

# The Orthodox Community Must Embrace its Gay Children

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*Rabbi Chaim Marder, Elul 5775*

The question of how Orthodox Judaism relates to LGBT Jews has rushed forward again with the shocking stabbings and murder of Shira Banki at the recent Pride parade in Jerusalem. That horrifying act was in no way representative of the Orthodox Judaism I live and breathe. Yet, it should give us all (and here I address most directly my Modern Orthodox community) pause, and cause, to seriously address anew the stance we take and the messages we send, especially about homosexuality and gay Jews. It calls for a fundamental change in the ways our community interacts with these men and women in our midst, our children, our siblings, our congregants. We must do it because it is right. And we must do it because the alternative to such a change has become too great to bear.

## **The Torah's family values and the Challenge of a reality**

The Torah presents to us a world in which a man and a woman come together in a special union, building a family and life together. It supports this bond (along with other goals) by setting forth numerous rules about our sexual and relational conduct. It provides a blessed path for two Jewish individuals with heterosexual attraction who realize that they love each other and wish to spend their lives together.

What path is there, on the other hand, for people who are simply not wired to enter into a heterosexual relationship? What life affirming options does the Torah offer them? We've come to know that for many people, not all, but many, this reality is not a choice, of their own or other's making; it simply is the way they were created. Why would G-d wire some people such that they can only find sexual fulfillment and companionship in a way that G-d's Torah prohibits? We struggle to understand, but the answers are not apparent. For many, especially (although not exclusively) our young people, the Torah's very prohibition of male same-sex intercourse and its labeling it a *toeva* (generally translated as "abomination") is exceptionally challenging. The result is a religious crisis, one that pits the Torah (and then, writ larger, their Jewish world which they have cherished), against their modern sensibilities, values and mores.

## **The real pain... and the Torah's other values**

My focus here, though, is not on the theological, philosophical, and religious questions and issues for the heterosexual Jew, even though these are critical to address. Rather, it is on the human, life issues that directly impact the real people that we know who identify themselves as gay. Many are in pain. Their pain cuts to the core of their beliefs, it is present in their mighty struggles with G-d, in their feeling rejected by the Torah that many of them would want to uphold. Their pain is in their experience of being distanced by, and excluded from,

the normative life of the Orthodox community which has failed to comprehend their struggles, and has, in many ways, sent the message that there is no place for them within it. Their pain is present in the very way they know themselves to be. In this case, with these people, their experience of the Torah, halachah, and the community is one of hurt.

We dare not underestimate the depth of this pain, or the extent of their loneliness. For some, the loneliness, the loss of place and person, the depth of despair pose a real threat to their lives, with a significant percentage considering causing themselves physical harm and even suicide. For others, it is an abiding sense of alienation from community and faith that are at risk.

It is G-d, in the Torah, Who recognizes that to be alone in life is unbearable. G-d says of the human he has created- "Lo tov heyot haadam levado- it is not good for the human to be alone." G-d responds by creating Eve. For the innately gay man, that loneliness persists, as it does for others who consider themselves as LGBT. We need to understand and respond to the loneliness, recognizing the reality of their needs, and being present for them.

## **The misplaced focus of the Orthodox community**

Yet, the Orthodox community, by and large, is not engaging compassionately and meaningfully, with these Jews. Save for a few, rare exceptions, it has focused almost exclusively on prohibited acts, on the Supreme Court same-sex marriage decision, on the dangerous impact gay sexual behavior is said to have on all of us, and on "abomination" (as mentioned earlier, the Torah calls male same-sex intercourse a *toeva*, often translated as "abomination". Bar Kapparah in Tractate Nedarim tells us the correct rendering of the term here is "*toeh atah bah*- you are going astray with it", greatly neutralizing the disgust factor associated with "abomination", although surely not permitting it). This focus, to my mind, has been misguided, troubling, wrong, and harmful. If such concerns should be at the center of our communal attention, why are we not giving equal attention, for example, to the issues of a sexually active single heterosexual population? Or the concerns we should have about ongoing business immorality (also called a *toeva* in the Torah)?

There is an imbalance here. I would contend that, instead of once more playing the angry role of defender of the Torah (which we must surely do at times), in this case, the Jewish community should be devoting its energies to engaging our co-religionists as the good people, as the Jews whom they are; and to working to keep them connected to the Torah instead of taking public positions that are driving them away from it.

