

Tackling homophobia in

In an article published in the journal of the Australian Family Association, **Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen**, founding director of The Institute for Judaism and Civilisation, expressed his concerns about programs to tackle homophobic bullying in schools. In the wake of the controversy Rabbi Cowen explains his position, while **Rabbi Fred Morgan**, **Rabbi Moshe Gutnick** and **Dr Jonathan Barnett** share their opinions on the issue.

Closing down the options

The problem with the anti-bullying program is not the laudable goal of preventing homophobia, but the overall strategy which promotes homosexuality as a “norm”, according to **Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen**.

BECAUSE every human being has a soul made in the image of its Creator, every human being should be loved and his or her best potential sought and helped into actuality. This love is the real source and meaning of tolerance. The false meaning of tolerance is moral relativism, with its argument that I must respect another’s practice because who knows what the truth is – maybe s/he has it and not I? The human soul and human tradition resonate over time with a set of universal norms, one of which is the heterosexual union of man and woman.

As with all norms, there are impulses in the human being which fight this norm, sometimes overpoweringly. We can struggle with it, sometimes people cannot even struggle with it, and this can be viewed with much compassion. Still the indulgence of the homosexual impulse was prohibited by the Creator and the small mirror of the Creator, the human soul, where in use knows it. Where the soul has been submerged – as in so much contemporary culture – to become aware of the soul, of tradition, of what is required of a person by his or her Creator – all that requires a discussion.

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A group of academics at the university with which I am affiliated sought to secure a condemnation of my article by the university and its disassociation from me. By doing this they not only negated religious tradition, but sought also to censure and silence a view which they do not hold. One of the great paradoxes of contemporary academia is the reign of a seamless political correctness. This disturbs me much more than the internet rabble of misrepresentations of what I said. Discussion in the university, where one should have been able to converse – mind to mind, mind to soul and soul to soul – was closed down. Political correctness in the major media, in the state education bodies and public service all begins in the university, which trains its personnel. Conversational shutdown in the street is a small reflex of the big intellectual conformity in the universities. Intellectual freedom, openness and integrity must return to the universities. We have to break through that political correctness, to open the conversation about sexuality, what our

Creator wants of us with it, and how to deal with difficulties along the way.

My article made four points with regard to the “anti-bullying” program of the Safe Schools Coalition Victoria (SSCV), which involves the “celebration of sexual diversity”. (1) The article explained the Jewish and Noahide laws’ view that the practice of homosexuality (as distinct from homosexual orientation) is non-normative. (2) The SSCV’s educational modelling to young children of homosexual practices as equally normative with heterosexual practices breaches the right of religious freedom guaranteed by both the Australian Constitution and United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child to be raised in their own religions. (3) It is not necessary to counter the bullying of homosexual children by “celebrating” homosexuality, any more than by celebrating “obesity” to stop the bullying of fat children. A different anti-bullying strategy should be taken. Finally (4) the SSCV’s encouraging children, who feel so inclined, to lock into a homosexual identity is wrong at a developmental stage, when up to 26 per cent of all children experience fluid sexual identity. This could actually cultivate homosexuality in children, 97 per cent of whom would otherwise mature into heterosexual and three per cent into homosexual identities. That is the injustice to the naturally heterosexual child.

But there is also an injustice in the SSCV program to the homosexual child. Children within this program would be locked into a homosexual identity at a very young age. How easily will they emerge from it, if they are later stirred to move towards a heterosexual norm? The philosophy of this program has consequences for homosexuals of all ages. The SSCV does not build a “soul” into its model of the human being – the soul made in the image of its Creator, which is capable of resonating with the laws that its Creator gave, including the heterosexual norm. The SSCV philosophy knows only body and mind. Its construes the direction in which the person is driven by impulse and inclination, as its “fate”. By removing the soul from the picture of the person, it takes away from the homosexual what resides in the soul: peace, a moral compass and the greatest resource for transformation or at least self-control in practice. In this it betrays the homosexuals.

Rabbi Shimon Cowen is the founding director of the Institute of Judaism and Civilisation.

The realities of the human condition

Responding to Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen’s controversial article on homosexual anti-bullying programs in schools, **Rabbi Fred Morgan** says his views on “normative” behaviour ignore the realities of the human condition.

