

Homosexuals in the Orthodox World

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The recent declaration (www.torahdec.org) by Orthodox rabbis and community leaders about homosexuality inspired mixed feelings in me. The Declaration, which reaffirms the forbidden nature of homosexual congress, states unequivocally that homosexuality is a *curable* psychological - not genetic - illness, and instructs the Orthodox community to treat homosexuals with kindness while guiding them towards reparative therapy, is signed by numerous right-wing and center-right Orthodox rabbis as well as some community leaders and mental health professionals.

Part of me was relieved. The Declaration used phrases like “love, support and encouragement” as a description for how Orthodox people should feel about the homosexuals in their communities. That is a far cry from the bellicose homophobia that many have come to expect from fundamentalist Orthodoxy. On the other hand, the Declaration advocates strongly for reparative therapy, an extremely questionable and, for the most part, medically discredited practice that many professionals consider to be dangerous to the psychological state of the patient.

The Declaration further argues that homosexuality *must* be both psychological and curable, since God could not be so cruel as to create people with homosexual urges and then forbid them to act on them – a theologically dubious argument to say the least. I would venture to say that anyone with a relative suffering from one of the many horrible genetic diseases would be taken aback by the claim that God would never create a person with a genetic illness that could ruin his or her life.

¹ Morethodoxy shut down, so I am posting my previously published articles as PDFs here. They have not been revised.

The Declaration opens with a condemnation of the more accepting attitude towards homosexuality in the secular world and complains that this attitude is creeping into the left-wing-Orthodox world as well. In specific, this Declaration seems to be a reaction to the “Statement of Principles” (statementofprinciplesny.blogspot.com) regarding homosexuality circulated by center and left-leaning Orthodox rabbis the year before. Nevertheless, the left wing’s “Statement of Principles,” although more sophisticated and nuanced than the recent “Declaration,” have more in common with each other than either group of signatories may care to admit.

The Statement of Principles, like the Declaration, reaffirms the forbidden nature of homosexual congress. Unlike the Declaration, it allows that homosexuality is genetically and/or hormonally determined and admits that reparative therapy may be bogus and even harmful. The Statement, like the Declaration, urges the Orthodox community to treat homosexuals with love and respect. On the other hand, the Statement implies that Orthodox homosexuals need to be celibate. Although it urges understanding even of Orthodox non-celibate homosexuals, the Statement suggests that if these homosexuals are open about their lifestyle – and the Statement affirms their right to be open about this – it would be the prerogative of an Orthodox synagogue or community not to accept them or give them any honors.

Although I appreciate the attempt by both groups to make homosexuals feel more welcome in our community and to tone down belligerent homophobia, both documents, in my view, fall short of what is required. Since I declined to sign the Statement – a document whose purpose I am strongly sympathetic with and which was crafted and signed by many close friends and mentors – I have given much thought to the Orthodox world’s relationship to homosexuals, sexually active and celibate alike, and what needs to be “stated” or “declared” about homosexuality.

The challenge of empathy (rather than sympathy) is one difficulty with formulating such a statement. The signers of both statements are predominantly, perhaps entirely, heterosexuals. Many are married with families, as am I. Our families get together with other families for Shabbat meals and celebrate lifecycle events in the

synagogue. We receive communal approval for being married and for being good spouses. We have loving and fulfilling intimate relationships at home. Thus, life is rather easy for us. We want to empathize with the homosexuals in our community, but it is hard for many of us to imagine having homosexual desire or lacking any attraction to members of the opposite sex. Even when we successfully internalize that homosexuality is simply the orientation of a significant minority of the population, we have trouble truly internalizing the dissonance inherent in the psychological world of Orthodox homosexuals: they want to feel a part of a community whose central text forbids one of their most fundamental impulses, and offers no plausible alternative.

I once suggested the following thought experiment to a colleague: “If, for some reason, it became clear that the Torah forbade you to ever get married or to ever have any satisfying intimate relationship, what would you do?” I do not remember his response, but my own reaction to the same question is: although I hope I would be able to follow the dictates of the Torah, I have strong doubts about the possibility of success, and I hope that my colleagues would be forgiving and understanding of my weakness if I could not.

One key line of the Declaration is: “Struggles, and yes, difficult struggles... are part and parcel of this world. Impossible, life long, Torah prohibited situations with no achievable solutions are not.” I commend the crafters of this document for the key term “impossible.” What we are asking of the homosexual Orthodox community *is* impossible: it is simply unrealistic to ask or expect normal adults to remain celibate and give up on the emotionally fulfilling experience of intimate partnership that heterosexuals take for granted. Hence, I would like to suggest that the Orthodox community adopt the stance of “*ones rahmana patrei*” – God overlooks what is out of a person’s control.

This does not mean that homosexual congress is halakhically permitted. As both the Declaration and the Statement point out, the Torah explicitly forbids it. It also does not mean that halakha recognizes same sex *qiddushin* (Jewish marriage) – it does not. However, it does mean that we understand that, for a certain percentage

of the population, homosexuality is the only possible expression of emotional intimacy and sexuality of which they are capable. Since reparative therapy does not exist as a real medical treatment, at least for now, we should accept that a homosexual choosing to be in a monogamous and loving relationship is the best and most realistic choice possible for this person - and is also the closest in character to the choice made by married heterosexual couples. There should be no social penalty in the Orthodox world for making this choice. If God overlooks the inevitable, so should we.