

Testing the waters over same-sex marriages

When our Members of Parliament ask our opinions about same-sex marriage, what will we say?

SOMEWHAT paradoxically, given these liberal and enlightened times, “That’s so gay” is a phrase that emerges regularly from the mouths of young people. And they’re not using it to be complimentary about whatever it is that’s the subject of the sentence.

When I hear the word “gay” being used in this pejorative sense, I invariably take the opportunity to explain why it’s not okay to use homophobic and bigoted language to express distaste – often asking, “Would you like to hear non-Jews say about something they didn’t like, ‘Oh, that’s so Jew?’”.

To the extent to which idiomatic expressions reflect underlying attitudes (as well as a somewhat young and naïve approach to the power of words), we still have a considerable distance to travel in terms of creating a climate of respect.

This is evident in cases much more blatant than the slip of a tongue: the relatively higher rates of depression and suicide among same-sex oriented youth; the abuse and social exclusion faced by gay and lesbian students. The two young women recently barred from attending their girls’ school formal because it was expected that a male partner be brought to the event personify the challenges that meet people of a range of ages and backgrounds in gaining minimal levels of respect and recognition.

The passage of the gay marriage resolution though the House of Representatives last week, passed by the slimmest of majorities, calls on members of the House to consult their constituents about their attitudes to marriage equality. When our Members of Parliament ask us our opinions, what will we say?

Clearly, no single voice will be able to speak for the Jewish community as a whole. There will certainly be a strong argument made that the proposed legalisation of same-sex marriage flies so in the face of traditional Judaism’s dual condemnation of homosexuality and view of marriage as the sacred union between man and woman, that it must be opposed.

Even if changes to the Marriage Act were worded to exempt religious institutions from being compelled to marry two people of the same gender, there would be those in the community who would see the reform as potentially creating such a mismatch between Jewish attitudes and those underlying wider society that they would lobby in order to avoid this dissonance.

There are, however, other perspectives that might inform our community’s attitude to marriage equality. Arguments grounded in elements of the tradition that could see reform to the Marriage Act as a timely and positive move find a basis in the concept of

Anecdotal evidence



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kevod habriyot (human dignity).

This notion, which draws on fundamental teachings about recognising the essential spark of the divine within every individual, combined with new understandings of homosexuality as “hard-wired” rather than sinful choice, demands new attitudes. The ideals of marriage and family are arguably not lessened by ending the discrimination and humiliation of those who live differently.

Another point that might be made to our MPs is that we would accept this change because we value the separation of religion and state. Marriage between man and woman is essentially a religious concept that underlies Judeo-Christian society. While we might still uphold that model within branches of our own tradition, we can’t demand that on this issue society be governed by religious teachings, but on other issues we prefer separation.

Jewish activists devoted to movements for social change, inspired by the Deuteronomy injunction, “Justice, justice, you shall pursue”, seek to end discrimination of any kind, extending the Voltaire maxim that I do not agree with what you say, but I’ll fight for your right to say it, to lifestyle choices people ought to be free to make, provided they do no harm to others.

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Marriage as an institution has evolved, changing over time from one which permitted polygamy to one centred on monogamy, from one that could be created only by sacred ritual to a civil matter, from one viewed as indissoluble to one that could be ended through “no-fault” divorce.

Gauging public opinion on the issue of marriage equality is not going to be easy. Given that there are issues with support groups for gay and lesbian Jews officially joining Victoria’s Jewish community roof body, it is to be expected that the dominant Jewish voice parliamentarians will hear is that the reform is anathema to Jewish values and social norms.

But there may also be voices from the margins that give expression to the complexities of the issue, the different strains within our own tradition, and a certain confidence which does not feel threatened by the choices given to others in making one’s own.

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