



Judaism & Homosexuality: An attempt to be reasonable

Dr Laurance Splitter

Laurance Splitter is a Principal Research Fellow and Director of the Centre for Philosophy with Children and Adolescents, within the Australian Council for Educational Research. He has worked for many years promoting the value of philosophy in the curriculum, as a way to stimulate good thinking, dialogue and ethical inquiry. He is principal co-author of *Teaching for Better Thinking: 'The Classroom Community of Inquiry'* (ACER, Melbourne, 1995). He is Cantorial Soloist at Temple Beth Israel and has been involved in synagogue music in Melbourne and Sydney since 1965.



The topic of sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, is virtually impossible to discuss in an emotionally neutral manner. However, we need to remain alert to the fallacy of defending a position by using emotion (such as fear or guilt) in place of reasoned argument. The challenge is to utilise both emotion and rationality constructively, so that one supports, rather than sabotages, the other.

We should respect the distinction between statements of (alleged) fact and statements that offer or reflect a moral point of view. For example, the proposition that there are people who are both gay and Jewish is a statement of fact. It also happens to be true. On the other hand, the proposition that homosexuality is sinful is an ethical or moral claim and, in my view, false. Sometimes this distinction is not so clear. Take, for example, the proposition that homosexuality is unnatural. Is this a factual, moral, or some other kind of claim? Actually, it is meaningless. How can something which does, in fact, occur in nature be unnatural?

The most popular interpretation of "natural" is something like "occurs in nature without interference from human beings." To reinterpret "natural" with moral weight ("what is natural is good/right, what is unnatural is bad/wrong") should be resisted, even if packagers of supermarket products are unable to do so. What's so good about congenital deafness or the virus that causes AIDS? And how is the question of whether monkeys in the wild engage

in homosexual conduct relevant to the question of whether such conduct in humans is morally acceptable?

We must avoid confusing factual with ethical claims, treat any argument that purports to support an ethical position on purely factual grounds with extreme scepticism. Asserting that stealing is wrong because it causes suffering, requires the additional justification that suffering, or at least the suffering endured by victims of theft, is wrong.

The next obvious question is "But why is this kind of suffering wrong?". How can we prevent an infinite regress of justifications from paralysing our attempts to justify moral beliefs? Well, one way is to appeal to a claim—with moral content—to which all parties involved can reasonably assent. In this case a key point of reference for the claim that homosexuality is morally wrong, is the Bible. The immediate problem is that the claim that a certain book says that something is wrong is a factual claim and so cannot be used in sole justification of an ethical claim.

The American CCAR resolved to support "any of its members who wish to perform ceremonies of commitment between two people of the same sex". The Rabbinic Assembly of the AANZUPJ has decided to *prohibit* its members from performing similar ceremonies, on the grounds that the issue remains too contentious, too contemporary, and just too difficult. One member of the Assembly has recently written that we will have to wait "for the dust to settle" before a "more sober, and perhaps more Jewish, understanding than I feel the CCAR has achieved" can be arrived at.

The core issue, of which commitment is the tip of the iceberg, is the acceptance of, and equality for those Jews who happen to be gay. I doubt that most gay Jews feel, as some Rabbis may believe, that gay and lesbian Jews care more about whether they are allowed to commit to each other in a public ceremony than whether their existence and status are even acknowledged within the Jewish community.

"I doubt that most gay Jews feel that gay and lesbian Jews care more about whether they are allowed to commit to each other in a public ceremony than whether their existence and status are even acknowledged."

Several rabbis interviewed in a recent ABC television program exploring the "Jewish and gay" issue, said little or nothing about commitment ceremonies. They, too, realised that the key ethical and religious questions need to be addressed regarding the underlying issue of what it means to be gay and Jewish. I believe that only when this has been done can the additional question of commitment ceremonies be properly tackled.

Despite a large body of literature on the implications of the factual assertion that there are gay Jews, the response from traditional Jews—the

pool, we should do so. Why should we remove Jewish gays, gay genes, gay sex or homosexuality itself from the world?

Ten major points

Here are some possible answers:

1. I question the meaning of the claim that being Jewish and gay is not natural, especially when it does indeed exist. Perhaps it is supposed to mean that it violates the "natural law". If this refers to the laws of nature/science, then I am at a loss since its existence clearly shows that it does not break any such laws. If it refers to the "Divine Law", that will be considered shortly.

2. If saying that being gay and Jewish is not normal means that it is not the norm, then statistically this claim is almost certainly true. But it is a factual claim and so cannot, by itself, support the moral claim that homosexuality is wrong, or that the gay gene, if such exists, should be eliminated. Many things (Jews, for example) are not normal in this sense, and while they often suffer needlessly because of it, they are not thereby less worthy or less moral.

3. "Being gay makes people unhappy" as a moral justification for eliminating homosexuality from the world is somewhat ironic. While the well-being of gays in many countries has improved radically in recent times, it is fair to say that gays—including gay Jews—endure considerable pain and suffering, relative to non-gays, and that this situation is morally wrong. They are more often physically abused, harassed by authorities, rejected by family, religious leaders and peers, less likely (at least in the case of gay men) to be in supportive, enduring relationships, and more likely to suffer psychological disorders such as depression and low self esteem. Since no one would invite these ills, we might conclude that being gay in this world is not particularly desirable.

The irony here, of course, is that these "problems" are mostly the direct result of a fear and/or hatred of gays in the general community, echoed and sometimes magnified within the Jewish community. The American Psychiatric Society finally deleted homosexuality from its list of mental and emotional disorders in 1974, not because gays had changed, but because psychiatry reached a new understanding, which seems to have escaped many religious leaders, about what it is to be homosexual. Similarly, gays having trouble with commitment, maintaining stable relationships and good mental health, derives from a deeply entrenched heterosexist social structure, in which everything—from bedtime stories, to shows on TV, to the "hatch, match and despatch" mentality of most cultural and religious groupings—falsely assumes that we are all straight.

