

# Time for us to say *dayenu*

## VIEWPOINT

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As Jews, many of us have been on the receiving end of everyday oppression in the form of jokes, stereotyping or discrimination by unthinking or unaware Gentiles. It is often said that antisemitism comes from ignorance about Jews. The same can be said for homophobia within the Jewish community. If you doubt this and you do not support Jewish lesbians and gays, ask yourself how many you know and how well you know them.

Stereotypes for both Jews and gays are common. Think of some of the words you have heard associated with each: miser, promiscuous, ostentatious, immoral, pretentious, outlandish, pushy ... and so it goes. We must be intelligent enough to understand that these stereotypes do not apply to every person.

Antisemites and homophobes alike justify their positions. But the bottom line is they hurt people. Rabbi Benzion Milecki (*AJN* 16/3/00) says it is "in" to be gay or support gay people, and refers to morals as "clothes that can be discarded in favour of the latest fashions." The woman I love, my life partner, is not a fashion accessory. The support of some within my family has taken many years to develop. We are now closer as a family than we have ever been. Isn't that what Jewish tradition supports and encourages?

Silence implies consent. The suicide attempt rate for young lesbians and gay men is four to five times higher than in the young heterosexual population (*Youth Studies Australia*, 1998). Lesbians are six times more likely to be physically assaulted than other women and gay men are four times more likely to be physically assaulted than other men (*NSW Police Service*, 1995); this includes Jewish gays and lesbians.

How many of us are still outraged by the silence of Germans, Hungarians and Poles during the Holocaust? How could they silently concur with this massive violation of human rights? Many of these people justified their silence. How many of us in this community will justify ours? The scale may be different. The year may be different. But the disrespect and disdain for people who do not conform to a particular cultural or religious ideal is the same. The unacceptable rationalisations are the same. Many gay and lesbian Jews are at worst, shunned, condemned and abused, and at best, misunderstood, pitied and prayed-for.

Rabbi Milecki also says that "it is difficult to write critically of an issue which 'political correctness' — the idol of new-age gurus — demands silence." Although I don't personally know any new-age gurus, I can confidently say that many people in this community want to raise this issue, bring it to light and welcome open discussion. Clearly, as we have seen in recent issues of the *AJN*, there are more traditional groups trying to silence the dialogue.

Rabbis Moshe Gutnick, Milecki



and others say homosexuality is immoral and equate it with all sorts of evil behaviour. If it is immoral to love, respect and cherish another human being, then I wonder at the teachings of some who call themselves leaders in this community. And I wonder at those who follow. Wanting love, respect and fulfillment in a relationship is not restricted to the heterosexual majority.

It is hard enough to find a relationship that is truly based on respect, deep love and support. If you are lucky enough to find this, I believe it is a blessing. To then have to contend with those denigrating and negating that relationship is unforgivable and cruel. Is this what we want to encourage in our leaders and community members?

*If you want to make enemies, try to change something* — Woodrow Wilson.

have not one iota of concern about women being together. If, however, they are taking what Leviticus says about men and applying that to women as well, then they themselves are interpreting the Torah. This inconsistency and hypocrisy is unacceptable and is doing tangible damage to innocent and loving Reform, Conservative and Orthodox members of this community.

If rabbis choose to interpret the Torah, then I believe this interpreting should be applied to include lesbians and gay men, as it has been to deaf people and those with disabilities. Not a simple solution, but one that could begin with open discussion and compassion.

*The important thing is never to stop questioning* — Albert Einstein.

The Jewish religion and tradition prides itself on being family-

observance of kashrut, Shabbat and some commandments, none of which are spoken about with such vehemence as this. But don't take my word for it or anyone else's, for that matter. There is a limit to what can be included in a brief article, so I encourage people to educate themselves, ask questions, read up, attend debates.

When the Dayenu group came together in November last year, there was a sense of wonder and excitement. Many of us had never met before, but most of us knew of someone who knew someone who knew us. The links were there. The shared sense of history was there. And here we were, suddenly faced, not with the dregs of the community we had been led to believe, but strong, independent, successful people, all cloistered away in their own lives, isolated

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Orthodox rabbis have re-interpreted the Torah to cease discrimination against those who are deaf and have disabilities. We laugh uncomfortably at how this could have ever been the case. Now we know better. On this issue however, some rabbis say "my intention is to promote God's teachings as they are written in the Torah — one cannot change the Torah to suit oneself". This is misleading. And nowhere in the Torah does it say anything about women in relationship with women. If these rabbis are committed to taking the writings of Leviticus literally, they should

oriented and committed to education. There are constructive ways to approach the Leviticus teachings, without denying or changing them.

There have been many suggestions over the past decades (and weeks) for approaches to this dilemma. We can explore, for example: the contextual translation of *to'eva*, the many teachings within Leviticus and its overall lessons, the context of the times within which this line was written, the issue of relationship versus sex, the concept of God's creation of all people and other issues affecting many Jews such as non-

from a true sense of community and shared vision. That first meeting filled me with such a sense of excitement that I cancelled two overseas work trips to help organise and be part of the group.

Dayenu loosely translates as "enough", as many would know. For me, Dayenu means we have had enough of the ignorance, denial, narrowness and mistreatment that has plagued Jewish gays and lesbians and their families for generations. And it also means it would be enough for us if the community would embrace our difference in the way it has embraced other types of difference.

During the first-ever lesbian and gay Shabbat dinner at Shalom College on March 3, several students peered out from their balconies to take a look at the group below. They wanted to see the people causing certain members of this community to vow to picket and protest the Shabbat dinner. What did they see? A group of deranged immoral misfits? They saw 70 well-dressed professional men and women aged between 20 and 60, sitting in chairs transfixed, many of them crying tears of joy, listening to sermons and song delivered by four rabbis.

*Oppression can only survive through silence* — Carmen de Monteflores.

"If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem." You may be familiar with this quote, although you might not think you're part of the problem. The problem is silent complicity for emotional and physical violence, discrimination and exclusion of Jewish gays and lesbians. One solution is to speak out against these things.

Judging from the extraordinary number of letters published in the *Australian Jewish News*, many people in the community are clearly deciding to lift the silent veil of oppression that has shrouded many for so long and to speak out for the rights of every person to love whom they love.

Many people wait for the leaders in this community to make change. Few changes in history have happened that way. How grateful are we for the civil rights movement in America, where the actions of some brave individuals began to ripple through their communities and beyond until leaders reversed the discriminatory laws. In Australia, our government prevented Aboriginal people and women voting until people began to do something at the personal and community levels first.

We cannot wait for change to occur. It is up to us to show the leaders where our hearts and minds are until they respond for the good of the people in the community. It is up to us to initiate constructive dialogue about this issue and the challenge of Torah interpretation. I believe it is up to all members in this community to be willing to learn more about the myths and stereotypes we have been fed for too long, as well as the corresponding realities. And I believe it is up to each member of this community to say *dayenu*. Enough.

■ *The following resources are suggested:* Twice Blessed: On being lesbian, gay and Jewish. *Christie Balka*, 1989. Beacon Press, Boston. Setting Them Straight: You can do something about bigotry and homophobia in your life. *Betty Berson*, 1996. Plume Publishers. Nice Jewish Girls: A lesbian anthology. *Evelyn Torton Beck*, 1982. The Crossing Press, New York. PFLAG: Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays: Support and discussion. 9800 7013. Dayenu Association Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group. Malcolm Davidowitz. 0413 444 208.

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