughtful ritual creativity during a turning point in Canadian history. What I found instead were Jewish weddings similar in appearance and performance to the dozens I have attended in my lifetime. Ritual conformity or ritual resistance can be viewed as either a positive or negative indicator of social change. Some will surely argue that conformity is a sign of complicity to dominant cultural expectations and the mainstreaming of alternative sexual identities. While this argument has merit, the remarkable women in this study suggest that conformity can also be the result of living in a time and place that allows for, and even embraces diversity. Even though Toronto weddings may lack characteristics that mark them as interesting or creative compared to those happening in the United States, their similarity to heterosexual ceremonies indicates that the presence of law is helping couples, along with their rabbis, families, friends, and communities, feel more comfortable and proud about who they are. Instead of seeking to dismantle it, the women we have met are merely widening the wedding canopy so that they too may find a place beneath it. Unlike most of their American counterparts, some of whom cross the border to

²⁰² Grimes, 12.

obtain legal marriage licenses, Canadian couples may simply live their lives without having to continually assert their right to do so.²⁰³ This study has illustrated that far from destroying or disrupting the precepts that religious traditions are founded on, or the sacredness inherent in uniting two souls, same-sex marriage, by gaining legitimate status, has the potential to assist tradition, and by extension society, to strengthen and grow.

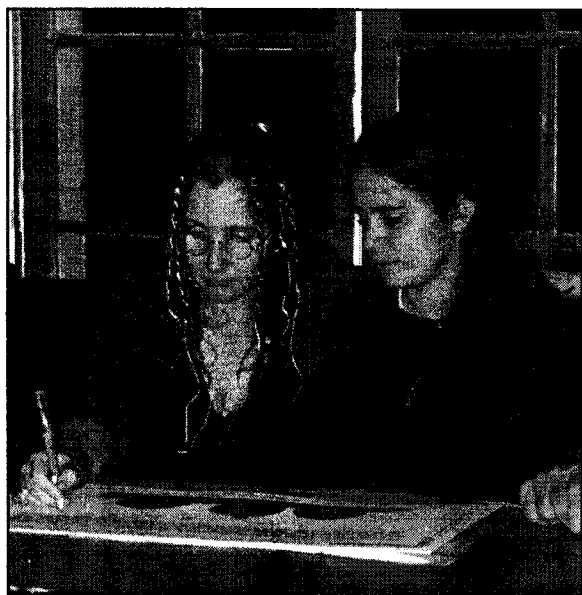
²⁰³ By no means am I suggesting that the presence of same-sex marriage laws dispels homophobia. I recognize that the freedom to live openly as a gay or lesbian couple, married or not, depends on where one may live. Certainly, a multi-cultural and diversely populated city like Toronto enables greater confidence and less fear of discrimination than a smaller, more rural community.

PHOTO GALLERY



Michelle & Alisa

Married, Summer 2006



Natasha & Hila

Married, Fall 2006

*Natasha & Hila are signing
their ketubah.*



Naomi & Chris

Married, Fall 2006



Leah and Michal

Married, Spring 2006



Lainie & Adira
Married, Fall 2004

GLOSSARY

- *Adonai*: Literally, “My Lord.” Another name for God, used most often in prayer.
- *Aron Kodesh*: The holy Ark in which the Torah scrolls are stored.
- *Aliyah*: Literally, to go up. It is the honour of being called up to the *bima*, or pulpit to recite or be given a blessing.
- *Ashkenazi*: Jews whose descendents are from Eastern and Central Europe.
- *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*: A coming of age ceremony when a boy of 13 or a girl as young as 12 is called to read from the Torah for the first time in front of the congregation.
- *Bima*: The podium at the front of the sanctuary where the Torah is read and the rabbi speaks.
- *Brachah/Brachot*: Blessing(s).
- *Bris/Brit*: Circumcision.
- *Cantor*: One trained in chanting liturgical music (*Chazzan* in Hebrew).
- *Chazzan*: Hebrew for Cantor.
- *Chuppah*: Wedding canopy.
- *Erusin*: Betrothal.
- *Halachah*: Jewish law pertaining to proper day-to-day behaviour.
- *HaShem*: Literally “The Name.” Another word for God.
- *Hasidic*: One who practices Hasidism, a mystical religious movement founded in Poland in the eighteenth century by Israel ben Eliezer, also known as the Baal Shem Tov.
- *Ketubah*: The Jewish marriage contract.
- *Kiddush Cup*: A special wine goblet set aside for making the blessing over the wine.
- *Kiddushin*: Literally, holiness. It is the sacred designation of Jewish marriage.
- *Kippah/Kippot*: The small, round head covering worn as a symbol of respect and religious observance in synagogue.
- *Lubavitch*: An ultra-orthodox Jew who identifies with the Chabad Lubavitch movement, one of the most famous and powerful Hasidic sects founded in the eighteenth century in the Russian town of Lubavitch. The movement’s headquarters are now in Brooklyn, New York.
- *Magen David*: Literally, the “shield of David,” the six pointed star that has become the symbol of Judaism.
- *Mazel Tov*: Congratulations! Literally, good luck, or a wish of good fortune.

