

Homosexuality, the Bible, and Us— A Jewish Perspective

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From Volume 6, no. 2 of Ultimate Issues

April–June, 1990

A conservative talk-show host and popular Jewish intellectual wrestles with why modern Jews should not dispense with ancient injunctions—in a leading neoconservative journal.

... The Hebrew Bible, in particular the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), has done more to civilize the world than any other book or idea in history. It is the Hebrew Bible that gave humanity such ideas as a universal, moral, loving God; ethical obligations to this God; the need for history to move forward to moral and spiritual redemption; the belief that history has meaning; and the notion that human freedom and social justice are the divinely desired states for all people. It gave the world the Ten Commandments and ethical monotheism.

Therefore, when this Bible makes strong moral proclamations, I listen with great respect. And regarding male homosexuality—female homosexuality is not mentioned—this Bible speaks in such clear and direct language that one does not have to be a religious fundamentalist in order to be influenced by its views. All that is necessary is to consider oneself a serious Jew or Christian.

Jews or Christians who take the Bible's views on homosexuality seriously are not obligated to prove that they are not fundamentalists or literalists, let alone bigots (though people have

used the Bible to defend bigotry). The onus is on those who view homosexuality as compatible with Judaism or Christianity to reconcile this view with their Bible.

Given the unambiguous nature of the biblical attitude toward homosexuality, however, such a reconciliation is not possible. All that is possible is to declare: "I am aware that the Bible condemns homosexuality, and I consider the Bible wrong." That would be an intellectually honest approach.

But this approach leads to another problem. If one chooses which of the Bible's moral values to take seriously (and the Bible states its prohibition of homosexuality not only as a law, but as a value—"it is an abomination"), of what moral use is the Bible?

Advocates of religious acceptance of homosexuality respond that while the Bible is morally advanced in some areas, it is morally regressive in others. Its condemnation of homosexuality is cited as one example, and the Torah's acceptance of slavery as another.

Far from being immoral, however, the Torah's prohibition of homosexuality was a major part of its liberation of the human being from the bonds of unrestrained sexuality and of women from being peripheral to men's lives.

As for slavery, while the Bible declares homosexuality wrong, it never declares slavery good. If it did, I would have to reject the Bible as a document with moral relevance to our times. With its notion of every human being created in God's image and with its central event being liberation from slavery, it was the Torah which first taught humanity that slavery is wrong. The Torah's laws regarding slavery exist not to perpetuate it, but to humanize it. And within Jewish life, these laws worked. Furthermore, the slavery that is discussed in the Torah bears no resemblance to black slavery or other instances with which we are familiar. Such slavery, which includes the kidnapping of utterly innocent people, was prohibited by the Torah.

Another argument advanced by advocates of religious acceptance of homosexuality is that the Bible prescribes the death penalty for a multitude of sins, including such seemingly inconsequential acts as gathering wood on the Sabbath. Since we no longer condemn people who violate the Sabbath, why continue to condemn people who engage in homosexual acts?

The answer is that we do not derive our approach toward homosexuality only from the fact that the Torah made it a capital offense. We learn it from the fact that the Bible makes a moral statement about homosexuality. It makes no such statement about gathering wood on the Sabbath. The Torah uses its strongest term of disapprobation, "abomination," to describe homosexuality. It is the Bible's moral evaluation of homosexuality that distinguishes homosexuality from other offenses, capital or otherwise. As Professor Greenberg, who betrays no inclination toward religious belief, writes, "When the word *to'evah* ('abomination') does appear in the Hebrew Bible, it is sometimes applied to idolatry, cult prostitution, magic, or divination, and is sometimes used more generally. *It always conveys great repugnance*" [emphasis added].

Moreover, it lists homosexuality together with child sacrifice among the "abominations" practiced by the peoples living in the land about to be conquered by the Jews. The two are certainly not morally equatable, but they both characterized the morally primitive world that Judaism opposed. They both characterized a way of life opposite to the one that God demanded of Jews (and even of non-Jews—homosexuality is among the sexual offenses that is covered by one of the "seven laws of the children of Noah" which Judaism holds all people must observe).

Finally, the Bible adds a unique threat to the Jews if they engage in homosexuality and the other offenses of the Canaanites: "You will be vomited out of the land" just as the non-Jews who practice these things were vomited out of the land. Again, as

Greenberg notes, this threat “suggests that the offenses were considered serious indeed.”

It is impossible for Judaism to make peace with homosexuality, because homosexuality denies many of Judaism’s most fundamental values. It denies life; it denies God’s expressed desire that men and women cohabit; and it denies the root structure that the Bible prescribes for all mankind, the family.

If one can speak of Judaism’s essence, it is contained in the Torah statement, “I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse, and you shall choose life.” Judaism affirms whatever enhances life, and it opposes or separates whatever represents death. Thus, meat (death) is separated from milk (life); menstruation (death) is separated from sexual intercourse (life); carnivorous animals (death) are separated from vegetarian, kosher animals (life). This is probably why the Torah juxtaposes child sacrifice with male homosexuality. Though they are not morally analogous, both represent death: One deprives children of life, the other prevents their having life.