MY impression of Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen is that he is a gentle man. When he spoke from the bimah at Temple Beth Israel at his father Sir Zelman Cowen’s state funeral, despite Chabad strictures on their rabbis entering Progressive synagogues, he showed that he is also a compassionate man, someone who is able to appreciate what it means for each of us to be created in God’s image.

I am perplexed, therefore, how a caring individual like Rabbi Cowen can express views about homosexuality that are so hurtful and damaging, as he did recently in an article in the journal of the Australian Family Association. Unfortunately his views made the front page of the free broadsheet *mX*. The report in *mX* quoted a leading member of Aleph, Melbourne’s Jewish gay group, as saying that the rabbi’s views are “delusional”. It also quotes a press release from the Executive Council of Australian Jewry distancing Australian Jewry from Rabbi Cowen’s remarks.

The crux of the rabbi’s argument lies in the word “normative”, which he uses repeatedly in his article. For example, in rejecting the value of educating teachers about homosexuality as part of an anti-bullying campaign, he claims it is “using bullying as a pretext to teach all schoolchildren that homosexual conduct is equally normative with heterosexual conduct”. For Rabbi Cowen, what is “normative” really matters since it defines the style of life that a person should lead. There is a “norm”, and those who are homosexual do not fit it. Rather than basing the “norm” on observations of human behaviour, including the experience of homosexuals, the rabbi bases his “norm” on an ideological principle that, in his view, takes precedence over the realities of the human condition.

What precipitated Rabbi Cowen’s article? It seems to be the decision of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria and other bodies to seek to educate teachers in how to deal sensitively and compassionately with students in their classrooms who are becoming aware of their homosexuality. These students face ostracism and bullying because we still live in a predominantly homophobic society.

“Keshet”, meaning “rainbow”, is an American-based, Jewish-focused program that trains teachers to be aware of these issues in the classroom. A

group has been set up in Melbourne to bring Keshet to Australia. Rabbi Cowen does not seem to believe that programs like Keshet should be used to train teachers in Jewish schools about how to give support to students who are struggling to come to terms with their sexual identity.

What Rabbi Cowen seems to overlook is that Keshet and similar programs are not about what is “normative”. They do not seek to lay down how people should behave. They are about reality – how people are in fact.

Since an appreciable percentage of the population is homosexual in fact, students who are becoming aware that they are or may be gay or lesbian need to be supported in that exploration as much as students who are exploring their sexuality as heterosexuals.

They need to be supported by teachers who are there not to declare what is “normative” and what is “abnormal”, but rather to offer support to all their students by recognising the differences among them, protecting them from prejudice and attack, and giving them confidence in expressing their deepest sense of self.

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It is important to mention that Rabbi Cowen’s view is not the only one available within Judaism today.

The Progressive movement has been in the vanguard in acknowledging both the rights and the needs of the gay and lesbian community; and even within the Modern-Orthodox world there is a far more nuanced understanding of homosexuality than Rabbi Cowen allows for.

“Delusional” is undoubtedly too strong a word to use about Rabbi Cowen’s views. But I suggest that Rabbi Cowen, whom I very much respect, might take on board his own comments about the importance of practising self-discipline and curb his instinct to express these judgmental and damaging views in public.

Rabbi Fred Morgan is the senior rabbi at Temple Beth Israel, Melbourne.

the schoolyard

The Orthodox view explained

Rabbi Moshe Gutnick believes there is no place for homophobia in authentic Judaism.

THERE is no doubt that the Torah forbids male homosexual acts. The prohibition exists whether or not homosexuality is considered by society normal or abnormal, or whether or not scientifically it is considered a matter of genetic predisposition or a learned behaviour. The Torah, in its divine wisdom, forbids such behaviour regardless of the answer to the above questions, and while it may even be that a person has no choice as to their sexual orientation, they always have a choice whether or not to engage in a prohibited act.

Indeed, one of the most difficult challenges facing the rabbinate is how to authentically convey that message while retaining the dignity of the individual and without harming their self-esteem. Indeed the challenge is greatest for the individual himself, who may have a homosexual orientation but wishes to be observant of, if not all the commandments, as many as he is able – and at the very least accepted by his fellow Jew. We must never underestimate the enormity of that challenge.

