

---

# This Year in 2004, We Need More Than Pride, We Need Courage

Contributed by Rabbi Joshua Lesser

During the 70s and the 80s the Jewish community was involved in a campaign to reach out to Soviet Jews. Not only was their quality of life diminished, they could not fully claim their Jewish identity nor engage in Jewish practice without the risk of punishment or even death. It was difficult as a child to fully grasp the complexities of the plight of Soviet Jewry nor was I sure about what I could do. When Russian Jews turned up in my classroom at the Hebrew Academy, it was their first-hand accounts that helped me relate to seeing Soviet Jews as part of my extended community. At the Hebrew Academy not only did we raise funds but we offered prayers and educated other Jews on how to respond and support our Soviet Jewish sisters and brothers.

It is from my own experience as a child that I have been amazed with the ability of many of our young people at CBH to understand the needs of a community potentially different from their own but still make the connection that they are part of the CBH family. Specifically I am referring to our young people embracing and speaking out for gay and lesbian Jews. Brave B'nai Mitzvah like Ben Cohen and Alisha Kramer and others have taken on the issue of the rights of gay and lesbian Jews in their D'vrai Torah.

I wonder how many families explain the nature of CBH and its founding to their extended family and friends. Surely there is some discomfort in wondering how outsiders may perceive our synagogue and the choice to align oneself with the community. Though quickly, even those with little experience with the gay and lesbian community express the warmth and the beauty of our synagogue. So it is pretty profound for some of our youth to take on the issue of advocating for gay and lesbian rights in front of their family, their friends and their parents' friends. When I have worked with our teens, many of them have shared with me how they have challenged their classmates' bias and homophobia. When I see our young members of CBH take such courageous action, it gives me hope for our next generation.

In November, along with the presidential ballot there will be the now infamous initiative that would alter our Constitution to define marriage solely between a man and a woman. Moreover, what is an even greater act of deceit, though it will not be on the ballot, this measure is written in such a way that it can be used to prohibit civil unions and prevent corporations from offering same sex partnership benefits. There are many who believe we have little chance to stop this ballot initiative and so are choosing to become complacent. I wonder what would have happened to those Soviet Jews if there were people in the Jewish community that saw advocating for their plight as too challenging or impossible.

As we approach Pride, we need to do more than just feel pride about the wonderful synagogue we belong to. Rather we must involve ourselves in educating ourselves and others

about the true nature of this ballot initiative:

- The ballot initiative is hypocritical because conservatives, as Bob Barr has made clear, do not alter the Constitution without tremendous cause.

- This initiative is purposely confusing, thus those who do not favor marriage but do favor civil unions may be fooled into thinking that it is safe to vote in favor of this change.

- The Constitution should never be a place for hate or bias. Our country's and state's history is already painful because of the treatment of women and black people in the Constitution.

- Many of the top businesses offer domestic partnership benefits to gays and lesbians so they can hire the best people in the field regardless of sexual orientation. It is bad for business to prohibit some of Georgia's major corporations from continuing these practices.

- In the Georgia Code of Laws we already have a state defense of marriage act making this initiative redundant.

In the beginning of June, Gay Pride month, the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force will be coming to town to train forty to sixty leaders on many strategies and components of battling this ballot initiative.

The Georgia LGBT Power Summit is an intensive training and action program for experienced leaders who are highly motivated to build a powerful, state-wide campaign to defeat the proposed Constitutional amendment and take a huge step forward in building political power in the LGBT community for the long term. The goals are to develop broad public support, identify and build a large scale base of pro LGBT voters, recruit volunteers to build the base, raise funds to support a campaign and build progressive alliances and action oriented coalitions across race, class and gender lines.

I have been selected as one of those people. I plan to spend time this summer, including some of my vacation, to fight this initiative because I will not allow my community to be treated like second class citizens. Though I know that as a synagogue we are very comfortable with these issues inside of our walls, I wonder if we have the courage that many of our teens have in addressing these issues outside of our walls. Do not think we can overturn this ballot initiative without YOU. Those who are well informed and I are available to educate people on how to have these discussions. We must not stand idly by but rather fight for the rights of our community to be treated equally outside of the synagogue. This Pride we need more than pride, we need your courage. We need your courage to have these difficult conversations so that the world outside our synagogue looks more like the world inside our synagogue.

