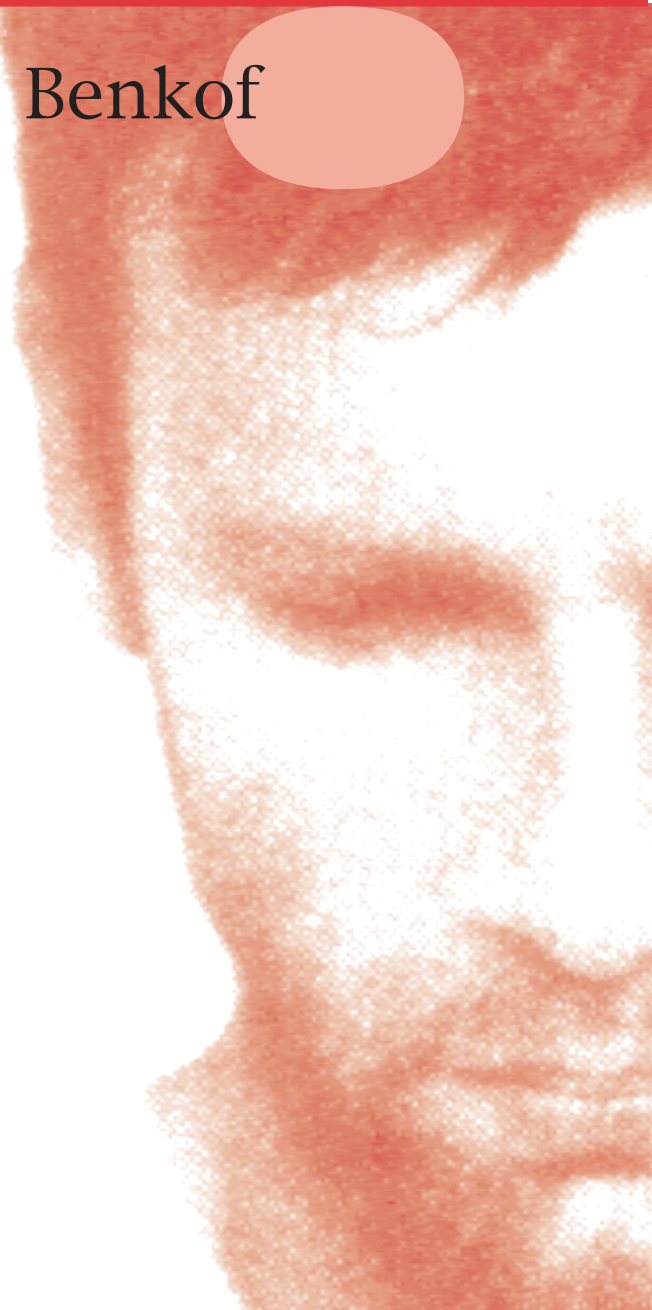


Is Judaism Homophobic

By David Benkof

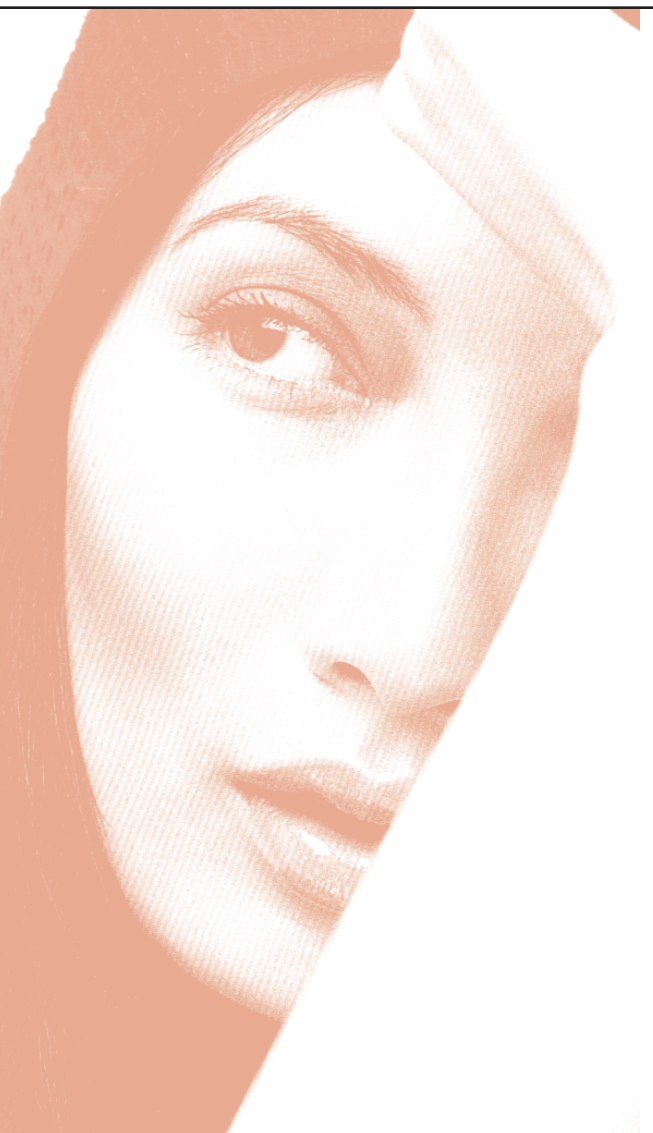


MANY RECENT JEWISH DISCUSSIONS

about homosexuality have left the incorrect impression that the Torah's perspective is closed-minded, out-of-date, and lacking sensitivity to the needs of gays and lesbians.

But the Torah's messages about sexuality are for every man and woman - past, present, and future; gay, straight, and in-between. Unfortunately, given the success of the gay-rights movement, it's hard to explain and defend Judaism's viewpoint on sexuality in just a paragraph or two. More than one person who has attempted to do so has come across as narrow-minded, ignorant, or mean-spirited.

Judaism has answers to all the arguments and accusations made by those who prefer Western society's pleasure-centered approach to sexuality, but the subject can get complicated. Therefore, please keep an open mind as this pamphlet describes and explains the Torah's ban on same-sex relations.



Homosexuality and History

In order to fully grasp the Jewish view on homosexuality, first we have to think historically. Despite the popular viewpoint that gays and lesbians have always existed in every culture, historians and anthropologists have overwhelmingly found the opposite. While same-sex intercourse and relationships have a long and broad history, there were no sexual orientations - no gays (or straights) until about 150 years ago.

Being gay or lesbian, these social scientists have found, is a social construction specific to the modern West. Before the late 19th century, most cultures looked at homosexuality as something one could do, not something one could be.

(That is, as it happens, precisely how the Torah views the matter.)

Same-sex love and sex were common in some societies and rare in others, but no society before the recent West distinguished among people depending on same-sex versus opposite-sex sexual desire and behavior.

This is not some fringe opinion of right-wing academics. It's the mainstream consensus of the scholars studying homosexuality across space and time.* Indeed, most of these scholars are gay or lesbian themselves. (Some of their works are listed at the back of this pamphlet.)

