

“When Gays Say “I Do”: A Jewish View”

On the afternoon of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, the vulnerable, hungry, repentant congregants hear the words of the Torah ring out, “You shall not lie with a man as you lie with a woman. It is an abomination.”

The following afternoon, a woman enters the rabbi’s study, and demands to know, “Rabbi, tell me, “Is this right? Do you believe this? Is my son an abomination?” She tells him that her son went to San Francisco where a psychologist was reputed, “to make the crooked straight.” She received a cheerful call from him, hopeful that he would finally be free of the curse that tormented him. And then, silence. His next words to her were in a suicide note. The therapy had not worked. Her son had taken his own life.

The distraught mother looks at the man in front of her. “You knew my son, Rabbi. Was he an abomination?”

Rabbi Harold Schulweis, in describing this moment, says that he was caught between the voice of an anguished mother and the voice of a sacred book. Both voices had a claim on him. To whose voice could he respond? Can you answer “Hineini” “Behold, here I am?” to two contradictory imperatives?

In the Bible, Abraham was asked to answer “Hineini” to two contradictory imperatives. The first “Hineini” is in response to God’s terrible command—“Take your son, your only son, whom you love and offer him as a burnt offering.” The second “Hineini” comes while he is poised, with knife in hand, ready to carry out God’s command. This time an angel calls to Abraham...”Do not raise your hand against the boy or do anything to him.” Which should Abraham obey, God or the angel, the master or the servant?

The question of which voice to heed is not only a Patriarch’s question. It is not only a rabbi’s question. It is a question for each of us, for every religious person who struggles to understand the world around us in light of the traditions bequeathed to us. It is a question in our national conversation, in our state, in our university, and indeed, it must be a question in our places of worship. How do we respond to our gay and lesbian friends, family members, and companions of faith? How do we reconcile the claims they

make for life, for love and when they discover the person of their dreams, for marriage?

Leviticus says, “You shall not lie with a man as with a woman. It is an abomination.” Religious Jews and Christians must interrogate this verse, must question how far the power of its claim extends. A literal translation of the Hebrew might read, “And a male you shall not sexually penetrate as in the lyings of a woman. It is abhorrent.” First, please note, the Bible says nothing here or elsewhere concerning sexual behavior between women. Second, the only activity explicitly forbidden is male anal intercourse. Steven Greenberg, the first Orthodox rabbi to live openly as a gay man, and the author of Wrestling With God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition, closely analyzes the text. He observes that the uncommon word, “mishkeve”, or “lyings of” appears in only one other place in the Bible. In Genesis, the word mishkeve is used to describe an incestuous rape. Reuven, Jacob’s oldest son, vengefully rapes his father’s concubine Bilhah. In this context, the word mishkeve describes sex where the motive is “not love but... power, not connection but disconnection, not tenderness, but humiliation and violence.” By applying this insight from the Genesis context, it becomes clear that Leviticus prohibits sex between men whose intention is humiliation. This is the abomination. And so Leviticus reads, “And a male you shall not sexually penetrate to humiliate. It is abhorrent.”

Rabbi Greenberg, claimed by the sacred words of Torah as well as by his own painfully acquired self-understanding as a gay man, finds in this careful interpretation, a way to say “Hineini” to both voices. He writes for himself and for other religious gay men, “The discovery of a faithful way of making sense of Leviticus in light of our experience is like manna from heaven...Many of us feel in our hearts that God has not rejected us. To be able to see that it is so from inside the Torah is a salvation beyond words.”

What is salvation for a faithful gay Jew or Christian might be seen at best, as elegant verbal gymnastics to the people of faith whose voices have been loudest. Their views are not tethered to a specific verse, but are wrapped in a worldview that treats difference as a threat. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that religious beliefs frequently underpin opposition to homosexuality. The attitudes of 55% of evangelicals and 28% of Catholics and mainline Protestants in America are shaped by what they hear from the pulpit. Contemporary moral theorist Jeffrey Stout elucidates why a thoughtful analysis of Leviticus may have little purchase, even among those who claim to be Biblical literalists.

Why, Stout asks, do cannibals, werewolves and people who have sex with animals offend us? Because they challenge what it means to be human. They confuse categories. They threaten our membership in the community of human beings. Cannibals behave like animals by eating human flesh. Werewolves slip between human and animal. We can love our pets, but to make love with them violates our social identity as human beings. We share our appetites for food and sex with animals, so when we eat and have sex we need to be most careful to mark our humanness. The sharper the social boundary, the greater the sense of abomination. So we agree that cannibalism and bestiality are abhorrent. The boundary between human and beast is not up for discussion.