## Changing our approach

### Speaking and listening

How do we come to expand ourselves, to relate to the real people here?

Firstly, by putting a halt to the unacceptable way we allow people, perhaps even ourselves, to speak about sexual orientation and LGBT people, and the messages we send thereby to those around us. As a leading Rav in Israel spoke of passionately in recent days, we must all be vigilant about the derogatory and harmful, often flippant way we speak about gay men and women, at our Shabbat tables, at our places of work, in all the public spaces which we inhabit. It is insidious and it is damaging. If we allow it or participate in it, we become complicit in the harm it causes.

With that framework, we can begin to listen attentively, and commit to really understand and know them. Hear their stories and struggles. Engage with them individually, with the regular concern we show for others about their lives and their aspirations. We should be just interacting with them as with any other Jews in our community.

### The Rabbi's Role

Here, I draw on some of what an advocate for rabbinic sensitivity in these areas has sought to convey recently, adding my own reflections as well.

Rabbis must earnestly and honestly communicate to LGBT Jews, especially to those from Traditional backgrounds for whom there is a larger identity struggle, that there is no sin in being who they are. Even though a rabbi cannot permit what the Torah has forbidden, he can yet affirm just how difficult this is. We need to convey a belief that G-d, Who made us all as we are, can only expect us to do what we are capable of doing. (If they ask us for it, we should offer halachik guidance in limiting behaviors, although that is not generally what they seek from us. Beyond that, what they do in their bedrooms is not for us to know.). We need to be affirming of them and their real struggles, and humanity, in all the ways described above.

If some express self-hate, we need to help them yet love themselves. If they feel rejected, even hated, by G-d, the Torah, the community, even their families- we must convince them that that it is not so (by redoubling our efforts so that we give them no cause to feel that way). We must help them feel loved, not hated. And we need to help the families and communities get there too.

At the same time, we should do all we can to encourage them to have an alive religious life. And we should tell them that they (along with a life partner, and now it might be spouse , if they have one), yet can have a place in

our congregations; that their Jewish children (if they will build a family) will be welcomed as any other Jewish children would be.

## Stepping up

Our synagogues, schools, and the other institutions that make up the Orthodox community must be ready to step up. A healthy, human Jewish community is one in which real people, with all of our complications, have a place. This means including all those who, for one reason or another, are not fully observing the call of the Torah in every realm of their lives. If anyone believes that ignoring them, or shunning them will do some good (i.e. change behaviors or somehow prevent others from joining their ranks) realize that the opposite is more likely to be true; it drives our LGBT friends, and children away from G-d- and from the good - and possibly into a world that that can be quite threatening to their wellbeing. It also ultimately turns away those who support and love them.

A few years ago, many of us signed onto a "Statement of Principles on the Place of Jews with a Homosexual Orientation in Our Community" (<http://statementofprinciplesnya.blogspot.com>). It sought to establish a framework within which Orthodox institutions might think about these very questions. That document is a starting point, not the conclusion. There are organizations which are doing important work in developing support networks for them and their families. We should welcome their efforts to educate and support, finding the right fit for each of our communities and its members. Our shuls, and schools, and camps all need to engage in the important conversations, figuring out how to make this happen. This includes (although no way exclusively): creating our own support groups and friendship settings for Orthodox gay and LGBT teens and adults- and for their families; rethinking policies, from honors in synagogue to school admission for the Jewish children of same-sex parents; hosting community sessions in which they are invited to share their stories and struggles with us (as has begun to happen in some small settings). These are just some samples of the ways in which, "*tachlis*", positive impact can take place.

## Stop declaring that this is condoning sin

Some who have argued for compassionate understanding and embrace of gay Jews have been accused by others of condoning that which the Torah condemns. That's not what is being advocated here. We are not encouraging or offering our blessings to people's actions, nor do they really expect it of us (at least that shouldn't be their expectation). What we are trying to do is offer our fellow Jews blessings towards a good life, as part of our community.

## The Only Path

Our Modern Orthodox community indeed must be ready to make the fundamental change in mindset along the lines laid out above. The alternative? We risk losing a whole world of precious individuals - individuals who will continue to lead their lives as they feel compelled to do - but no longer connected to the community that might otherwise give them loving support, and benefit them in countless other ways, and which can benefit from them as well. They are, after all, our friends, our own siblings and children.

Embrace them, and love them as part of our communal world. Only then are we living up to what we as Jews and a Jewish community are meant to be.

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