But what about the biological studies that supposedly show a "gay gene" or a "gay brain"? Although biology certainly plays a role in sexual behavior (as it does in every aspect of life), the natural-science data supporting a biological basis for sexual orientation is all preliminary and mostly disputed. Such tentative biological evidence pales in comparison to the strong social-science evidence that being gay is not a naturally occurring phenomenon in the human species but rather a social construction specific to modern Western culture.

Does God make people gay?

No. The social-science evidence alone shows that God doesn't mint each human being with a built-in sexual orientation. (Otherwise, there would be evidence of same-sex-oriented people - as opposed to acts - in numerous cultures and eras, and that evidence is lacking.) Rather, whether people wind up gay, straight, or bisexual nowadays depends on a complex interplay among their genes, their experiences, and their social environment - particularly their interactions with modern Western society.

That doesn't mean, of course, that having same-sex attractions is a conscious choice that can be changed at will. Most gay men and

*For example, lesbian anthropologist Esther Newton (SUNY-Purchase) noted in an essay that in her field, "there is really no essentialist position on sexuality, no notion that people are born with sexual orientations. The evidence, fragmentary as it is, all points the other way."

And leading gay historian Martin Duberman, the founder of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in New York City, put it this way in an interview with me: "Were people always either gay or straight? The answer to that is a decided 'No.'" Instead, people from other eras who slept with members of their own gender "haven't viewed that as something exclusive and therefore something that defines them as a different category of human being."

many lesbians report no memory of ever choosing the objects of their sexual desires, and that testimony deserves respect.