But other boundaries are more porous. Look around. We worship today with two women clergy preaching and presiding. We study at this university with brilliant and accomplished faculty--both women and men. We strive to be engaged parents—fathers as well as mothers. We form friendships of equals between men and women. There are women who work outside the home and men who don't. We no longer are Mr. Outside and Mrs. Inside. Our gender boundaries are not very sharp. While a man who behaves like a beast still repels, a man who behaves like a woman or a woman who behaves like a man, increasingly does not. Homosexuality confuses our sepia toned portraits of man and woman, of John Wayne and June Cleaver. Homosexuality involves using sexual organs in ways that violate social boundaries—not between man and beast, but between male and female.

In communities that insist that men are the rulers and women are the ruled, male homosexuality threatens one's membership in the community of men. No wonder fire and brimstone rains down in some churches in America. For even in those pews, gender roles are not nearly as immutable as the Fifties fantasy. If Stout is correct, that the sharper the social boundary, the greater the sense of abomination, attitudes about homosexuality are directly tied to beliefs about the status of women. And as women attain more freedom, education and political power, what once was abhorrent becomes simultaneously more acceptable for those who herald the changes, and more threatening and tenaciously condemned for those who do not.

This sheds light on something that has perplexed me--why opponents of same sex marriage contend that gay love and commitment imperils their own heterosexual marriage. Doesn't every marriage stand on its own? Is marriage a fixed pie where someone else's celebration diminishes my happiness? What we learn from Stout is that those who feel threatened by

gay marriage have the variables right but the equation reversed. It is not gay marriage that endangers heterosexual marriage. It is egalitarian heterosexual marriages that make gay marriage possible.

The Talmud tells a story of a man whose wife died and left him with an infant to suckle, and he could not afford a wet nurse. A miracle occurred and he grew breasts like a woman and he nursed his child. Rabbi Joseph said: Come and see just how great this man must be that such a miracle was performed for him! Abbaye said: On the contrary. How bad this man must be that the order of nature was changed for him. (Shabbat 53b)

Miracle or monster? A sign of God's love or a divine curse? For Abbaye, the gender divide is foundational. To alter it is to change the very order of nature. But for Joseph, the ability to love and nurture and care for another human being, in whatever body houses it, is both mysterious and miraculous.

Today, Rabbi Joseph's wisdom speaks to lesbian and gay couples desiring to love and care and nurture one another in both body and spirit. Can we, like Rabbi Joseph, rejoice in a newly acknowledged miracle? Can we, like Rabbi Joseph, bless the mystery of a body made with different desires by a mysterious and creative God?

When the Biblical Abraham heard two calls from heaven, when he put down the knife with his son before him, when he responded to the second call with "Hineini", "Behold, Here I am", he brought forth an act of courage more striking than his initial willingness to take his son up the mountain. When Abraham said "Hineini", he privileged the voice of God's messenger over the voice of God. We might ask, "Was this a rebellious act? Didn't he disobey God?" However, Jewish tradition praises him, as Rabbi Joseph celebrates the father in the Talmudic story, for saving a life. Abraham is identified as a questioning religious soul. He is the one who asks God, "Should the Judge of the earth not do justice?" His audacity, temporarily dampened for three days, is recovered on that crucial moment in the story of the Binding of Isaac when he responds "Hineini"-- not to God, but to God's messenger. By responding to the second "Hineini", Abraham was able to see beyond hierarchy to truth. By reconsidering his first "Hineini", by putting down his weapon, rather than disobeying God, he paid tribute to the God who gave him spiritual wisdom, he honored the God who trusted him to act with justice, he vindicated the God who instilled in him the precious gift of discernment, the imperishable gift of conscience. Because Abraham invoked the "Hineini" of discernment, because Abraham heeded the "Hineini" of conscience, because Abraham choose life, love and a hopeful future, God opened his eyes. The place where he stood, the place where he

asserted his conscience, that place will forever be known as “Adonai Yireh” “On the mountain of the Eternal, there is vision”.

And, like Abraham, when we are faced with one “Hineini” against another, when we are challenged to understand the truths of our texts in light of the people whose lives and loves are revealed before us, let us, as well, have a visionary conscience. May we look deeply and see miracles in differences. May trust our gifts of heart and mind and conscience, invoking them for life, for love, for a hopeful future for all those who find enduring love—gay as well as straight. May we dance at those weddings as our hearts, our hands and bodies express “Hineini”-Here I am.

Special thanks to Rabbi Harold Schulweis for “One Hineini Against Another” in Hineini in Our Lives by Norman J. Cohen and to Rabbi Steven Greenberg for Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition