

November 29, 2005  
Statement of Rabbi Jonathan Biatch  
Temple Beth El, Madison, Wisconsin

Good morning. I am Rabbi Jonathan Biatch, spiritual leader of Temple Beth El in Madison, and I thank you for allowing Wisconsin citizens to speak to this proposed referendum.

My synagogue is affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism, which has ten Jewish congregations in the state of Wisconsin. I do not speak for all members of these congregations, but I believe that my views are fairly representative of our tradition, which looks to the values of the Hebrew scripture for guidance on how to conduct our lives.

I am here today to voice my opposition to the proposed amendment, and to urge you to use your leadership to reject the proposal that would send this referendum to the people of Wisconsin.

I fear that this proposal, if passed, will create in the eyes of the Wisconsin constitution a class of victims of prejudice, that is, citizens of Wisconsin who are homosexuals: individuals and families who have already suffered subtle and blatant injustices in their lives.

I oppose this proposal on the basis of the biblical value that views each and every member of the human family as made in the image of God, as stated in the first chapter of the book of Genesis [Genesis 1:27]: “God created humanity in God's image; in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them.” That includes the estimated three to ten percent of Wisconsin citizens who are homosexual.

This is not solely a Jewish value: It is basic to all Abrahamic faiths. If we believe that all people are made in the image of God, and, therefore, that each member of the human family reflects the goodness of the Eternal One, then we must act accordingly toward each person. Each individual is inherently valuable, and in this spirit, we must embrace our human diversity, and demand equality for all.

Second, I speak against this proposal because it would permanently deny equal rights to Wisconsin's lesbian and gay couples, people who have dedicated their lives to one another. As we know, a marriage license extends over 1,000 federally granted rights and benefits, and close to 200 state-granted entitlements. Denying these important legal protections, which is the practical result of this proposal, will hurt real families who live in every part of our state.

Through working with gay and lesbian individuals, couples, and families, I know that they have been denied basic rights because of their sexual orientation. Our society has, sadly, been in the habit of refusing to recognize the emotional ties that bind together members of the same gender, simply because they are of the same gender. And this discrimination – whether on the individual or official level – is something that must guard against.

And third, this particular proposal raises serious Constitutional concerns. I would not favor using the Constitutional amendment process to resolve this or any divisive social issue of current concern. Loading down our Constitution with such amendments weakens our bedrock document that should – ideally – bind citizens of our state together. A question of basic human rights should not be subject to the will and whim of the majority, and Wisconsinites and Americans of all faith communities and backgrounds support this value. These constitutional concerns alone should merit rejection of the referendum.

I am opposed to this proposal for these three reasons, and accordingly I urge you and your legislative colleagues to reject it even before this referendum appears on our state ballot.

Thank you.