The fact that so many think that my being gay and Jewish is either impossible or repulsive, has made it my problem.

Perhaps the sense of dis-ease, motivating more than one gay person to lament the fact of his/her sexuality, would prevail even if the rest of the world responded differently, although I doubt it. However, there is the possibility that in a more tolerant world, homosexuality would be regarded as a morally acceptable condition, but still a handicap or disability, much like deafness or physical deformity. Current thinking suggests that the most appropriate response to these conditions is to treat their "victims" as worthy of respect and concern, and worthy of whatever assistance they require to enjoy life to its fullest. Further, we regard it as a good thing if medical science comes up with a cure, or ways of coping better with the disability. Shifting the example to sexual orientation, we confront the familiar claim that homosexuality, if not

actually immoral, is a pathological disorder—an illness—and while those "suffering" from it should be treated with respect (perhaps even pity), they should be "cured" if possible.

This line of thought reflects a limited notion of what counts as healthy and what as disease. Physical and psychiatric medical experts do not believe that homosexuality is a disease or any kind of affliction at all. The onus, surely, is on those who would claim otherwise to articulate and argue their position. If gays are disabled or ill, precisely what is it that heterosexuals do that they cannot? Procreate, perhaps (the familiar *p'ru ur'vu* injunction)? This is not true: many gays can and do bear and/or raise children. Those who do not choose not to (many heterosexuals included) make that life-choice. Another life-choice is that of our sexual partner(s). Whether we are gay or straight, we *could* choose sexual partners of either sex, just as we can choose abstinence, although generally we know which sexual option we prefer. But I *cannot* choose my sexual orientation.

4. I turn next to the claim that gay men are promiscuous and uninterested in building stable, loving relationships. I noted above that the difficulties many gays experience in the area of relationships has a lot to do with the heterosexist social structure of their conditioning, into which they do not fit. These same social structures militate against promiscuous behaviour among heterosexuals. The solution to the "problem" of promiscuity among gays is, then, obvious: allow and encourage them to build similar social structures—of which public ceremonies celebrating commitment is a prime example. Granted, many people will choose to reject such structures, or to "stray" from them at various times. But this also occurs in the straight world, so it cannot be grounds for condemning homosexuality specifically.

The relativism defense

5. The next putative objection to homosexuality is that being homosexual and/or engaging in homosexual behaviour revolts and disgusts some people. This claim is certainly true: many people do condemn homosexuality with surprising venom. Often, their response goes beyond words, as gays who are the victims of violence, would know. To justify their feelings and/or actions, they will offer up such clichéd comments as "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve". Such attempts are considered in point 7.

Some philosophers favour a view called "Emotivism", which argues that moral claims carry no objective weight above and beyond the feelings which they invoke—making disgust sufficient grounds for condemnation. Emotivism opens the door to complete relativism regarding ethics.

I do not need to explain why I reject such theories since Jewish tradition would also reject them because they leave no place for divine authority and the rule of law. Ironically, my "Jewish" response to relativism aligns me with the most rigid fundamentalists, against those who would defend homosexuality on the grounds that what people do in the privacy of their own bedrooms is no one else's business. This argument is unacceptable in the case of murder, rape or incest, and should not be accepted in the case of sexual conduct.

Put another way, my claim that homosexuality and homosexual sex are morally justified is intended to stand (or fall) as an objectively true claim.

6. Reference to emotivism in ethics introduces the next objection to homosexuality: that it threatens the sanctity of the family and

Orthodox rabbinate in particular—is to deny this assertion, or to insist that morally speaking, being gay and being Jewish are as incompatible as being a murderer paedophile or rapist, and being Jewish. Lumping gays in with such evil folk to damn them by association is a neat trick.

What, exactly, is the target of moral criticism here? Is it the factual claim that gay Jews exist? Hopefully not: if one cannot legitimately defend an ethical claim by recourse to the facts alone, neither can one legitimately attack a factual claim by recourse to a particular ethical stance. You may not like the fact that there are gay Jews, but disapproving or even condemning the claim does not make it any less true.

Is it the traditional Jewish response that gay Jews ought not to exist? A leading British rabbi has proposed that if one day genetics allows identification and removal of a "gay gene" from the human gene



therefore of society generally. Fundamentalists love this one: they understand that it will strike a chord with those who hold the family to be morally sacrosanct. It often specifically targets same sex couples entering into committed relationships, but it is also used against homosexuality and homosexual behaviour in general.

I am more than willing to grant that the concept of family is, or



“Indeed, it is the claim that families are so important for the physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual health of all of us, that most strongly supports the notion of same sex commitment.”

should be, a touchstone of great moral worth. Indeed, it is the claim that families are so important for the physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual health of all of us, that most strongly supports the notion of same sex commitment. To cite an old biblical insight: It is not good for man (sic!) to be alone. No doubt those who think that homosexuality threatens the family will bristle at the use of this ancient pearl to support same sex relationships, but that is because they are committed to some, or all, of the following beliefs:

- that the only kind of family is the nuclear family with a mother, father, x children, assorted dogs etc
- that homosexuals who crave families of their own “recruit” innocent young people to their ranks
- that the desire and need to be among “significant others” does not apply to homosexuals because they are not really human beings deserving of love and support.

Where does the moral authority for the first belief come from? Historically speaking, the nuclear family is a relatively recent phenomenon, one whose credentials are hardly beyond reproach. The pressure on the family—reflected in growing divorce rates, the plight of many abandoned elderly folk, and the apparent inability of many parents to raise their children—can only increase in a world where women refuse to play the second-class role that once held the nuclear family together.