God’s first declaration about man (the human being generally, and the male specifically) is, “It is not good for man to be alone.” Now, presumably, in order to solve the problem of man’s aloneness, God could have made another man, or even a community of men. However, God solved man’s aloneness by creating one other person, a woman—not a man, not a few women, not a community of men and women. Man’s solitude was not a function of his not being with other people; it was a function of his being without a woman.

Of course, Judaism also holds that women need men. But both the Torah statement and Jewish law have been more adamant about men marrying than about women marrying. Judaism is worried about what happens to men and to society when men do not channel their drives into marriage. In this regard, the Torah and Judaism were highly prescient: The over-

whelming majority of violent crimes are committed by unmarried men.

In order to become fully human, male and female must join. In the words of Genesis, “God created the human . . . male and female He created them.” The union of male and female is not merely some lovely ideal; it is the essence of the biblical outlook on becoming human. To deny it is tantamount to denying a primary purpose of life. . . .

Judaism has a sexual ideal—marital sex. All other forms of sexual behavior, though not equally wrong, deviate from that ideal. The further they deviate, the stronger Judaism’s antipathy. Thus there are varying degrees of sexual wrongs. There is, one could say, a continuum of wrong which goes from premarital sex, to adultery, and on to homosexuality, incest, and bestiality.

We can better understand why Judaism rejects homosexuality by understanding its attitudes toward these other unacceptable practices. For example, if a Jew were to argue that never marrying is as equally valid a lifestyle as marrying, normative Judaism would forcefully reject this claim. Judaism states that a life without marrying is a less holy, less complete, and a less Jewish life. Thus, only married men were allowed to be high priests, and only men who had children could sit as judges on the Jewish supreme court, the Sanhedrin.

To put it in modern terms, while an unmarried rabbi can be the spiritual leader of a congregation, he would be dismissed by almost any congregation if he publicly argued that remaining single is as Jewishly valid a way of life as married life.

Despite all this, no Jew could argue that single Jews must be ostracized from Jewish communal life. Single Jews are to be loved and included in Jewish family, social, and religious life.

These attitudes toward not marrying should help clarify Judaism’s attitude toward homosexuality. First, it contradicts the Jewish ideal. Second, it cannot be held to be equally valid.

Third, those publicly committed to it may not serve as public Jewish role models. But fourth, homosexuals must be included in Jewish communal life and loved as fellow human beings and as Jews. . . .

Accepting homosexuality as the social, moral, or religious equivalent of heterosexuality would constitute the first modern assault on the extremely hard-won, millennia-old battle for a family-based, sexually monogamous society. While it is labeled as progress, the acceptance of homosexuality would not be new at all. . . .

Gay activists and some liberal groups such as the ACLU argue for the right of homosexuals to marry. Generally, two arguments are advanced—that society should not deny anyone the right to marry, and that if male homosexuals were given the right to marry, they would be considerably less likely to cruise.

The first argument is specious because there is no “right to marry.” There is no right to marry more than one partner at a time, or to marry an immediate member of one’s family. Society does not allow either practice. Though the ACLU and others believe that society has no rights, only individuals do, most Americans feel otherwise. Whether this will continue to be so, as Judaism and Christianity lose their influence, remains to be seen.

The second argument may have some merit, and insofar as homosexual marriages would decrease promiscuity among gay men, it would be a very positive development for both gays and society. But homosexual marriage would be unlikely to have such an effect. The male propensity to promiscuity would simply overwhelm most homosexual males’ marriage vows. It is women who keep most heterosexual men monogamous, or at least far less likely to cruise, but gay men have no such brake on their cruising natures. Male nature, not the inability to marry, compels gay men to wander from man to man. This is proven by the

behavior of lesbians, who, though also prevented from marrying each other, are not promiscuous. . . .

Blessing Gay and Lesbian Commitments

B I S H O P J O H N S H E L B Y S P O N G

From Living in Sin?, 1990

An Episcopalian bishop details his own coming to terms with the reality of homosexual partnerships—and why he believes gay men and women deserve the church’s blessing.

Everything I now know about homosexuality, through conversations with gay and lesbian people, the books I have read, and the experts with whom I have talked, has led me to the conclusion that a homosexual orientation is a minority but perfectly natural characteristic on the human spectrum of sexuality. It is not something one chooses, it is something one is. . . .

Gays and lesbians, like all people, have unique gifts and contributions to offer the human family, some of which might well be present in them because of, not in spite of, their sexual orientation. But it is hard to discover gifts that celebrate one’s being when the atmosphere in which one lives is laced with a murderous, oppressive hostility toward who one is. . . .

If my conclusions about gay and lesbian people are valid, then the whole of society must be seen as guilty of a cruel oppression of this courageous minority. The time has surely come