Whether or not an individual is

able to deal with that challenge, they must always be made to feel welcome and they must never be made to feel that they lose their Jewish identity or ability to worship as a Jew. There is no place for “homophobia” in authentic Judaism; there is no place for being judgmental. Indeed every command of the Torah must be observed, but that includes the command that we love as ourselves, even one who transgresses. There is “no one righteous on Earth, that does only good and never sins”.

However, the prohibition remains. Therefore, no Jew believing in Torah or the seven Noahide laws for all mankind (loosely termed the Judaeo-Christian ethic) can be asked to accept a program that “celebrates” homosexuality. While bullying in any form is abhorrent, including the bullying of someone because of their sexual orientation, the solution is not to “celebrate” an orientation that is against Torah teaching. In the absurd, would one expect of an Orthodox school, where perhaps someone was being bullied for not observing the laws of kashrut, to combat that bullying by “celebrating” the eating of non-kosher food? Indeed, to take such an approach would imply that if a particular behaviour could not be “celebrated” or if it was legitimately inappropriate, bullying of a person

engaged in that behaviour would be permissible. Bullying is abhorrent and unacceptable, regardless of the reason and whether or not that reason has any legitimacy, or whether or not it can be celebrated.

Instead, to stop bullying, a Torah school would celebrate the intrinsic worth of every human being – created in the image of God – regardless of their level of observance, and regardless of any difference they may display, whether it be sexual orientation or anything else.

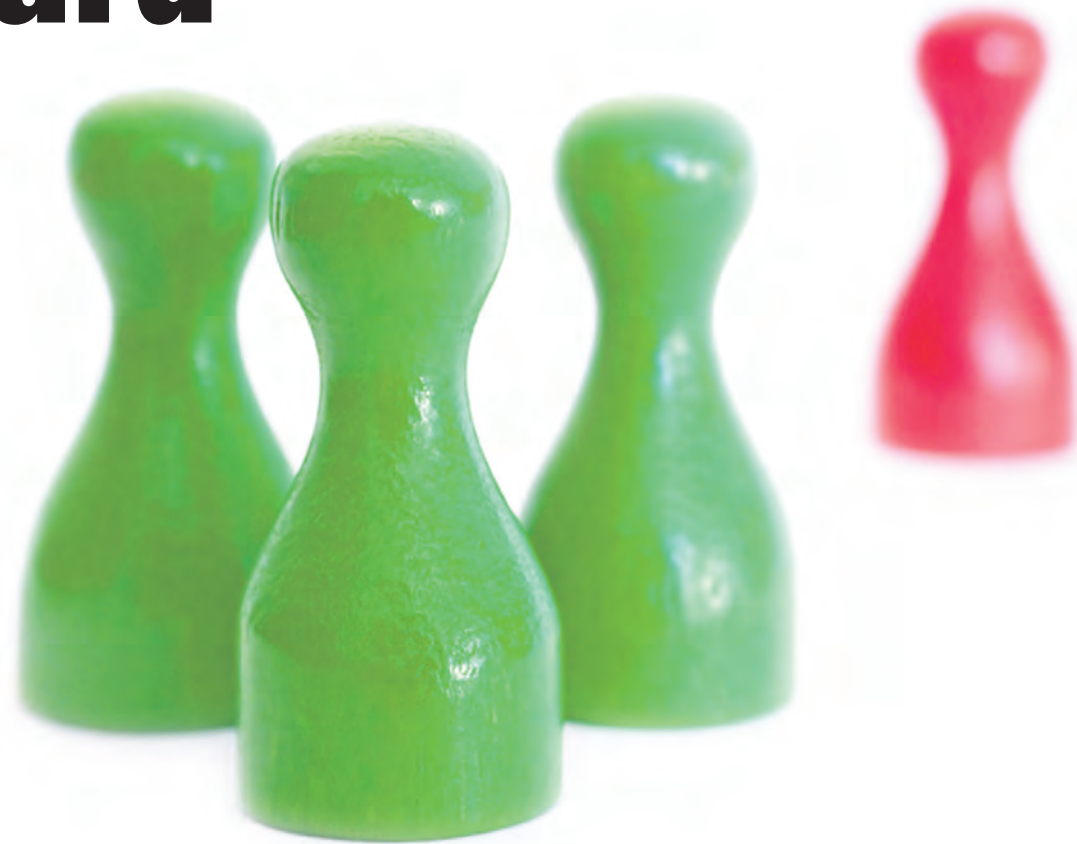
A Torah school would teach the mishnaic dictum “do not judge your fellow until you are in his position”, and since one can never truly know what another person goes through – you may never judge them! A Torah school would teach that every Jew, regardless of level of observance, including sexual orientation, is welcome in our synagogues and our homes, and the Torah is equally the heritage of all.