Furthermore, many writers have revealed that the Bible fails to provide a model of the family as either ideal or nuclear. Abraham threw his first son, along with his mother, into the desert; Rebecca and Jacob conspired in tricking the ageing Isaac; Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery, etc. In pointing to these “defects”, I do not mean to denigrate the Bible or our ancestors. Indeed, to its credit, the Bible presents them as real people who survived many difficulties—including their own families—to become great leaders. The only place one will find the “model nuclear family” is in the sitcoms of the 1950s, whose producers doubtless had their own less-than-sacred agendas.

Recruitment by gays, through seduction or corruption of the young and impressionable, is offered to support the claim that gays threaten families. This seems to underpin the recent claim, by a prominent orthodox Rabbi, that “there are certain things which they* don’t like talking about, but they have done so now because it’s forced into the open and is the sort of (sic) they want to enter into Jewish schools, into sex education. And

this is something which will ring the alarm bells with Jewish parents.” [* Who are “they”? All Jewish gays or a support group for gay Jews?].

This claim would be funny if it were not so mischievous. It rests on one highly improbable and one question-begging assumption, viz. that human sexuality and sexual orientation are determined by one’s early sexual experiences (one can influence another person to become gay), and that it is wrong to “recruit” people to homosexuality because homosexuality itself is wrong. Moreover, the claim itself is false; there is simply no evidence that gays seduce young people (consenting or not) at a rate higher than applies to heterosexuals. And isn’t it interesting that all the socialisation aimed at “encouraging” gays to tow the straight and narrow line (recruitment at work!), hasn’t been successful. This tells those who would listen something important about how sexual orientation develops

God's Eternal Plan

The third belief in support of the “gays threaten families” line is really an attack on gays’ need for families, including intimate relationships with significant others, just like everyone else. Is anything more demeaning and inhumane than a priest, minister or rabbi instructing gays either to “change their evil ways” or put up with celibacy and lack of intimacy? That Jews, especially, could treat fellow Jews as less than human is almost unbelievable.

7. What can be made of the argument that Jewish homosexuality violates God’s intention or Eternal Plan, and so must be treated as a sin? It is difficult to mount a counter argument because the argument is not clear. If homosexuals cannot choose their sexual orientation, then why would the Almighty create them in violation of “His” own plan for the world? (Similar to asking how sickness and natural disasters are consistent with the existence of an all-knowing, all-powerful being). Moreover, what is it about the Eternal Plan that homosexuality violates? We are back to *p’ru ur’vu*: going forth and multiplying is part of the Eternal Plan, and those creatures—this argument treats us as no higher than the beasts—who can, but choose not to, participate are, by omission, behaving sinfully. I suppose gays could (as some do) meet this requirement by becoming parents or, at least, providing egg and/or sperm for procreation. “Ah!” the critic replies gleefully, “this won’t do because you are still wasting sperm, rather than using it for its ‘proper’ purpose”. But this response comes from Noddy land. This mentality leads fundamentalists of all religions to procreate like rabbits with little thought to the consequences for the children, the mother, the environment, etc. And generations of teenagers have suffered unnecessary guilt and shame every time they have contributed to this “wastage”.

The idea of an Eternal Plan has great appeal, but in responding to that Plan, we humans (including gays) can surely do a great deal more than *p’ru ur’vu*. Let’s create a more peaceful and harmonious world in which people of all persuasions find nurturing in a diversity of “family” and community settings (consider *tikkun olam*). In this imagined world, the value of survival per se—even Jewish survival—is not absolute. The Bible reflects this realisation: how often does God come close to wiping out our ancestors as punishment for their sinful behaviour?

I simply cannot accept that as a Jewish homosexual, I am not part of God’s Plan. I am convinced that the Almighty would not cruelly require me to live a life bereft of the love and sexual joy prescribed my heterosexual friends, preempting the traditional Christian—and, increasingly, Jewish—response of “condemn the sin, not the sinner”, which gives me permission to exist, as long

as I commit to a life of celibacy.

The claim is that in choosing not to be part of the Eternal Plan, gays and heterosexual couples who choose not to bear children, stand condemned. The plausibility of this line of reasoning hangs on two points: accepting that *p’ru ur’vu* is a central element of the Plan, and accepting that sexual orientation is freely chosen. Whatever we think of the former, the latter is simply false. Like the “sin versus sinner” distinction, the free choice claim is a crucial premise for those who would condemn us (or, rather, what we do).

8. The strongest and most persistent claim presented by traditional Jews against homosexuality, is the argument from Divine Authority, as explicitly laid down in the Torah and reinforced by subsequent texts and teachings. “Do not

“I simply cannot accept that as a Jewish homosexual, I am not part of God’s Plan. I am convinced that the Almighty would not cruelly require me to live a life bereft of the love and sexual joy prescribed my heterosexual friends.”



the infamous (and Jewish) Dr Laura Schlesinger in the US:

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's law...When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind him that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how to best follow them. When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odour for the Lord (Lev. 1:9). The problem is my neighbours. They claim the odour is not pleasing to them. How should I deal with this? I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as it suggests in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her? I have a neighbour who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?...I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abomination." (Lev. 18:22), and again "If a man lies with a male, as one lies with a woman, the two of them have done an abhorrent thing; they shall be put to death—their bloodguilt is upon them." (Lev. 20:13).

