



Rabbi Bernard Mehlman (photo: Marilyn Humphries)

OPENLY JEWISH

Long before it was fashionable Rabbi Mehlman made Temple Israel a safe haven for LGBT members

BY CHUCK COLBERT

For 20 years, until he retired in 1999, Bernard Mehlman served as senior rabbi of Temple Israel, New England's largest Reform congregation, located in the Longwood medical area of Boston. A longstanding champion of equal civil rights, Rabbi Mehlman has advocated everything from compassion for people living with HIV/AIDS to non-discrimination laws to hate crimes protection to marriage equality. He is an exemplar of a generation of liberal clergy who moved rapidly and fully to become an outspoken leader on behalf of gay rights. And yet, his "biggest contribution" to the local congregation, he said during a recent interview at his home, "was to integrate Temple Israel."

In 1985, Mehlman invited a small group of mostly gay men to meet with temple clergy. Rabbi Mehlman recalled the meeting (and a subsequent gathering a year later) as a "testing of the water." They wanted to know: Is Temple Israel a "safe haven" for openly gay people?

"Yes," but Mehlman envisioned much more. "I will continue to support you,

advocate in the larger community and at the State House," he explained to them. "But I am not your rabbi. If you want me to be your rabbi, then you need to join our temple and you will put on our plate a whole different set of agendas that we are going to have to talk through."

In the spring of 1987, Marc Maxwell and David Passer joined Temple Israel as the first openly gay couple. At the time, the board of directors approved all new memberships. Mehlman recalled the meeting when the two men's joint membership came up for a vote. Someone asked who approved it, and Mehlman said that he had. Pin-dropping, dead silence followed. Yet quickly, Mehlman remembered, another person called the question. It was seconded, and the board voted unanimously to approve their membership. "We never had a problem with gay members at the temple," he said. "A few [people] complained privately, but never out in the open. That was the end of it. The rest is history."

A native New Yorker and 1957 NYU graduate, Rabbi Mehlman was ordained in

1963 from Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. Before coming to Temple Israel in February 1978, Mehlman held jobs as an Army chaplain in Germany (1963 to 1965), and with congregations in New York City (1965 to 1967) and Washington, D. C. (1967 to 1978).

The relative ease with which Temple Israel integrated LGBT members distinguishes the congregation from many worshipping communities where out gay people often experience ostracism and outright hostility.

At one time Temple Israel had an unofficial LGBT havurah (study or affinity group). It disbanded years ago because gay members were so well integrated into the community there was no longer a need to gather separately.

Temple Israel's early outreach to gay members in fact opened the gates to single parents, some of them lesbians raising children, as well as to Jews of color and to younger generations of Jews in their twenties and thirties. Temple Israel also welcomes Jews by choice, interfaith individuals and families with non-Jewish partners and spouses. The congregation's deliberate outreach and consequent diversity hallmark the temple as a trailblazer and role model among Reform movement synagogues.

Over the years, Temple Israel, which is nearly 155 years old, has offered a full range of Jewish rituals, including conversions, bar/bat mitzvahs, commitment ceremonies, and baby naming ceremonies for LGBT members. The first week of May 2004, when same-sex marriage became "legal" in Massachusetts, Temple Israel and its clergy were busily performing wedding ceremonies, some of them celebrated on the synagogue's bimah (altar).

The temple also provides a rich smorgasbord of intellectual learning opportunities—lectures, seminars, and Torah study.

Sure enough, the word got out. If Jews needed a spiritual home, Temple Israel was the most likely to embrace them.

Temple Israel's transformation into a new era all began with "an understanding as a heterosexual person that [gay people] didn't feel safe institutionally, having been hounded out and marginalized" elsewhere, Rabbi Mehlman said. Yet, "here we were saying 'We are trustworthy keepers of a spiritual safe haven.'" ♦