

US rabbis: Accept homosexuals

KOBI NAHSHONI

DOZENS of Orthodox rabbis from across the United States have signed a statement of principles saying that religious communities must accept those of its members who are “active homosexuals” and their biological or adopted children, and that they must not be encouraged to undergo “change therapies” or marry someone of the opposite sex.

The statement was formulated following a panel held by the “rashei yeshivah ramim” six months ago in New York. The panel included three homosexual graduates of the Yeshiva University and was hosted by its spiritual supervisor, Rabbi Yosef Blau. The occasion opened the largely controversial subject to a public debate, which caused a stir in the Modern Orthodox faith with which the yeshivah is affiliated.

The statement was drafted over the months following the panel, with the help of mental health professionals and many debates. It follows a development earlier this year when 20 important rabbis in the Religious Zionist camp in Israel signed a document of principles calling for a change in the approach to the community’s gay members. In this instance, the final outcome was signed by the first vice-president of the Rabbinical Council of America, Rabbi Shmuel Goldin, and Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, who heads Manhattan’s Jeshurun community.

The statement of principle states that halachah prohibits only homosexual acts, and not orientation or

attraction to members of the same sex.

It adds that homosexuals are free to seek “change therapy” if they feel that they are worthless or dangerous, but that mental health professionals have found these treatments ineffective at best, and at times harmful.

“Of course we are not saying there is no halachic problem with homosexuality, but there is a lot of understanding and goodwill to help these people.”

Rabbi Seth Farber

Director, ITIM

The rabbis also state that homosexuals must be accepted as fully-fledged members into synagogues and schools, and treated as any other member. However, as such, they must fulfil the obligations and mitzvahs of the community, including such norms or Jewish principles practised by the community that are not officially dictated by formal halachah.

The rabbis are also opposed to “outing” any gay community members who have not openly declared their sexual tendencies.

Though Judaism “cannot give its blessing and imprimatur to Jewish religious same-sex commitment ceremonies and weddings”, the rabbis add, the community must still accept “practising” homosexual couples and their biological or adopted children.

The statement also declared that forcing those with homosexual orientation to marry members of the opposite sex could lead to “great tragedy, unrequited love, shame, dishonesty and ruined lives”, so instead these people “should be directed to contribute to Jewish and general society in other meaningful ways”.

Founder and director of the Jewish-Life Information Centre (ITIM), Rabbi Seth Farber, also signed the statement.

He said that the panel had dealt with a “phenomenon that has challenged many halachah thinkers, instead of turning a blind eye or pretending it doesn’t exist”.

“Modern Orthodoxy doesn’t sweep things under the rug but rather holds serious, basic, and transparent debates,” he said.

“Of course we are not saying there is no halachic problem with homosexuality, but there is a lot of understanding and goodwill to help these people.

“The same empathy must be shown for them as for anyone struggling with a mitzvah, and whom no-one thinks to banish from the community,” he continued.

Another signatory, Rabbi Yuval Sherlo, stressed that the questions answered by the statement are not only related to homosexuality, but rather constitute the “current hot topic” of a large public asking to understand the Torah’s regard for people struggling with a conflict between their sexual orientation and their commitment to halachah.

YNETNEWS.COM