Much blood, and ink, has been spilt as a result of these few words. Yet there is little hope that Orthodox leaders, for whom the word of God as revealed in Torah is the last word, will remove their blinkers. The belittling of our humanity by this attitude is almost as great a tragedy as the harm done to generations of gay Jews. I have always been taught that the Word of God cannot be read straight from a single text, that we are bound to use our Gōd-given gifts of reason and judgment to search for the meaning of that Word; that the continuous unfolding of that Word is part of the evolution of human knowledge and understanding; and that the true meaning of "revelation" is entirely consistent with these notions

Can we reason with those who would simply throw words from a book in our faces? Probably not: the gulf between dogma and doctrine, and enlightened common sense is just too wide to bridge. One thing worse than preaching to the converted is arguing with the unconvertible. Here is part of an anonymous "letter" on the internet to

Satire

This kind of satire reflects a common attitude to Torah: that its laws and mitzvot may once have been valuable, even progressive, but by today's lights, many are inappropriate or irrelevant. The author places the onus on those defending the biblical injunction against homosexuality, which remains while many other laws have been dropped or severely modified through scientific and social development, to provide sufficient justification other than its inclusion in Torah. The real danger here is that Torah's moral guidance and wisdom will be ignored by the many because of the narrow, literalistic interpretation insisted upon by the few.

A likely response is that while a certain amount of softening of this commandment (and its attendant punishment) has occurred, there simply is no negotiation on the law itself, because it is one of the few commandments which refers to *abhorrent* or *abominable (to-evah)* behaviour, designed to draw a clear line between the Children of Israel and neighbouring pagan tribes whose practices included homosexuality.

The Talmud distinguishes between those commandments which are clearly intended to carry moral weight independent of their being given in Torah, and

"The fact that so many think that my being gay and Jewish is either impossible or repulsive, has made it my problem."

those which seem to lack rational explanation (in a biblical and /or contemporary context), justified solely by having been divinely ordained. The former would include laws against stealing and murder for which independent moral justification can be found. The latter would be certain dietary laws, including those pertaining to sea creatures lacking fins and scales (the eating of which, interestingly enough, is also an abomination: Lev. 11:10ff). Is the condemnation of homosexual behaviour as an abomination the former or the latter?

If the former, then an independent, morally sufficient reason for supporting the injunction should be evident. I have found that none of the arguments proposed is good enough. My deep conviction is that notwithstanding the desperate attempts to construct such independent reasons, the most honest reason for the traditional condemnation of homosexuality is that it has been divinely ordained as an abomination. In other words, it is wrong simply because a Divine commandment says so.

For those inclined to accept the Bible as the literal word of God, there is almost nothing one can say in opposition, other than to reject both the Book and God and thereby place oneself outside (religious) Judaism (or, perhaps, to confess that as a gay Jew, I violate only one mitzvah, which still leaves 612 for me to follow). Surely we cannot agree that a certain statement is true unless we know what it means. Consider again the words from Leviticus 20: "If a man lies with a man, as one lies with a woman, the two of them have done an abhorrent thing; they shall be put to death—their bloodguilt is upon them." This injunction is most commonly interpreted as ruling out sodomy between males, on pain of death—a death, moreover, for which only those who violate the commandment are to blame. Furthermore, that which is condemned as abhorrent is a particular action or form of behaviour freely engaged in, rather than those who engage in it. This is important because it reflects the characteristically Jewish view that we are accountable for what we do, rather than for who we are. We are not born into sin, we are born with the capacity to choose between good and evil, and we are to be judged by that choice.

Nevertheless, this common interpretation overlooks one crucial aspect of the original (English) wording, viz. that what is condemned is characterised by reference to the exact same act between a man and a woman. What makes the same sex act abhorrent is that it is a mockery, a perversion, of a sacred act (sacred because it alone made *p'ru ur'vu* possible). It could even be said that it is unnatural, because man's nature compels him toward *p'ru ur'vu*, hence sexual relations with members of the opposite sex.

However, thus understood, the commandment looks very shaky indeed. If sex between a man and woman is natural for those involved, then sex between two men or two women is also natural for those involved. The commandment relies crucially on the assumption that we are all "naturally" heterosexual but, in so far as we are "naturally" anything, this is simply not true. Without exploring what causes sexual orientation, it is now generally accepted that by the time one gets around to thinking, feeling and acting sexually, it is a given. We do not choose to be gay; neither are we "really" straight and choose to act perversely. We really are gay and choose (when we are allowed) to seek intimacy and sexual satisfaction from those partners to whom we are

"naturally" attracted—just as those who are straight do.

It is hardly surprising that our tribal ancestors did not, or could not, acknowledge the concept of sexual orientation. There was simply the act itself. Note that there is no reference either to homosexuality or heterosexuality in the Bible (or subsequent texts, until very recently). Once we acknowledge the connection between how one is sexually, and how one acts sexually, the commandment can no longer be interpreted as condemning either. It is pointless condemning the state of homosexuality since, for all intents and purposes, it is a fact not a moral choice. And it is wrong—cruel and inhumane—to condemn the expression of that state (except where that expression causes real harm).

Needless to say, for those who interpret the Bible literally, this conclusion is unacceptable. Their stance against homosexual conduct,



in light of a contemporary understanding of sexuality, forces them to rule that those of us who really are gay must abstain from sexual intimacy completely or undergo therapy to "become" straight (or at least to be able to have straight sex). They disregard the majority of doctors and psychologists criticising both courses as emotionally unhealthy and destabilising; and the millions of young people driven to despair and even suicide by the intolerable burden of their sexuality; and homophobia and gay-bashing directly linked to their pious proclamations. Jewish fundamentalists also overlook the considerable revision and reinterpretation of the remaining 612 laws over time—suggesting that they have a hang-up when it comes to homosexuality—and disregard the thousands of Jews lost to us who, when having to choose, understandably opt for their sexuality over their religion.

