

# Differentiating between people and behaviour



The substantial Jewish involvement in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras has focused attention on homosexuality and Judaism.

**Rabbi Benzion Milecki** discusses the issue.

SOCIETY is faced with a growing acceptance of homosexual behaviour. Judging by the coverage in the media — especially in the weeks prior to Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras — it is definitely "in" to either be gay, or to actively condone and support those pursuing homosexuality as an "alternate" lifestyle. At the very least, a smile or a wave in their direction has become mandatory in polite society. We need only look at the number of "straight" people lining the streets as the parade goes by.

It is difficult to write critically of an issue concerning which "political correctness" — the idol of new-age gurus — demands silence. More so, on a subject so deluged with emotion. Who are we to tell others how to live their lives, and more significantly, whom to choose as partners and whom to love?

Homosexuality is an issue which touches the lives, and hence the attitudes, of many in our community. I shall therefore preface my remarks with a point which I believe to be fundamental to the Jewish approach to life. It is an attitude which was inculcated in me by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and which I have endeavoured to impart to my congregants and students.

To create and maintain a society that is both tolerant and moral, a difference must be made between people and behaviour.

The fact that the majority of people seem incapable of making this distinction is the bane of civilisation. It leads to unnecessary hatred — when the assumption is made that because someone acts immorally, he deserves to be hated. Or to moral mediocrity and a breakdown of values — when the assumption is made that because someone I love is acting immorally, the action could not be immoral after all.

The ability to love a person while strongly disapproving of his or her behaviour is a sign of moral maturity — a maturity which, unfortunately, very few possess.

And because so many people cannot themselves make the distinction between actions and people, they assume the worse of others as well. There is a widespread, if not always articulated, belief that if someone strongly disapproves of another's conduct, he must hate that person. That assumption is most assuredly false — at

attempt to change the bearings on their moral compasses because those they love or know have acted immorally. They begin to think of themselves as not being "with it", as if morals are like clothes, to be discarded in favour of the latest fashions. A value system which is victim to the fickleness of human nature is no value system at all. It is fashion which must be controlled by morality, not *vice versa*.

On the opposite extreme, hating a person because of their immoral beliefs or misbehaviour shows a lack of respect for the Image of God present in all of us.

According to Jewish law, even if a person was sentenced to death — an extraordinarily rare event in Ancient Israel — he must be treated with both love and respect. Indeed, not doing so is considered an affront to God Almighty Himself. The judges who condemned him to death must fast, he must be put to death in as painless a manner possible, and he dare not be degraded in any way.

The reason for this, as explained both in the Torah and the Talmud, is because every person, even someone who has sinned in an appalling manner, is created in the image of God. As such, the imperative "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" applies to him even at the moment of his fall.

Having made this introduction, I should now like to express the Torah's unequivocal opprobrium of homosexuality.

Homosexuality is not only forbidden according to Jewish law, it has the dubious distinction of being one of the only things which the Torah refers to as *Toeva* — an abomination — a word which is used to connote the idea of disgust. And this the Torah tells us in the name of God Himself (Leviticus 18:22 — the section of the Torah read on Yom Kippur).

Furthermore — together with other sins of sexual immorality, such as adultery and incest — it is a sin for which the Torah demands that one give up one's life, rather than transgress. This in spite of the ruling that in almost every other case, the Torah values life above the performance of a *mitzvah* or the transgression of a sin.

And finally, homosexuality is a sin which applies equally to Jews and non-Jews. I do not wish to enter into the nature/nurture debate, nor do I believe that it is relevant.

As individuals, we must involve them in the community and encourage them to do *mitzvot* — while praying that they eventually develop the insight to understand the error of their actions, and the strength to overcome them.

least in the case of those in touch with the spiritual dimensions of Judaism.