- *Mezzuzah*: Parchment scroll inscribed with biblical passages, placed in a case, and attached to the doorpost of a Jewish house.
- *Midrash*: Commentary on texts from the Torah.
- *Mitzvah/mitzvot*: Commandments as laid out in the Torah. There are 613 mentioned.
- *Nisuin*: Marriage.
- *Pesach*: Passover. The holiday commemorating the Israelite's Exodus from Egypt.
- *Rosh Hashanah*: The Jewish New Year.
- *Seder*: The ritual meal and service recounting the Exodus from Egypt during Passover.
- *Sefardi*: Jews from Spanish or Portuguese descent.
- *Shabbat*: The Jewish Sabbath beginning on Friday at sundown until Saturday at sunset.
- *Sheva Brachot*: The seven marriage blessings recited at Jewish weddings.
- *Shofar*: A hollow ram's horn that is blown like a trumpet, especially at Rosh Hashanah.
- *Shul*: Synagogue.
- *Sukkah*: A small hut build from branches and leaves constructed for the holiday of *Sukkot*.
- *Tallis/Tallit*: Prayershawl.
- *Tikkun Olam*: The concept of repairing the world.
- *Torah*: The Hebrew Bible, also known as the Five Books of Moses or the Pentateuch.
- *Tu B'Shevat*: The Jewish New Year of the trees.
- *Yihud*: The period immediately following the Jewish wedding ceremony when the couple takes some time on their own before entering the reception.
- *Yom Kippur*: The Jewish Day of Atonement that follows ten days after *Rosh Hashanah*.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Seven Blessing Translations

1-1: Seven Marriage Blessings (Traditional Orthodox). Translation from the Hebrew Source: The Orthodox Union Wedding Guide www.ou.org/wedding7brachot.htm

1. You are blessed, Lord our G-d, the sovereign of the world, who created everything for His glory.
2. You are blessed, Lord our G-d, the sovereign of the world, creator of man.
3. You are blessed, Lord our G-d, the sovereign of the world, who created man in His image, in the pattern of His own likeness, and provided for the perpetuation of His kind. You are blessed, Lord, the creator of man.
4. Let the barren city be jubilantly happy and joyful at her joyous reunion with her children. You are blessed, Lord, who makes Zion rejoice with her children.
5. Let the loving couple be very happy, just as You made your creation happy in the Garden of Eden, so long ago. You are blessed, Lord, who makes the bridegroom and the bride happy.
6. You are blessed, Lord our G-d, the sovereign of the world, who created joy and celebration, bridegroom and bride, rejoicing, jubilation, pleasure and delight, love and brotherhood, peace and friendship. May there soon be heard, Lord our G-d, in the cities of Judea and in the streets of Jerusalem, the sound of joy and the sound of celebration, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the happy shouting of bridegrooms from their weddings and of young men from their feasts of songs. You are blessed, Lord, who makes the bridegroom and the bride rejoice together.
7. You are blessed, Lord our G-d, the sovereign of the world, creator of the fruit of the vine.

1-2: Seven Blessings from Alisa and Michelle's Wedding Ceremony.

Formulated by Rabbi Michael Dolgin and used with permission by Temple Sinai Congregation of Toronto. Translated from Hebrew.

