



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

HOMOSEXUALITY AND JUDAISM: SYNTHESIS OR IMPASSE?

The greatest threat to the Jewish brit with God is the growing rift between our tradition and our ethics. Passionate defenders of Jewish traditionalism argue that we have no right to judge Torah and halakhah by contemporary moral standards, while equally zealous advocates of compassion and justice insist that communal standards must always give way before individual need.

The most recent example of the latter is to be found in the CCAR Report on Homosexuality and the Rabbinate. At the same time that the report "urges that all rabbis, regardless of sexual orientation, be accorded the opportunity to fulfill the sacred vocation which they have chosen" it also observes that there is a "unanimous condemnation of homosexual behavior by Jewish tradition."

These claims may both be correct, but leaving them unreconciled, parallel assertions renders Jewish tradition irrelevant to Jewish living. If we do what Jewish tradition "unanimously" opposes, then why bother to consult that tradition? Why bother to identify with it? Morality and law have always stressed different priorities. There has always been a creative tension between legal precedents and changed economic, social, or moral conditions. But tensions are fruitful only when they are resolved, not when they are abandoned.

The status of gay men and lesbians within Judaism is but one issue where, far too quickly, creative application of traditional method isn't even attempted. The resulting dichotomy sunders halakhah and Jewish tradition from empathy and ethical concerns – the very wells from which our tradition has always drawn strength, vitality, and renewal. Such a rupture damages both morality and Judaism. Since one doesn't need Judaism to be a good person, the model of abandoning tradition in favor of ethical behavior demonstrates a logic whose conclusion is Jewish disinterest and irrelevance.

This year, then, at the chanting of Parashat K'doshim, serious attention to the nitty-gritty of how Jewish law can address new perceptions and new issues needs our attention – both to reclaim the ethical core that has always powered halakhic development and to reassert the ongoing relevance and sanctity of Jewish tradition. To concede that an issue cannot achieve moral resolution within Jewish tradition is to assert that God does not speak through Judaism.

To insist that Jewish tradition is not responsive to reason, knowledge, and justice is to deny to God the service of the human mind and conscience, to pervert the very essence of the rabbinic revolution.

To ignore the evidence of thousands of decent men and women – gay and lesbian Jews who already enrich our heritage with their commitment, their desire to affiliate, their need to love and be loved – is to needlessly impoverish our communities and to endanger Jewish survival by excluding willing participants.

The need, then, is to reconcile tradition and homosexuality, not simply to shrug our shoulders and abandon one for the other. There must be a path of sanctification, reflecting biblical values and rabbinic methods, which can enlighten the lives of gay and lesbian Jews and restore some wholeness to our fractured lives.

In 1988, I suggested such a reading of the problematic texts in Leviticus and rabbinic writing - using the insights of psychology, anthropology, sociology, and sexuality in antiquity to provide a way of understanding Torah and its traditions that could sanctify gay monogamous relationships precisely as Judaism has sanctified loving, committed straight relationships. An extended version of that paper, with complete citations, was just published in the winter edition of the Jewish Spectator.

I believe that such an approach is even more essential now as the two camps move farther and farther apart. Those who claim to love tradition maintain a blanket hostility toward all homosexual expression – promiscuous or not, loving or not – while those who claim to love human liberation show rage and impatience with halakhic commitment, thereby precluding the self-correcting possibilities which already exist within biblical/rabbinic Judaism.

For the sake of our sacred brit, for the continued spiritual vitality of the Jewish People, we cannot allow that division to continue. It is relatively easy to insist on a moral posture. It is equally simple to reject any new development in favor of the status qua. Much more complicated, like life itself, indeed like God, is to wrestle with translating morality into communal consensus; righteousness, into law.

That way is the path of Torah, and the mission of the Jew.

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