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My Commitment Ceremony With Obama

By [David Shneer](#)

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I'm one of those Americans who pounded the pavement for candidate Barack Obama in 2008 but has since grown ambivalent about his presidency. He wasn't pulling out enough troops from Afghanistan; he wasn't working hard enough to push Israel to halt settlement building; the health care initiative turned into a disaster. And he wasn't coming out in favor of the legal rights for all Americans to get married, a shortcoming made all the more glaring by New York's recent legal victory. But my ambivalence fell away when I fell in love again with Obama after he invited me over to his house.

The rekindling of our romance all started one evening, when I came home from work to find a beautiful invitation in the mail. I'm not sure how I knew it was from the White House. It's not like Barack and I write to each other all that often, aside from some group e-mail policy briefings that go to only his closest 10,000 friends. But I could tell. It was the creamy white, classic, heavy paper, the beautiful calligraphy with my name properly spelled, and the giveaway: the return address, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

I opened it up to find an invitation to Barack and Michelle's 3rd annual LGBT Pride Party, taking place just four weeks later on June 29. (Apparently, the six-week rule for formal invitations doesn't apply to the White House.) I was invited to the biggest gay party of the year because I had gone to the White House earlier in Obama's presidency for policy briefings on issues related to Israel. At the time, the administration was searching for a group of American Jewish leaders that would be an alternative to the ones that seemed to be handed to it by beltway insiders. Thirty other grassroots Jewish leaders and I were expected to provide the administration a different vision of, and better access to,

segments of the American Jewish community that might be more sympathetic to Obama's strategy on Israel and Palestine. I came as the LGBT activist in the room, founder of a national Jewish LGBT organization, now part of Keshet, and was the only representative of that very important "swing vote," the LGBT Jewish constituency.

Unlike my previous White House visit, this time I was representing Jews in a crowd of LGBT activists. The party was a fantastic affair, although the queer crowd was dressed more D.C. than fabulous. After a few glasses of champagne, the president appeared. And 10 minutes later I was in love again. (And don't worry, my husband knows. He was there, too.)

Everyone is aware that the president has a gift for oration, but it's not just how he communicates that makes him an inspirational speaker; it's also what he says. That afternoon, he outlined for a skeptical crowd what his administration had accomplished in its two-plus years: ending the HIV travel ban, forcing all hospitals that accept Medicare to treat gay or lesbian partners just like straight partners, passing a federal anti-hate crimes bill and, more recently, taking on the Defense of Marriage Act and the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy in the military. In his words: "I told you I was against the Defense — so-called 'Defense' — of Marriage Act. I've long supported efforts to pass a repeal through Congress. And until we reach that day, my administration is no longer defending DOMA in the courts. The law is discriminatory. It violates the Constitution. It's time for us to bring it to an end." For a law passed during the Clinton administration, those were brave words. The bottom line is that after his inspiring speech at the LGBT Pride party at the White House, I felt again like this president was on my side.

No, he didn't say publicly that he was in favor of same-sex marriage, and he owned up to that fact in an offhand remark addressing New York's recent legislation. He knew what everyone in that room was thinking, but rather than addressing it head on, he sidestepped the issue. Instead, he insinuated that if we wanted him to keep moving down his LGBT agenda checklist, politically he couldn't say anything about same-sex marriage.

As he came to his stirring end, he talked about how America is changing not just in legislatures, but also in people's homes and around office water coolers: "And that's not just the story of the gay rights movement. It is the story of America, and the slow, inexorable march towards a more perfect union." Although quoting Martin Luther King Jr. is something of a cheap parlor trick, Obama did it so well that both at the speech and as I was writing this, I got emotional (or, as I posted on Facebook later that night, *verklemt*).

It was humbling to be reminded that all Americans are deserving of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. It was important to hear Obama talk about how the granting of equal rights for LGBT Americans is an important part of his domestic and foreign agenda. And it was inspiring for me to have my passion reignited for a politician about whom I had

become ambivalent. When I hear the voice in my own head wondering why Obama isn't speaking out in support of New York's granting of marriage rights and pushing Congress to bring a legislative end to DOMA, I remind myself that the perfect is the enemy of the good.

I was also reminded of the reasons that American Jews should support Obama: not only because he holds Jewish American Heritage Month parties at the White House, but also because he advocates forcefully for the civil and political rights of *all* Americans, something that every American Jew should get behind.

My husband, Gregg Drinkwater, and I walked out of the White House after being congratulated by Joe Biden on our 15th wedding anniversary (we consider our 1996 Jewish wedding ceremony under a chuppah our real wedding). We asked a passerby to take our picture in front of the White House. At that moment I had a commitment ceremony with the president. (I'd call it a marriage, but, as Barack knows, we can legally wed in only a few states.) I committed to working on Obama's campaign for re-election and to taking seriously the responsibility the White House gave me, as a Jewish representative in that very queer crowd, of letting both Jews and LGBT Americans know that this administration is on our side.

David Shneer is a professor of history at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and a writer, whose most recent book is "Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust."

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Author

David Shneer

David Shneer is a writer, scholar, and holds the Louis P. Singer Chair of Jewish History and serves as chair of Religious Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. His previous work includes *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust*, *Queer Jews*, and *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora*.



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