The Progressive Jewish community does not have to, and indeed ought not to, appeal to any such literal interpretation of Torah. Our task is to continually apply both Jewish tradition and contemporary understanding to problematic issues. Given this, I have trouble accepting the AANZUPJ Rabbinic Assembly's reasoning regarding their decision not to permit same sex commitment ceremonies.

I do have some sympathy with the view that contentious issues need to be handled with great sensitivity; strong feelings are a good reason for not charging in and simply proclaiming a new code of practice, even if one is convinced that such reform is warranted. Surely, it is better to educate people—specifically through dialogue, reflection and careful deliberation of the issues involved. Ethical change can sometimes come through revolution, but evolution seems a more gentle, and reliable, path. However, this does not let the Assembly off the hook. To the contrary, it is to them that we look to engage with the process to which I refer. When it comes to homosexuality in particular, we must press our rabbis for genuine leadership and teaching, if only because their orthodox counterparts are close-minded on the issue which, in my view, disqualifies them as genuine participants.

I offer this contribution to the dialogical process, in the hope that the Assembly will see reason, common sense and decency on this topic and work toward granting gay Jews the status and dignity they deserve and yearn for. Let them not mistakenly care more for the future survival of Judaism than for the survival and well-being of those Jews who are already in our midst. And may they move swiftly, for we have waited long enough.

The mysterious case of our disappearing kindred

Zoi Juvris

Image courtesy: www.dayenu.homestead.com/index.html



*Stars of David Come Out : theme of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras float.

LAST YEAR THE CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS IN AN HISTORIC DECISION RESOLVED TO ALLOW ITS RABBIS TO CELEBRATE SAME SEX COMMITMENT CEREMONIES. THE AANZUPJ MOETZAH IS CURRENTLY DISCUSSING THE ISSUE. IN THAT CONTEXT, A NUMBER OF GAY AND LESBIAN JEWS AND PROGRESSIVE COMMUNITY LEADERS WERE APPROACHED TO DISCUSS THEIR VIEWS ON PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM AND HOMOSEXUALITY.

Why has the Progressive community been agonizing lately over the rights of gay and lesbian Jews? Actually this should be qualified, because there are many in our community who are not agonizing about it, in fact, many prefer not to think about it at all. Perhaps we feel that the issues which confront gays and lesbians in our community have nothing to do with us.

We are wrong.

Even if we prefer to ignore it, each one of us has a personal stake, because Jewish gays and lesbians are our brothers and our sisters, our school friends, our children or grandchildren—or those of our closest friends, our teachers, uncles, aunts. Surveys suggest one in ten people engage in homosexual behaviour. So, in a community of approximately 100,000* Australian Jews, that would mean there are 10,000 Jewish gays and lesbians.

So, where are they? Where is their presence in our synagogues and communal organisations?

"There aren't 10,000 gay Jews," says Victor*. There are 1000 Jewish gays and lesbians who are out, and the rest are closeted to some degree, some of them in heterosexual marriages—and that's a whole other Pandora's box."

Victor grew up in Melbourne and was very involved in Netzer, the Progressive youth movement. Openly gay in his day-to-day life, Victor is not so with all of his family and community.

In fact, most closeted gays and lesbians have not 'come out' to family or community; others put aside their identity when they don their tallit to allay any awkwardness their fellow congregants may feel. Ultimately,

most gay and lesbian Jews leave the community.

Lee*, a Melbourne woman in her late 30s involved with the Jewish Lesbians Group of Victoria, says the reason they leave comes down to being proud in your own identity

"When we returned to Australia I needed to find a sense of community that I identified with...but what also happened was that among the people I was connected with at that time I didn't feel there was much support. There were some elements

their partners. Victor, nevertheless has not told his grandparents. His partner, who is not Jewish, believes that his grandparents are keeping him closeted.

"I don't accept that," he explains. "I choose not to tell them, not because they are going to reject me, but because of the conflicts that will arise with my parents. If they criticize me to my parents, I know my mother would tell them to go take a leap, and wouldn't see them again. Do I need to create that drama?"

Nevertheless, there is a fear that his grandparents will reject him and he won't take the risk. "My grandmother once commented that a friend with Alzheimer's did not have Alzheimer's at all, she was driven mad when she found out her grandson was gay."

Inevitably, he says, keeping his grandparents in the dark means that he is closeted to a degree in the wider Jewish community. So while Jewish families may be supportive, the enormous emphasis on family means the fear of rejection and conflict is more significant and keeps many Jewish gays and lesbians closeted.

Friends contribute to this too, by avoiding mention of a friend's homosexuality, often from the desire to protect a friend from perceived hostility or contempt. This can perpetuate the hidden-ness of gay Jews in the community, rather than normalising their presence.

Diane*, a Sydneysider, feels so strongly the need to publicly demonstrate her support of her daughter, that she marched alongside her at this year's Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. This year the Mardi Gras included a Jewish float for the first time. "It was largely in support of [my daughter] but it was also because I felt it was important for the community at large to realise

that gays and lesbians are normal people who have normal families who support them; to try to get some kind of understanding of gays and lesbians in the community among people who somehow regard them as different from everybody else."

Diane was not the only parent under the Jewish banner. She received enormous attention by writing articles for the Sydney Morning Herald and the Jewish News. "Writing for the Jewish News was very difficult," she admits, "I was telling all the Jewish community things that I had kept very private until then, but the feedback was so reinforcing."

Diane found the experience unexpectedly liberating. "It somehow made it easier for me to talk about it. There's this mindset, where anything the slightest bit different isn't part of us. So, it's not something that one talks about other than to one's closest friends...I've found that what I did has been very liberating for other parents as well. There was a chain reaction which I certainly had not envisaged when I set foot on Oxford Street."