A Torah school, and indeed any school in a society that must be based

upon the seven Noahide laws, cannot celebrate homosexuality; but it can celebrate the observance of all the commandments – including the tolerance and acceptance that have always been part of the dual creed that we have taught the world, that one must “love thy neighbour as thyself”, and that all humans are created “b’tzelem elokim” – in the image of God.

Rabbi Moshe Gutnick is president of the Organisation Rabbis of Australasia.

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If ‘Safe Schools’ isn’t the answer, what is?

Dr Jonathan Barnett explains the need for, and aims of, Keshet Australia, an organisation supporting GLBT members of the Jewish community.

GAY, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) children are in our schools, our synagogues, our summer camps, our Zionist programs, in our homes; they are all around us. They are part of our community. But many suffer from depression and anxiety and feel disconnected.

Keshet Australia has a primary goal to help nurture, protect and provide a safe environment for GLBT children. We need to do this to keep families together. We need to do this to keep our GLBT young people within Judaism (no matter what their affiliation) and to not drive them away.

Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen’s article discussed Safe Schools Coalition Victoria (SSCV) with

respect to its mission to prevent bullying. The SSCV is more than this; it strives to create a safe environment for young people in Victorian schools. Keshet Australia strives to do this within the Jewish community. Keshet, which means rainbow in Hebrew, is an organisation whose mission is to achieve the full inclusion of GLBT Jews of all ages, sects, and philosophies in Jewish life. Keshet Australia’s leadership committee consists of Orthodox, Progressive and non-denominational members. It includes GLBT members and allies, parents and friends. What sets Keshet Australia apart is Jewish Judaism and our focus on the Jewish community in Australia.

Keshet Australia’s initial project will bring a well-established educational program to our schools, synagogues and community in early 2013. This “train-the-trainer” program was developed in the US and has the support of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV). The program’s goal is to reach out to rabbis, teachers, youth and lay leaders

in the Jewish community so that they can come together to learn how to best develop and lead initiatives to address acceptance and diversity issues. The program shares specific skills and techniques to enhance the mental health of GLBT youth by creating a warm and welcoming environment for all youth. It does so in a Jewish context, focusing on Jewish values and text.

The core value of the program is b’tzelem elokim (in God’s image). As the program teaches, the “image of God” is reflected in the different types of people we encounter in the world. “In God’s image” leads to the other six Jewish values that form the heart of the program, kavod (respect), v’ahavtah l’reacha kamocho (love your neighbour as yourself) and in doing so love our whole selves, avoid lashon hara (especially words that hurt), foster shalom bayit (peace in the home), promote kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh (communal responsibility), and practice al tifrosh min hatzibur (solidarity of the Jewish commu-

nity); we are required to reach out, be an ally and a friend.

The Keshet Program addresses some of the key findings of the JCCV’s Report of the GLBT Reference Group, 2011, some specific examples include:

All schools could increase the level of education within the school so that students are aware that same-sex attraction, bisexuality and transgender are not “conditions to be cured”;

Schools [should] develop and implement discussion programs, or supplement existing ones, to ensure acceptance of differences of all types, including sexuality and gender identity;

All rabbis should participate in professional-development programs, preferably under the auspices of their rabbinical association, relating to these issues. The programs would not only ensure they are factually informed but will also ensure they are able to appropriately counsel their members; and

Community organisations should provide training for their

staff and facilitate education for their members and volunteers relating to these issues.

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As Keshet’s programs develop they will reach out to other members of the community.

Currently, parents of GLBT children have no Jewish support group to turn to. Adult GLBT Jews often feel alienated by the community.

Keshet will develop programs to help these and other groups enhance their Jewish connection, creating a stronger and healthier Jewish community.

Dr Jonathan Barnett is convenor of Keshet Australia.