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Gender issues in Jewish law

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Lesbians and Their Children

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Lesbians and Their Children

Contemporary American Reform Responsa,
New York, 1987, # 200

Walter Jacob

QUESTION: Two women who are in a lesbian relationship have raised a child who has been adopted by one of them. The child has been formally converted to Judaism with *berit milah* and *mikveh*. This was done like any other conversion and posed no problems. Now, however, the child is about to be *bar mitzvah* and the two women want to participate in the service as any parents. Should they be permitted to do so? (Rabbi M. Staitman, Pittsburgh, PA)

ANSWER: Although Jewish tradition from the Bible onward strongly condemns homosexuality, it has rather little to say about lesbianism. Some of the sources indicate that it may have been treated as a temporary phenomenon, rather than as a permanent condition among women. So, the *Talmud* (*Shab. 65a; Yeb. 76a*) and the *Sifrei* prohibit sexual intercourse between women, but do not specify any punishment. They state that such a woman was permitted to marry even into the priesthood. As lesbianism was considered obscene, later sources demanded punishment (*makot mardut*) for those involved (*Yad Hil. Issurei Biah 21.8; Shulhan Arukh Even Haezer 20.2*). As, however, there was no biblical basis for such punishment, there was also little further discussion in responsa literature. We should be guided by these feelings and by our tradition's strong support of normative family life. Everything we do should strengthen the family. We should, therefore, ignore the lesbian relationship and feel no need to deal with it unless the individuals involved make an issue of it. If they do not, then their lesbian relationship is irrelevant. They should be permitted, along with other individuals, both male and female, to participate in the *Torah* readings as well as other portions of the *shabbat* services. This will indicate to both the congregation and this household that we recognize the love and care given to the child and do not focus on the lesbian relationship.