Dayenu, the group which organised the Jewish Mardi Gras float, received overwhelming support, with more than 150 people joining the march, including from overseas and interstate and significant numbers of supporters.

The response in Melbourne also seems to have warmed up since the first chilly reception the Jewish Lesbians Group of Victoria received

at their first public appearance at the inaugural Jewish community's Concert In The Park.

Lee, who has sat at the Jewish Lesbians table each year at the annual community event, recalls, "There was lots of response in the Jewish News, saying we had no right to be there, that it wasn't suitable for children and it went on for weeks afterwards...And every year it happens the balance of support changes, and there is increasing support for Jewish diversity."

Lee adds that support has come from unexpected quarters. "There were letters of support from some very Orthodox people...so the lines are not drawn that clearly," she emphasises. "There are certainly some Progressive Jews who have not been particularly supportive and on the other hand, some ultra-Orthodox people have come forward with some very supportive positions."

"Their homophobia comes from their humanity, not from their Judaism. Orthodoxy says they can't accept homosexuality because of Jewish law but I think theology is used as an excuse."

"Sitting at the table in the Concert in the Park is a very interesting experience. Some people there treat us with open contempt. A lot of people... walk along all the stalls until they get to ours and then detour a long way around it—they must worry that it's contagious. A few

people are warm and interested...in terms of which religious communities have reached out to us, which communities have stopped by and made a point of saying, 'we would welcome you as part of our community'—it hasn't been the Temple."

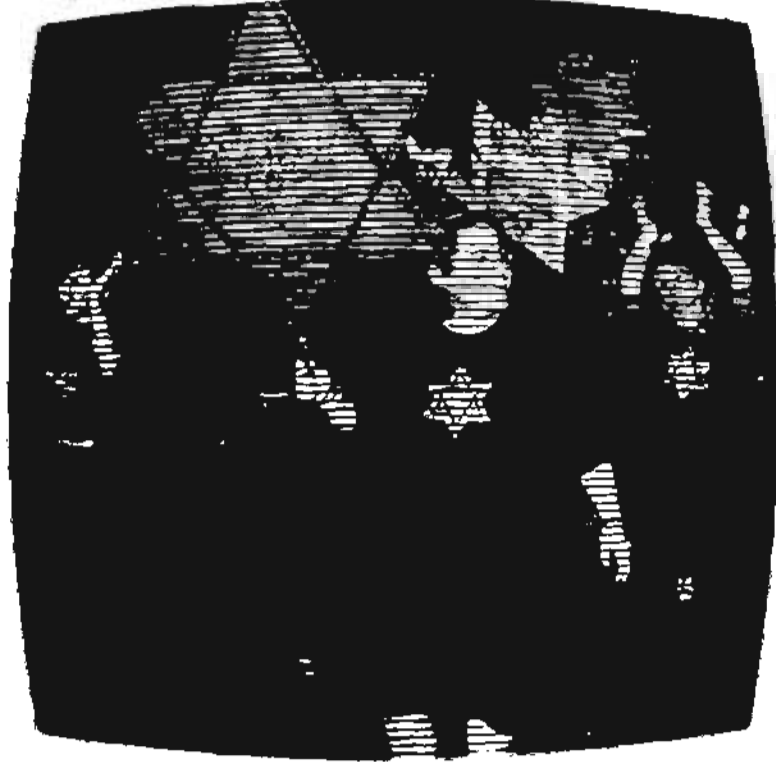
Which brings up the question of why some Jews, across the whole spectrum from ultra-Orthodoxy to Progressive Judaism, have supportive attitudes while others are condemning.

Victor believes that the answer is simple: "Their homophobia comes from their humanity, not from their Judaism. Orthodoxy says they can't accept homosexuality because of Jewish law but I think theology is used as an excuse, it has something to do with the human being that they are. It's just inherent prejudice."

Given such perceived prejudice, of course gay and lesbian Jews feel unwelcome and uncomfortable in their community.

Marlo Newton, President of Kedem in Melbourne, one of the smaller lay-led congregations of the AANZUPJ, says, "I have had feedback from some members of the Jewish gay community that they don't feel welcome in organised Jewish community life. Personally, I welcome

Image courtesy: www.dayenu.homestead.com/index.html



An American Rabbi proudly participates in the first Jewish gay and lesbian float.

"It's a reflection of the fact that Jews of my generation, who were raised post-Holocaust, were raised to be Jewish and proud. We were raised as outsiders of the mainstream community but we were taught to be proud of who we are. And that's a very good lesson to learn. It's a lesson that you transfer to other aspects of your identity. In the same way that, as a Jew, I would not be in places where my Jewishness is treated with contempt, as a lesbian woman I can't be in places where my lesbianism is treated with contempt."

Lee's departure from the community began in her teens while she was in Israel as part of a youth movement shnat year. She came out to her group in Jerusalem

which quite clearly disapproved and I just didn't want to be part of that."

In Lee's experience, which is supported by others, Jewish families tend to accept their gay and lesbian children more readily than the families of her non-Jewish gay and lesbian friends.

Mike*, a gay man who has only recently acknowledged his homosexuality and come out to family and close friends, says his experience has been wholly positive. "My parents have accepted me without hesitation—although a few tears were shed over the presumed loss of grandchildren."

None of those interviewed are closeted and all tend to have supportive families, who welcome

members to Kedem whether they are straight or gay I don't make a distinction in my mind. They wish to become members, they are welcome; if they have Jewish partners then we would treat them in the same way as we treat other couples. I have no hesitation calling up a gay couple to the Torah in the same way as we often call up a straight couple."

