

Our Wedding at GJC, June 2, 2002

by Malkah Binah Klein and Neysa Nevins

We didn't really see ourselves as pioneers as much as being in the right place at the right time, blessed with many wonderful mentors who had lit the path ahead of us. Neysa had been an active member of the Atlanta GLBT synagogue, Congregation Bet Haverim, before moving to Pennsylvania. Malkah Binah was a student at RRC, and while she was not fully "out" when she began her rabbinical studies at RRC in 1999, she moved to Philadelphia knowing that RRC would be a place that would embrace her as she came out.

Malkah Binah's dear friends from rabbinical school, Miriam and Mike, had celebrated their wedding at GJC in 2000, and she loved the flow of their wedding, from the ceremony in the Charry Sanctuary up to the Marcus for lunch and dancing. When she and Neysa decided to have a wedding, in large part to create the opportunity for a family celebration, GJC was the obvious choice. She didn't even realize that there might be a barrier to having the wedding at GJC until she mentioned her plans for a GJC wedding after services at Dorshei, and as told about a lesbian couple who had not been welcomed to the Charry for their aufruf aliyah a few years earlier.

We met with Rabbi Lenny Gordon to inquire about our wedding and he explained that the Conservative movement did not have a rule against hosting gay weddings, and to his knowledge no Conservative synagogue in the Philadelphia area had yet been asked this question. He was supportive of us and brought the question to the lay leaders, who approved our request.

Our wedding day was joy-filled and beautiful. We asked Rabbi Linda Holtzman to perform the wedding. Linda was Malkah Binah's beloved teacher from RRC, who had played an instrumental role in developing RRC's policy in 1985 to not discriminate based on sexual orientation and who, at the time of our wedding, had already conducted many gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies. About 180 guests joined us, from near and far.

We began with separate tisches before the wedding, where our friends entertained us with (silly) Torah and song. Then we met at the stairs between the Silver Kiddush Lounge and Charry Lobby, Malkah Binah one step up from Neysa so we could see eye-to-eye, and we held a bedeken, a symbolic unveiling during which Rabbi Holtzman invited us to look into each other's eyes and affirm our commitment to be with all of our partner, that which she reveals easily, and that which remains more hidden. We then notarized our wills and powers-of-attorney, in the Charry Lobby, with all of our wedding guests as witnesses. Our wedding was not yet "legal" in American law, and we wanted our guests to understand how we were creating some legal protections for our relationship.

Then our parents walked each of us down the aisle in the Charry Sanctuary, we circled one another and then climbed the steps to the bimah to be married under our chuppah. After the ceremony, Kenny Ulansey's band energized the room with klezmer as we danced our hearts out. Then we feasted on delicious vegetarian food prepared by Frank and the wonderful staff of Centre Catering.

We were touched that a young man, after experiencing our wedding told his parents, "I want a Jewish wedding." This was success-- a Jewish wedding that was about joy and family and community. The wedding also helped to create much more ease in our family systems, removing any awkwardness as our parents spoke of our relationship. We are grateful that GJC is now celebrating PRIDE Shabbat, actively affirming the spectrum of gender and sexuality within our families and community.