1. Blessed Eternal God, Creator of the Universe, You create the fruit of the vine.
2. Blessed Eternal God, Creator of the Universe, You have created everything with purpose.
3. Blessed Eternal God, Creator of the Universe, You create humankind.
4. Blessed Eternal God, Creator of the Universe, You have created humanity in the divine image, form and idea are your construction. From us, comes a foundation that transcends time. Blessed Eternal God, You create humankind.
5. Let the barren one truly rejoice as her children gather within her to celebrate. Blessed Eternal God, You cause Zion and her children to rejoice.
6. May these two loving friends experience true happiness, as You did in your creation in Gan Eden of old. Eternal God, we praise You who makes joy their for all time (Isaiah 61:7).

7. Blessed Eternal God, Creator of the Universe, You have created joy and gladness and two who love one another. You are the Source of celebration and song, dance and exhilaration, love and kinship, friendship and peace. Eternal, our God, may there soon be heard in the cities of our land and in the squares of Jerusalem the voice of all those who go out into the world alone and empty and who are brought back to fullness by the Eternal One (Ruth 1:21); the voice of those who build up the household of Israel (Ruth 4:11) – may they find peace in the eyes of God (Song of Songs 8:10). Eternal God, we praise You as the One who revives the soul with love (Ruth 4:15).

1-3: Seven Blessings from Naomi and Chris’s Secular Humanist wedding ceremony.

1. We are grateful for the eternal unfolding of the seasons which has brought us to this momentous occasion
2. We rejoice in our heritage and in the blessing of life’s passages that bring both joy and sorrow and offer challenge and opportunity.
3. Radiant is the spirit in humankind that illuminates our world through establishing justice and peace.
4. Empowering is the potential in human beings to combine love, wisdom, and courage and to forge a better life for our loved ones and ourselves.
5. Precious is the love and support of family, friends, and community.
6. Blessed is the happiness of Naomi and Chris, who share in joy and gladness, pleasure and exultation, love and harmony, peace and friendship.
7. We rejoice with Naomi and Chris. May they find every-increasing joy as they devote themselves to growing and sharing, and nurturing and supporting one another.

1-4: Seven Marriage Blessings from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association Manual for Marriage (1997). Used by permission.

1. Blessed are you, THE IMAGELESS our God, sovereign of all worlds, who has fashioned human beings in your image, patterning them in your likeness, and preparing them to share in the chain of life. Blessed are you, BELOVED ONE, who fashions human beings.
2. May Zion, the heart of our people, rejoice in the ingathering of all her children and all who join together in loving relationships. Blessed are you, THE WELCOMING ONE, who makes Zion rejoice with her children.
3. Blessed are you, THE BOUNDLESS ONE, our God, sovereign of all worlds, who creates the fruit of the vine.
4. Blessed are you, SOURCE OF LIFE, our God, sovereign of all worlds, whose whole creation testifies to your glorious presence.
5. Blessed are you, KIND ONE, our God, sovereign of all worlds, who fashions human beings.
6. Blessed are you FAITHFUL ONE, our God, sovereign of all worlds, who has created gladness and joy, loving partners, glee, song, mirth, and exultation, harmony and love, and peace and companionship. Soon, O ETERNAL, our God, may there be heard in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem the voice of

joy, the voice of gladness, the voices of loving partners from the *chuppah*, and from celebrations festive songs of young friends. Blessed are you, JOYFUL ONE, who brings loving companions together to rejoice in each other. Make joyful these loving companions, O God – even as you once in the Garden of Eden made joyful your first couple. Blessed are you DELIGHT, who makes joyful these loving companions.

7. Make joyful these loving companions, O God – even as you once in the Garden of Eden made joyful your first couple. Blessed are you, DELIGHT, who makes joyful these loving companions.

1-5: Alternative Translation for the Seven Blessings. Developed for a lesbian commitment ceremony by Knobel, et al in “Union Ceremonies for Same-Gender Couples,” Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2004. 10-11.