Newton's attitude is not unique among congregational leaders, yet gays and lesbians I spoke with felt that this attitude often does not translate to behaviour. There is a view that Progressive Jews may be Progressive by name, but not necessarily by nature; that, in fact, our communities can be very conservative.

When Victor's partner died of an AIDS related illness some years ago,

"I felt it was important for the community to realise that gays and lesbians are normal people who have normal families who support them; to try to get some kind of understanding among people who somehow regard them as different from everybody else."

he approached a Progressive rabbi who was plainly ill-equipped to offer support in his bereavement or address the fact that this had been a same sex relationship. "He spoke to me as if I was grieving for a friend; he couldn't acknowledge that this had been my life partner."

Victor continued: "Do our rabbis counsel about gay and lesbian issues with individual congregants, and do they do it the right way? When Aleph [the Jewish gay men's support group in Melbourne] applied for

membership of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV), did the VLPJ congregations speak out? Was the VLPJ publishing supportive articles in the congregational magazines? Was there an editorial or a rabbinic view? It's all about making a statement."

Rabbi Jackie Ninio, of Temple Emanuel Woollahra in Sydney, agrees that the Progressive movement has to be more vocal. "When we read in the Jewish News some of the negative comments made about gays and lesbians it is important that we stand up and speak out. I think that we should be vocal about our position so that [gays and lesbians] who are out there know they are welcome in a place where they will be validated and acknowledged. I think it's really important to remove the hidden-ness

and it is a way that we, as a congregation, can reach out."

To a degree both Rabbi Ninio and Marlo Newton place the onus for initiating change on gay and lesbian Jews. In Rabbi Ninio's view, "a lot of that needs to come from the gay and lesbian community themselves, because it's hard for us to know what has happened in the past to alienate people from Judaism, what they need to feel like they can come back. What I've found really helpful [is] that there are people in our community

who'll come and express their needs."

She relates an experience which was transformative. "For the Mardi Gras, the gay community organised a Shabbat dinner. [Temple Emanuel Woollahra] was approached to conduct Shabbat services and I did that. Afterwards there were a number of people who commented on how important it was [to them] that a rabbi conducted the service and not a lay person. I hadn't realised the importance of the symbolic nature of that act for others...I think most times we are not aware of what is needed. If people are brave enough to come forward and say, this would be very helpful, it makes a difference."

Newton challenges gay and lesbian Jews to choose to affiliate despite the discomfort. "I find the rewards of being part of the larger Jewish community are greater than the occasional drawbacks. And [the community] can't change or respond...unless more people who are different become part of us; until then we don't have the impetus to look at our attitudes and re-examine them."

Judy*, co-convenor of Dayenu, the group which came together to create the Mardi Gras float, and Justine*, who is an active member of Temple Emanuel and marched with the float, have certainly taken a proactive role with the Jewish community. "We really feel that from a political perspective there needs to be a presence [in Jewish community life] and specific activities for, but not restricted to, gays and lesbians," says



Jewish Lesbians of Victoria joined in the fun and under their own banner.

Judy. "There will be a time, although I don't know whether it will be in our lifetime, when the issue of sexuality will be so irrelevant that no-one will bother about who is homosexual and who is heterosexual...but in the meantime, I think it's important to have a visible presence as gays and lesbians."

Victor and Lee have not felt the same motivation, despite their history of involvement with the Progressive community. Both spoke of it as a battle that, for them as individuals, was not worth fighting.

Marlo Newton understands this response, but points out the same could be said of Progressive Jews trying to affiliate with the wider Jewish community. "There is always someone who is going to disagree with the way you choose to live your life," she says. "But if you allow that to dictate the way you live your life, then you've already lost."

Both Lee and Victor volunteer that a major reason they have not persisted in Jewish religious life is because they don't consider themselves religious.

"My Jewish identity, which is very strong, is primarily secular," says Lee. "And part of the decision is, what do you get out of it, how close do you feel towards it." For her, the line in the sand is drawn "when the community won't even recognise your partner; won't even recognise your capacity to make lifetime partnerships."

According to Victor, it comes down to the passion to fight for a cause. "Is [acceptance of gays in] Judaism something that I feel passionate to fight about versus gay rights in the wider arena, or whatever else? I don't come from a strong religious background...If I had been heterosexual, I think most probably I would have looked for a Jewish woman, had a family and been a parent just like my parents, sending my kids [to religion school] but not having much involvement."

One analysis is that the family-oriented 'hooks' which entice heterosexual families into congregational life—brit milah and baby naming, bar/bat mitzvah, chuppah and religion school—have little relevance for gays and lesbians.

Victor points out, "In [the larger communities of] Melbourne or Sydney, you can count on one hand the gays and lesbians who are going to be involved in childbearing and childrearing," the traditional characteristics of Jewish family life.

Justine* chose to pay membership fees at Temple Emanuel Woollahra for the first time this year, after years of alienation from the synagogue. The one thing which made a difference to her was the personal, human response of the rabbi when she first broached the issue of her lesbian partner.

"My partner was so curious about Judaism and kept urging me to take her to synagogue. I was reluctant and kept putting it off until I happened to bump into Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins, who hadn't seen me for ages and he suggested we have coffee. When I told him about my partner, and questioned whether we would be accepted by the congregation, his response was wonderful. He said, 'Surely, you don't just want acceptance, you want to be welcomed.'"

It is notable that most gay and lesbian Jews do not have Jewish partners; not surprising when one considers the small size of most Jewish communities—and hence of the gay Jewish community. Nevertheless, the motivation for communal involvement may be quite different if both partners are Jewish. A heterosexual interfaith couple faces similar tensions about religious involvement, but for them Judaism offers enticing entry points when they come to crucial life cycle events.

Marlo Newton points out that these entry points to Jewish life may not be relevant for many Jews today.

