

'A Classic Case of Civil Disobedience'

Rabbi David Lazar battles to make gay and lesbian rights a reality in Israel.

By Hillel Kuttler

Illustrations by Charmaine Caire

David Lazar speaks, looks and acts the rebel. The pony-tailed rabbi was raised in a liberal-Conservative Jewish home in Los Angeles, became Orthodox, studied in the early 1980s in a hesder yeshiva in Israel, settled in the Gaza Strip and sold holy texts in Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods.

The pendulum swung back 15 years ago: Lazar became a Conservative rabbi, ran a congregation in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Ramot and today leads a Masorti (traditional-Conservative) synagogue in Ramat Aviv. He successfully pushed for the movement's seminary in Israel to ordain women as rabbis.

Lazar now advocates on behalf of homosexuals in Israel. His initial involvement in an AIDS task force in Tel Aviv and a cultural organization in Jerusalem has reached an apex, with Lazar performing commitment ceremonies and weddings for homosexuals.

Since 2001, Lazar has married-off both male couples and female couples. Nearly all couples are Israeli. One is religiously observant. Lazar was scheduled to perform a wedding in December for a couple who are in prison and hope to receive a furlough to hold the ceremony on the Tel Aviv beach.

The weddings have resembled het-

erosexual Jewish rites, with eidim (official witnesses), the signing of a ketubah and the couple standing under a chuppah. Each mate places a ring on the other's finger. In some weddings, one person breaks the glass at the conclusion; sometimes both do; in others, none do. Instead of the traditional references to a chatan and kallah (bride and groom), Lazar designates them as — in the case of two women — ahuva (beloved) and ahuvatah (one who loves the beloved).

Before reaching that point, Lazar insists on getting to know the couple well. That includes hosting them for a Shabbat dinner with his family. When he marries off a heterosexual couple, Lazar will have met them for a total of eight hours; for a homosexual couple, for 20 hours.

After a lesbian couple came over one Friday night, Lazar told his twin daughters, then 8 years old, that the women were a couple.

"'So?' they said. 'I mean lesbians,' I said. They said, 'Duh!' So that showed me that education is working," Lazar explained.

A straight, married father of five girls, Lazar, 47, explained that he is motivated by an impulse to do the right thing. His position has placed him at odds with the Conservative establishment in the United States, but that hardly bothers Lazar.

"I've often found a way to be in different worlds at the same time. I see no conflict between being involved in the gay and lesbian world and my wife going to the mikvah before Shabbat," Lazar said, enjoying a sandwich and the mild weather at a coffee shop's outdoor table near his home.

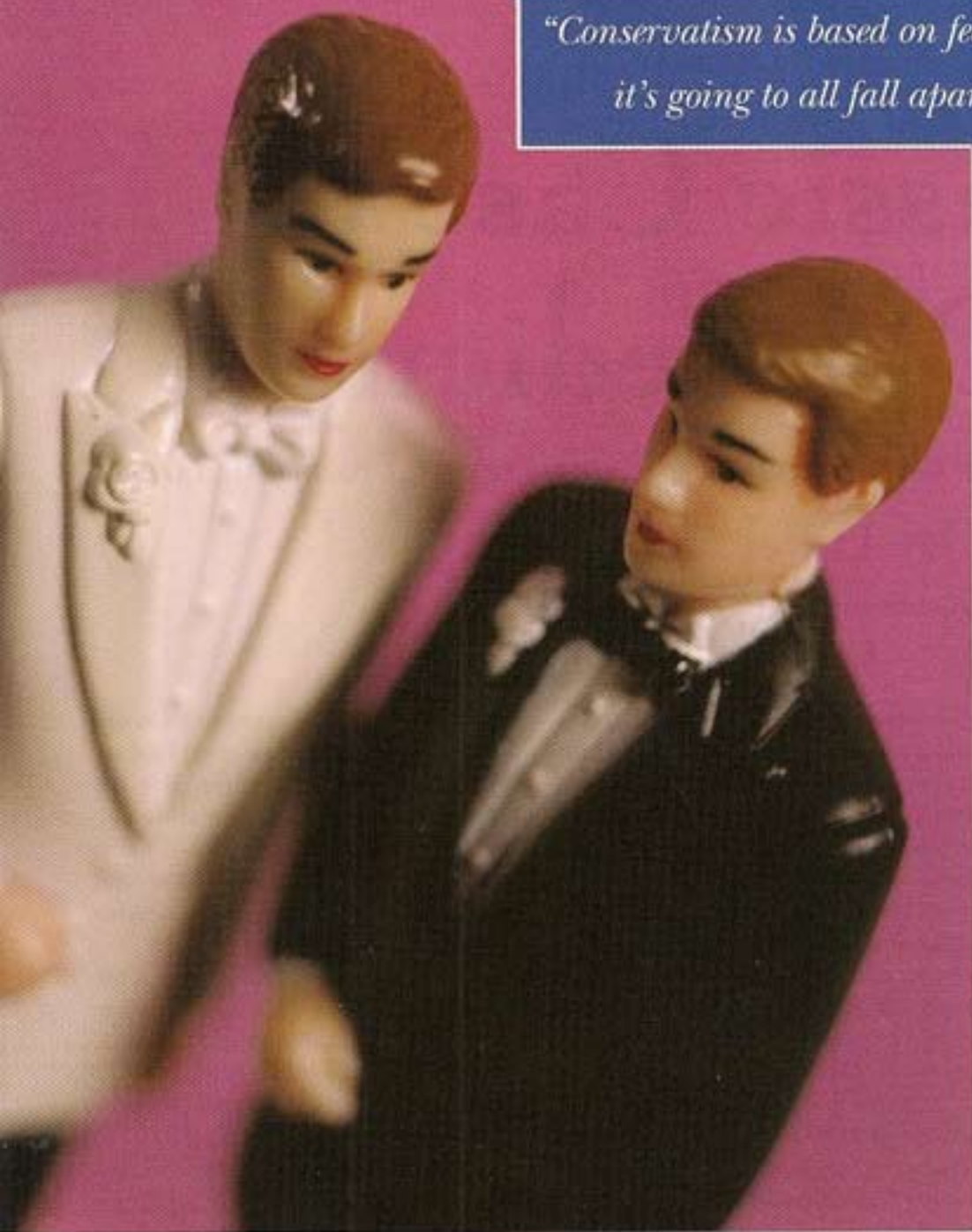
"There's serious discrimination in the Conservative movement, and in society in general, against gays and lesbians. There's a serious injustice being done. ... The issue of Judaism and homosexuality is, for me, one of social justice.