1. Praised are you Adonai, Ruler of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.
2. Just as Sarah brought new life into this world with laughter, so may God bless you with the ability to create a new life together – a life full of joy and laughter and happiness.
3. Just as Rebecca at the well satisfied the thirst of Eliezer and the camels, so may God bless you with the flow of generosity and lovingkindness in your home.
4. Rachel and Leah were sisters; they were the same, yet were different. May God bless you with the gift of respecting each other’s capabilities and may you help each other to grow in strength.
5. Just as Miriam lead her people to freedom, may God bless you with the power to inspire others to sing and dance freely.
6. Just as Deborah was a prophet and a judge, may God bless you with eyes that see the good and the bad in this world so that you may be partners with god in healing the world, *tikkun olam*.
7. Like Ruth, you in love and devotion declared, “For wherever you go I will go, Wherever you lodge, I will lodge; you people shall be my people, and your God, shall be my God,” may you both be strengthened in your commitment to one another as you journey from year to year.

Appendix 2: Texts for Ketubot**2-1: Ketubah text for Naomi and Chris.**

Today, standing under the *chuppah*, we join hands to walk life's path together. We pledge to be equal partners, loving friends, and supportive companions all through our lives. We promise to encourage and support one another to be our best selves, while also joining efforts toward our shared dreams. We commit to openness – sharing our innermost thoughts, feelings, and experiences – so that we grow ever closer. We shall value each other's uniqueness, beliefs, and cherished family traditions.

Let us build a home together. We will lay the foundation with respect, understanding, and compassion. Its rooms will be constructed with laughter, love, and warmth. Its doors will open wide so we may embrace friends and family. Let our home be painted with wonder, delight, and the joy of life together. In it, we will provide comfort to one another during life's sorrows.

We recognize that as we enter into this covenant with one another our relationship is deepened by our relationships with others. May our lives be enriched by devotion to each other, our loving community, and the spirit of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world.

Each woman signed as spouse below the document, followed by the signatures of the rabbi and two other witnesses.

2-2: Ketubah text for Alisa and Michelle.

Each woman spoke the following words in the presence of witnesses before their wedding ceremony. The text appeared in Hebrew before the English translation below:

I, Michelle, will be your partner in life, by the consent of the *Beit Din* of Toronto, according to the Law of Moses and Israel.

I will cherish and respect you and work for our mutual sustenance, living with you as is the way of married couples.

I, Alisa, will be your partner in life, by the consent of the *Beit Din* of Toronto, according to the Law of Moses and Israel.

I will cherish and respect you and work for our mutual sustenance, living with you as is the way of married couples.

Beneath the following statement, each signed their name to the document along with the rabbi and two Jewish witnesses:

We have promised to establish a Jewish home from this day forth. We have committed ourselves to the covenant of marriage written between us this day. We have performed the symbolic acquisition with regard to everything written and explained above. All herein written is valid and binding.

Appendix 3: Interview Questions

3-1: Questions for Couples

- Tell me about the road that lead to your wedding.
- Why did you decide to get married and why a Jewish ceremony?
- How did you find someone to conduct the ceremony?
- What is your religious background?
- How important was religious and/or spiritual content in your wedding?
- How important was legal sanctioning?
- If you were not legally recognized, would you have pursued a religious commitment ceremony?
- What elements of the traditional ceremony were retained? Which ones did you discard?
- How did you decide what to wear?
- Do you feel that your wedding was in any way a gesture of political activism?
- How do you understand your rituals, relationship to be different from heterosexual couples and how was that reflected in your ceremony?
- What was the reaction to your marriage/wedding from friends and family?
- Does being legally married affect your level of entitlement to legitimacy?

3-2: Questions for Rabbis and Officials

- How many weddings do you officiate at in a typical year? How many same-sex weddings have you performed?
- What are the major considerations you need to make when preparing and planning a same-sex Jewish wedding?
- What kinds of questions do you ask couples as they approach you to officiate at their weddings? Are they different kinds of questions than you would ask heterosexual couples?
- Do one or both partners have to be Jewish in order for you to conduct the ceremony?

- What is the liturgy you are using? What changes have been made to accommodate same-sex couples?
- In what ways do you see these ceremonies as being revolutionary and in what ways are they complicit with traditional egalitarian wedding ceremonies?
- How has the challenge of same-sex weddings motivated change within your religious movement?
- What effect have these weddings had on your congregation or in the Jewish community?
- What role does equal marriage legislation have on your ability to perform these weddings and the community's receptivity to them?
- Would you have been willing to officiate before marriage laws were passed in Ontario?

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