"I think that the notions of *kehillah* and *chavurah* and community are recognition in some way that we are groping for other ways of coming together than as

celebrate your joys and your sorrows. You can't just have commitment ceremonies and not recognise our lives in any other way. I think [same sex commitment ceremonies are] important, but only as a symbol of

integrating gays and lesbians in community life makes commitment ceremonies inevitable. "I have spent the better part of 25 years expecting that one day, I would get married to a nice Jewish girl and have a large family... I still consider the traditional unit of two people making a commitment to love and support each other a central aspect of life. However, the decision of the AANZUP] to prohibit members from performing such ceremonies until a more Jewish perspective can be found calls out to my Jewish identity as a sensible approach to the issue. I have no doubt that in the fullness of time, such ceremonies will become accepted, and cherished as part of our tradition."

"It would certainly be an interesting statistic to see the success rate of commitment ceremonies against the modern day vision of heterosexual marriages," poses Mike. "Perhaps because of the struggle for the right to have these ceremonies they carry more meaning for those undertaking them."

Symbols are important. As Marlo Newton pointed out, the ordination of the first woman rabbi might have been seen as symbolic, but a woman still had to be ordained for it to become normative.

"Is the community going to ask me to run the VUPJ gay and Jewish group? And the answer is no. Rather than seeing actively involved gays and lesbians as positive role models, they don't want to present it as a viable role to their kids."

groups of families. It may be that *chavurah* groups might be the way for different groups to integrate into the larger congregation—in the way that there is a *rosb chodesh* group for women in larger synagogues, there may be a *chavurah* for gays, singles, non-English speakers, all sorts of permutations. No Jew is an island."

"What would make me come to synagogue?" asks Victor. "If there was going to be serious and meaningful debate about how [the Progressive community] was going to deal with homosexuality within the community; I don't want to talk about commitment ceremonies. If they actually say that we, as a movement, are going to discuss homosexuality, with the aim of educating our community, making it clear that homosexual Jews have a place in our community. I'm surprised that the Progressive movement would discuss commitment ceremonies because I don't think they've ever discussed homosexuals."

Lee adds, "It's about to what extent we welcome and include Jews of diversity, and homosexuality is one of those expressions of diversity. Part of being in the Jewish community for me is [that the community] is prepared to

how the community is going to respond to lesbians and gay men within it. That is much more fundamental."

She continued, "In terms of what is important to me: to what extent are our lives going to be celebrated at our death? Death is something that happens to all of us and, unlike marriage, it is not something that we choose or don't choose, and how the community deals with that is incredibly important."

Mike, who considers himself a Progressive Jew and attends a Progressive shule, supports the interim decision of the Moetzah, but points out that welcoming and



Rabbi Nino has been approached by a number of homosexual couples from her congregation who, in the main, have not wanted a commitment ceremony, but *kedushin*—the sanctifying of their relationship in the eyes of God and the community. "These [couples want] an acknowledgement of their relationship as something holy and as something that is part of the Jewish way. So the issue of acceptance, of being part of the community, is an important one. Acceptance and welcoming of different types of relationships and different kinds of definitions of what is a family is really important in a synagogue."

Stereotypes

The negative stereotypes that are still accepted about gays and lesbians are still a serious and insidious obstacle—an irony when one considers the negative stereotypes about Jews that we constantly try to break down.

Victor touched a sore point: "Is the community going to ask me or [other gays from within the community] to run the VUPJ gay and Jewish group? And the answer is no. They're not going to condone it. Rather than seeing actively involved gays and lesbians as positive role models, they don't want to present it as a viable role to their kids."

"It's about accepting our homosexuality and destroying the societal stereotypes, like the equivalence drawn between gays and pedophiles. What would have been the response [of the parents in my synagogue] if they had known I'm

gay when I was teaching at Sunday School?"

And we still have not explored how the community responds to and supports homosexual families. Do we welcome children and their homosexual parents in our schools?

Lee asks, "Do we have school systems that will support and respect diversity of family structures? Or is the child expected to be closeted about the homosexuality and guarded about family occasions? Can that child feel comfortable inviting friends over, confident her family will be treated with respect?"

David Opat, school counsellor at Melbourne's King David School, says that there has never been an issue at the school and so the school has not seen the need for a formal policy. He noted that, unlike other schools he has worked in, there have not been any incidents at King David School that he has had to deal with. Indeed, KDS is renowned as a warm, tolerant school which educates its students to think for themselves.

"I'm not aware of any students that are out. As school counsellor I haven't had any kids come to me to talk about issues of homosexuality."

In Opat's opinion, the response to students who are gay or coming out would be less of an issue than it would have been 20 years ago because peers are more aware of sexuality and gender issues.

But it does beg the question: if homosexuality is not discussed openly at a school, if it is hidden, how likely is it that a child will speak out? Given the acknowledged power of peer pressure on adolescents and

teenagers, would a gay or lesbian student feel more isolated and alone under those circumstances?

To be charitable, the community's lack of policy response may simply be a matter of ignorance and lack of awareness. Lee disagrees. "How do we train people to be closed minded? I don't know how we do that, and I don't know how we train them to be aware of diversity. At some point we have to say, this is the right thing to do, this is our policy and we'll educate teachers and community leaders and lay people to act on it."

Perhaps we should all ponder Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins response to Justice: "Where there is love, that's where God is."

* Eyechad has given assumed first names to some of those interviewed, who wished to protect their privacy. In doing so, we acknowledge that this is itself a form of closeting homosexuality and perpetuating the culture of hidden-ness.
** 1996 census figures indicate there are 80,000 Jews in Australia. Most Jewish demographers agree this is an under-estimation and put the figure at just over 100,000.