

Homosexuality – A Jewish Perspective
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Faiths in Conversation
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The recognition and acceptance of homosexuality and homosexual tendencies is not new, contrary to popular opinion. It is not something that has been in the closet for thousands of years and is only now being acknowledged. It is not merely a new awakening of respect for individual differences and life choices as part of our modern movement towards the flourishing of the autonomous individual.

Homosexuality in the mainstream of human society is old. Most ancient societies hardly differentiated between homosexuality and heterosexuality. The gender of the partner made very little difference throughout a good deal of human history.

Unbridled and unrestricted sexual expression of all forms and types was ubiquitous. Men have had sex with women and with men; with little girls and young boys; with a single partner and in large groups; with total strangers; and with a variety of domesticated animals. Undisciplined sex dominated man's life and the life of society. Throughout the ancient world, and up to the recent past in many parts of the world, sexuality infused virtually all of society.

And in a number of pre-modern cultures, whether ancient Greece or Medieval France or many, many others, male-male sexuality was considered to be loftier and more respectable than heterosexual relations.

And then, approximately only three thousand years ago, came the Hebrew Bible and proclaimed that God has a plan to uplift humanity that includes unprecedented restrictions on sexuality. Sexual expression is not to be squelched but it is to be circumscribed. No sex outside of marriage, no sex with animals, no sex between men and men. These prohibitions are found in chapters 18 and 20 of the biblical book of Leviticus and the context is made absolutely clear: These abominations were practiced by the Egyptians and Canaanites who surrounded the ancient Israelites. Don't copy their practices. Despite that fact that everyone does it and that you have a real strong urge to do it, don't do it!

Rather, as the very beginning of the Book of Genesis proclaims, men are to marry women. The biblical ideal is that one man is to marry one woman. They are to cleave to each other. They are to endeavor to spend their life together and to build a cohesive family. Sex in Judaism was sanctified — which in Hebrew means "separated" — separated from the world and placed in the home, in the bed of husband and wife.

Why? Not because limiting sex to heterosexual marriage it is necessarily natural; human history teaches that it is not! Rather, because this is God's blueprint for civilizing and uplifting mankind.

There are two levels to this civilizing process:

One, sexuality in general must be controlled and disciplined, natural instincts must be rechanneled, and man must learn and internalize delayed gratification.

This is part of the moral maturation of man that allows him to efficiently direct his energy towards the improvement of society..

Number two, the male and the female complement each other; there is a certain fundamental moral personality evolution that can usually only occur when one from Mars and one from Venus dedicate their lives to each other. And this is especially true for the male; men are refined and mature morally through the commitment to the continuous company of the female.

It is eminently possible, as many have said, that it was the institution of male female marriage – brought to us by the Hebrew Bible – that enabled Western civilization to grow and flourish. When sexual energy was not placed within the boundaries of male female marriage, societal development was stymied. The gradual emergence of western civilization has been an arduous development, an accomplishment that we dare not take lightly.

As Dennis Prager has written, “Accepting homosexuality as the social, moral, or religious equivalent of heterosexuality would constitute the first modern assault on the extremely hard won, millennia-old battle for a family-based, sexually monogamous society. While it is labeled as "progress," the acceptance of homosexuality would not be new at all.”

Now the second section of my presentation:

Traditional Judaism is unequivocally against homosexuality. It is wrong and it ultimately poses a threat both to our Jewish way of life and values, and to American civilization.

But it is not the greatest sin or the most pernicious threat that we have to combat. The more significantly threatening aspect of post modern American culture is the primacy placed on self-fulfillment, particularly in one's sexual life. The dictates and mores of Jewish law and values frequently clash with the current American ethical mindset, which promotes exercising personal autonomy toward achieving self-fulfillment. Within the highly eroticized Western culture, the greatest manifestations of this mentality are pornography, heterosexual promiscuity, sky- high divorce rates and startling amounts of adultery.

It is here that we should be directing our energies and proclaiming our values. Few people are drawn to a gay life without an initial internal inclination, whereas the vast majority of men (and a smaller but significant number of women) contemplate with some interest and desire the promiscuous heterosexual life that is normal in secular America. Heterosexuals have legitimate outlets for their sexuality, homosexuals don't. Therefore there should be greater condemnation of heterosexual sin than of homosexual sin.

Homosexuality should not be the ground zero of religion's efforts to uplift and sanctify sexuality and the family in our society. There are more prevalent and fundamental issues to deal with. Homosexuality ought not to be the convenient scapegoat upon whom religious people blame all of America's ills.

The third section of my presentation: What does the rabbi say to the homosexual who comes for pastoral counseling?

