

## **At a Gay Synagogue, a Rabbi Isn't Fazed by Legalities**

**By THOMAS CRAMPTON**

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Rabbi Ayelet S. Cohen awoke one morning to find she had turned into a criminal - at least in the eyes of some.

With charges brought against two members of the clergy last Monday in relation to same-sex marriage ceremonies conducted in New Paltz, N.Y., Rabbi Cohen realized that she had broken the law by conducting a similar wedding herself.

The ceremony, conducted by Rabbi Cohen, 29, of the Congregation Beth Simchat Torah in Greenwich Village for a lesbian couple last July, was identical to the marriage ceremony for a man and woman. The couple stood beneath a Huppah, the traditional wedding canopy, as a cantor sang seven blessings and witnesses signed the Ketubah, the Jewish wedding contract.

With another wedding planned in four months, Rabbi Cohen immediately called the New York Board of Rabbis to see if she could be prosecuted for past or future weddings.

"They said that if I signed the Ketubah, I could be charged," Rabbi Cohen said. "I am happy to say I did sign it."

Like many New York clergy members who have solemnized same-sex marriages in the past, Rabbi Cohen argued that declaring a church rite effectively illegal breaches the separation of church and state.

"The police can read about the weddings in the newspaper if they want," Rabbi Cohen said. "Nobody has called to investigate, and I will continue to conduct ceremonies, even if illegal."

The district attorney of Ulster County, Donald A. Williams, brought charges against two Unitarian clergy and the mayor of New Paltz for solemnizing the marriage of couples who did not have wedding licenses.

On Thursday, more than 30 clergy members gathered on the steps of New York City Hall to protest the prosecutions, with one rabbi and one minister conducting marriage ceremonies.

While Mr. Williams of Ulster County said he could not turn a blind eye when people empowered by the state solemnized marriages without licenses, his counterpart in Manhattan, District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau, said same-sex marriage questions belong in civil rather than criminal courts.

"The situation is very unclear, but I do know they have prosecuted for a ceremony I consider essential to my faith," Rabbi Cohen said. "They might as well decide to prosecute bar mitzvahs for boys with brown hair."

On a national level, the push by President Bush for a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage presents an even greater danger to religious leaders, Rabbi Cohen said.

"He needs to learn that he is only the president of the United States," Rabbi Cohen said, "not the leader of all churches and synagogues."

As a rabbi at the Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, Rabbi Cohen helps lead one of the largest gay synagogues in the world.

Founded in 1973 after placement of a small classified advertisement in The Village Voice by a Jew from India, the congregation has grown to 800 active members. More than 3,600 worshipers attend the congregation's Yom Kippur service at the Javits Center.

Everything from the rabbi's study to the book-lined walls resembles synagogues in similar urban settings. Children come in for Hebrew lessons and volunteers gathered on one recent afternoon to discuss their

favorite memories from reading the Haggadah, the Jewish text for Passover.

There are, however, some distinguishing characteristics. The toilets, for one, are distinguished by the gay pride symbols of doubled-up male or female signs.

At the celebration of Purim, a holiday where Jews put on fancy dress for a reading of the Scroll of Esther, a large portion of the synagogue's male members dress up in drag.

"Unlike most synagogues, we make a habit of being open about our sexual orientation," Rabbi Cohen said. "I am straight and I was trained as a conservative Jew."

A visit to Congregation Beth Simchat Torah several years ago invigorated her faith and inspired Rabbi Cohen's journey away from a branch of Judaism that prohibits training of openly gay rabbis to a temple that embraces them.

"Nobody joins this synagogue to impress their grandmother," Rabbi Cohen said. "People come because practicing their faith here completes them."

The synagogue's open attitude toward homosexuality contrasts sharply with Rabbi Cohen's own experiences in the late 1990s at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan, the Jewish Conservative Movement's seminary.

The Conservative Movement permits gay worshipers but not gay rabbis. Other branches of Judaism, such as the Reform Movement and Reconstructionist Movement give unqualified acceptance to homosexuals, while the Orthodox Movement rejects them at all levels.

"Debate about the prohibition of openly gay rabbinical students was a constant topic of discussion at the seminary," Rabbi Cohen said. "This was a hotter issue than interfaith marriage, the situation in Israel or even anti-Semitism."

Rabbi Cohen said that the most annoying arguments against same-sex marriage were based on religious traditions.

"There is this false concept that marriage has never changed for one thousand years," said Rabbi Cohen. "In the Bible women are sold as property to their husbands by their fathers. Do we really want that back again?"

In the case of conducting same-sex or any other marriage, Rabbi Cohen said she does not make the process easy.

"No quickie Las Vegas-style marriages happen here," Rabbi Cohen said. "I have one couple I will work with for more than eight months before the wedding."

Rabbi Cohen said she would not waiver in the fight to legalize gay marriage.

"My teachers were conservative, but thanks to them I carry a strong legacy of social justice," Rabbi Cohen said. "If same-sex marriage breaks the law, I am proud to be a criminal rabbi."