"My involvement with the gay and lesbian community here in Israel stems from that. I have no gay brother, father or best friend; no lesbian mother, sister or daughter — that I know of. Just plain, old tzedek [justice]. One of my goals as a rabbi is to help make this as normal as possible, as soon as possible, and that is why I've been performing weddings."

In 1992, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly issued what it called a "consensus statement," saying that clergy "will not perform commitment ceremonies for gays and lesbians."

The issue of performing weddings between homosexuals was not discussed then, said Rabbi Kassel Abelson, chair-

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man of the committee. The statement, which is meant as guidance, "is not a standard," and each rabbi decides on the application of halachah, he said. In April, the committee will consider any halachic challenges to the policy, he added.

As to Lazar's officiating at commitment ceremonies and weddings between homosexuals, Abelson said: "He is entitled to interpret Jewish law as he chooses. If you're asking, 'Will he be thrown out of the movement?' No. 'Will his ceremonies be given official standing?' Also no. He is doing that as an individual."

Lazar considers his officiating at homosexual weddings and commitment ceremonies to be a "classic case of civil

disobedience," and called the movement's opposition "immoral."

"Conservatism is based on fear — that if we try to change, it's going to all fall apart. I just don't buy that," said Lazar, who is director of Rikma, an organization in Jerusalem that trains community leaders. "The Conservative movement tells gays, 'We welcome you into our synagogues and we will defend your civil rights. But we will not defend your religious rights.'"

"That is religious rights run amok. I am interested in my Jewish values informing my civil life, and I am interested in my civic values influencing my Judaism — like, for example, democracy and environmentalism."

Lazar's supporters in Israel consider him an inspiration. Valerie Stessin recalled that as a student at Jerusalem's Schechter Institute, she and three other female students sat in a corner during a prayer service. Lazar, a fellow student, beckoned them to sit near him, with the men, a gesture that demonstrated to Stessin — previously familiar only with Orthodox Judaism — that "things could be different," she said.

Stessin was studying in the educators' track, but with Lazar's encouragement, she switched to the rabbinical track and became the institute's first female rabbi.

"I could not have done it if I had felt that I was doing it myself, alone," said Stessin, who now works in Jewish education. "He very much wanted it to happen. I was interested, but he kept saying, 'Don't worry; you can do it.' I needed the shoulder to lean on."

To Tamar Ascher, Lazar's comments at a workshop on diversity in Judaism bespoke acceptance by a religious leader of her lifestyle as a lesbian. She and her partner went along with Lazar's suggestion that they arrange a religious ceremony of sorts, but they did not want the trappings of a Jewish wedding.

Lazar instead wrote an original script that impressed even the couple's straight friends enough that they wanted a similar ceremony for their weddings.

"That was very neat, as a byproduct," said Ascher, who lectures at a teacher's college in Jerusalem. "[David] is incredibly creative. He incorporates what you're supposed to be as a rabbi. A leader is only a leader if he has followers, and you have to show where you're coming from and where you're going in a clear, non-threatening way.

"He is a spiritual leader, a religious guide. If I feel like I'm having a religious dilemma, I definitely would turn to him."

Hillel Kuttler last wrote for Inside on a special, very fragrant corner of Tel Aviv.