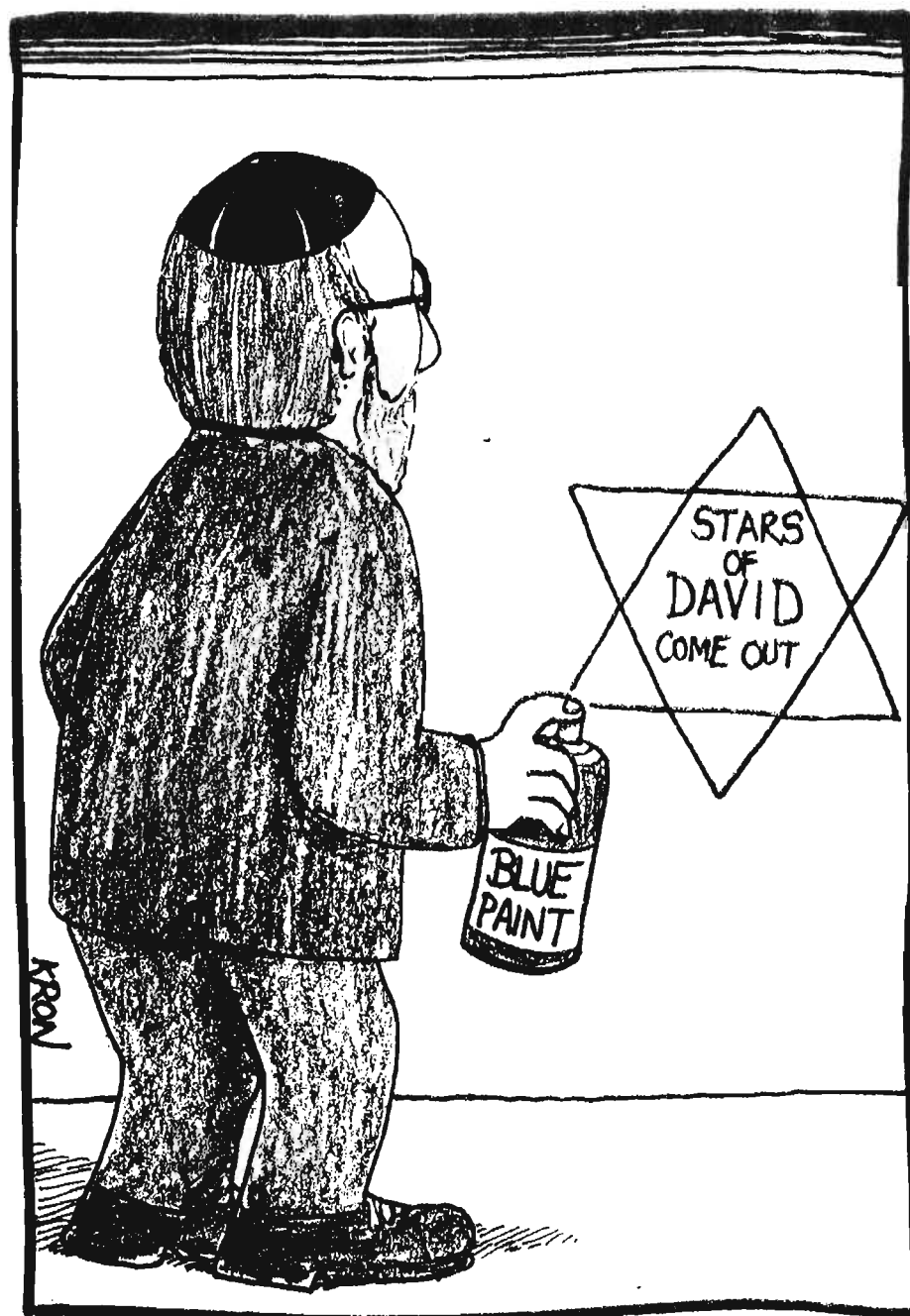
It cannot be said often enough that it is a sign of moral weakness to condone bad behaviour in a desperate attempt not to lose someone you love. Too often, we are blackmailed out of core values by such statements as "if you really loved me, you would accept me as I am".

Let us be very clear on this: You can accept someone's right to choose, while being totally unaccepting of what they have chosen.

It is possible to love a person, while being pained to the core by his or her behaviour.

Too many parents, and their friends,

(An exhaustive discussion of the subject can be found on our website ([www.southhead.org](http://www.southhead.org)) in a brilliant article by Dennis Prager.) For those who believe in One God, it is clear that our Maker was as aware of human frailties thousands of years ago as we are at the dawn of the 21st century. He certainly hasn't been awaiting correction for thousands of years by an "enlightened" science! It is equally clear that as God has unequivocally forbidden homosexuality, it is possible, albeit with extraordinary effort and courage, to conquer and indeed, transform, one's nature. God, to quote the prophet, neither deceives nor lies. Nor is He



so cruel as to give a person a challenge which he cannot possibly surmount.

There can be no doubt that those with either a natural leaning towards homosexuality, or habituated to it, have been given a particularly arduous challenge — one whose difficulty most of us cannot even begin to imagine. As such, they are deserving of our support and love. We need to remember that Abraham argued to the point of exhaustion on behalf of the people of Sodom — a city whose primary transgression was homosexuality.

Before passing judgment on those with homosexual tendencies, we must ask ourselves how we would fare if faced with a similar challenge. Would we, and do we, rise to the occasion when confronted by a moral challenge of the difficulty experienced by someone with a homosexual urge? How far do we "stretch" ourselves in areas where God challenges us; areas much easier, and impacting on our lives far less, than those faced by the person with a bent towards homosexuality? This is a question which each of us must respond to before criticising others. In a particularly sobering insight, the Baal Shem Tov, father of the *Chassidic* movement, teaches us that we are judged on the basis of our judgment of others. Knowing our own frailties, a little caution is advised before rushing to judge others.

On the one hand, the man or woman who commits a homosexual act is loved by God, no less than we are. If there is a blemish, it is on the outer shell of his or her being, while

the essence remains intact. On the other hand, this does not detract from our rock-solid belief that homosexuality is wrong, and indeed an abomination — the flawed opinion of new-age psychiatrists notwithstanding.

God did not make a person into a homosexual the way he made others heterosexual. God did not create four categories of people: man and woman, homosexual and lesbian. God created men and women with a variety of challenges in life. For some the challenge is overcoming the homosexual urge.

Therefore, while we cannot in any way support a movement which encourages and condones homosexual practice, we can reach out to those with a homosexual urge with love and compassion. We are not reaching out to the outer shell of their homosexuality, but to the inner core of their Jewish essence — the part of them inextricably tied to God. That part of them which is so pure and holy that no transgression in the world can eradicate.

As individuals, we must involve them in the community and encourage them to do *mitzvot* — while praying that they eventually develop the insight to understand the error of their actions, and the strength to overcome them.

And while praying for them, we may wish to spare a thought for ourselves. For which of us can be sure that he or she will overcome that unique personal challenge given each of us by God?

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