First of all - empathy! People becoming aware of homosexual tendencies and struggling with them are very often in an extremely vulnerable and difficult place. Their pain, frustration, and anguish are beyond what many of us can imagine. An effort must be made to understand and to accept them for what they are.

While we must never give the impression that the forbidden is permitted, we must also make it clear that homosexual tendencies and thoughts are not prohibited and not sinful. What is prohibited are acts, and although we might not have control over our thoughts, we have control over our behavior. Homosexual behavior is governed by the same free will choices as all other sexual behavior. The challenge and the temptation are enormous, but the divine imperative is to resist. The person must be constantly supported in his daily effort to resist actualizing his inclinations.

In many cases, despite the best of efforts, there are going to be moments of weakness leading to failure to live up to the divine imperative. To fail is human. The person is not to be excoriated for that. I myself have failed in sexual matters, and the homosexual's sin is no worse than mine. You have to repent and keep trying to do better.

There may be cases in which the urge is so strong that failure comes often. There may be cases in which the effort to resist and the sense of failure when unsuccessful are just too much. Or there may be cases in which the loneliness of celibacy is experienced as impossible to tolerate any longer. All of these may be cases in which the person's sanity and physical well being are very much at stake.

As such, there may be cases in which the rabbi may counsel that a discreet monogamous homosexual relation ought to be pursued. Not because it is permitted. No, it is forbidden. Rather, because it may be the lesser of two evils. From the perspective of Jewish law, we might have a case of danger to life that overrides other commandments, or we might have a case of duress causing the forbidden act not to be culpable and not to carry with it any sanction.

And through it all, we counsel homosexuals that there are 613 commandments in the Torah. As Rabbi Shmuley Boteach has said, ' If you have a problem with two of them – the prohibition against gay sex and the dictate upon a man and a woman to marry and have kids – there are still 611 left. That should keep you busy!'

In other words, the failure to keep two does not exempt you from all the others. You are not morally tainted so as to rob your other good deeds of the same value that my good deeds possess. Being a good person in God's eyes is not an all or nothing proposition. You do the best you can!

The fourth section of this presentation: How to relate to homosexuals and homosexuality.

What about someone who has homosexual inclinations? Relate to him the way you relate to me. He lives with urges to do something that is forbidden. I am a married man and I live with an attraction to women other than my wife. The difference is, it is easier for me to live with my urges because I have a wife waiting for me at home. He doesn't - so go easy on him.

What if you suspect that he has actually succumbed to the irresistible power of his inner passions? Again, relate to him just like you relate to me. I also have some indiscretions in my past. But cut him more slack, because it is harder for him.

And what if you know for certain that the person lives a gay lifestyle pretty constantly? Well, if our Jewish communities usual welcome Jews who violate the Sabbath, or who eat pork, or who don't hide the fact that they regularly cheat on their income tax, then we should welcome active homosexuals as well. We should welcome them into our families, homes, synagogues and communities, them and their adopted children. Homophobia is wrong. Shunning gays is wrong.

We must not accept or legitimize the sin, but we must recognize reality and both feel and display utmost empathy and sensitivity.

The last matter of my presentation: Public policy.

We could spend hours just on this matter. Let me say that politics makes for strange bedfellows. We must carefully distinguish between religious philosophy and standards on the one hand, and public policy on the other hand.

All things being equal, maximum civil freedom is the best thing for maximum human flourishing. Not all values and standards should be in the hands of the government to regulate and enforce. Many things are best left in the hands of the individual and his moral conscience, and in the hands of religious and social organizations.

I believe that everything possible ought to be done for the good of gays as individuals, while not doing anything that would promote social acceptance of homosexuality and same sex marriage as an institution. As Dennis Prager states: "By and large, it is society, not the individual, that chooses whether homosexuality will be widely practiced. A society's values, much more than individual tendencies, determine the extent of homosexuality in that society. Thus, we can have great sympathy for the exclusively homosexual individual while strongly opposing social acceptance of homosexuality. In this way we retain both our hearts and our values. "

There are a variety of opinions as to how might this nuanced approach might play itself out: Discrimination against gays in the workplace should be eliminated. There may be room for domestic partner benefits and perhaps even for gay civil unions, but in my opinion not gay marriage.

Sources:

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Rabbis Nathaniel Helfgot, Aryeh Klapper and Yitzchak Blau, Statement of Principles on the Place of Jews with a Homosexual Orientation in Our Community, July, 2010

I've been approached with a question that might be worth considering in advance: "If God has forbidden homosexual relationships, why did God create homosexual, transsexual, and bi-sexual persons?"