In earlier eras, though, people didn't develop gay or lesbian identities - even if they sometimes found themselves attracted to same-sex individuals - because in general, those cultures were less sex-obsessed than our own. As gay historian Jonathan Ned Katz has described it, during the late 19th century, "sexual desire moved from the mind's margin to the center of consciousness, and sexual activity moved from society's edge to the culture's center."

Judaism, too, recognizes that the strength of temptations for different behaviors the Torah forbids have varied through the centuries.

For example, it's now rare to find a Jew who has a desire to worship a graven image. But during the days of the Prophets, strong yearnings to worship idols were common. We might even describe some ancient Jewish idol-worshippers as having an idolatrous "orientation" - perhaps because they were more insecure, aesthetically inclined, or rebellious. If we time-traveled the DNA of such people and raised them from birth in today's society, would any of them spontaneously start bowing down to idols? Doubtful.

Similarly, if we raised today's gays and lesbians in Biblical times, they wouldn't have homosexual orientations. Sexual identity arises from social contexts, not DNA. Think of computers as a good analogy: being gay or lesbian may be the software or even the operating system for many people nowadays, but it isn't in anybody's hardware.

Right and Wrong, Holy and Unholy

A central premise of the Torah is that there are behaviors that are proper, and others that are not. And there can be no doubt that the Torah considers male-on-male sex (and, to a lesser degree, female-on-female sex) improper. At the same time, though, Judaism recognizes the reality of strong temptations for many behaviors

the Torah forbids. If there weren't temptations to do such things, after all, there would be no need for the Torah to tell us they are wrong.

To many moderns, though, the Jewish restrictions in the area of sexuality can seem puzzling. Why not let everybody make their own decisions about what kinds of sex and what kinds of families they want? Can't same-sex relationships be as loving and holy as opposite-sex ones?

They might be loving, but they cannot be holy, according to our tradition. And sexuality, a most powerful and valuable human drive, is meant to be infused with holiness.

The term for a Jewish marriage is *kiddushin*. Any time Judaism uses the root letters for the word "holy" - koof-dalet-shin - it involves something that supersedes our natural inclinations because God has a higher plan.

A good example is Shabbat. Every aspect of our calendar is based on nature - the month from the moon, the year from the sun, the day from the earth - except the week. We have a seven-day week for no other reason than God's creation of the universe in six days and His rest on the seventh. Without Shabbat, we would work non-stop - and indeed most people do. But the Torah teaches us that if we rest one out of seven days, our lives will be better.

It's the same with *kiddushin*. In a state of nature, people aren't gay or straight; they're what Freud called "polymorphously perverse." That's another way of saying, essentially, "anything that moves." But society helps individuals develop sexual identities and romantic bonds of various sorts. Societies in history have celebrated varieties of sexual congress that would seem to us to range from the conventional to the bizarre. But God has shown us through His Torah that only a tiny percentage of all possible relationships can be holy.

Thus, a Jewish marriage by definition involves a man and a woman not because it is natural, but because it's part of God's plan for helping our lives and our society. Judaism can no more grant *kiddushin* to two men or two women than it can observe Shabbat every sixth or every fifth day.

Sexuality and Change

Whether people can change their sexualities is a complicated subject. There certainly are many onetime gay and lesbian people who later find themselves in opposite-sex relationships, sometimes to their surprise, and sometimes after much therapy, study, and prayer. There's even special "reorientation therapy," which is controversial, but appears to work in some cases. There are many people now in happy opposite-sex marriages who credit their therapy for helping them go from gay to straight living. On the other hand, there are many others who have found that no matter how much counseling they go through, their same-sex attractions don't go away, and they aren't successful in mustering opposite-sex desires.

But here's the key fact about sexuality and change: *While many gays and lesbians who want to follow the Torah wish they could make their sexual orientations fully heterosexual, Judaism doesn't demand that.* Judaism recognizes that people will have all kinds of inclinations - for food, for sex, for gossip, for violence - and it does not condemn people for their desires. It does, however, call for restraining one's behavior. And there are many Jews and non-Jews alike who struggle with same-sex desire but successfully manage not to express it in their actions. Among them are men and women who are celibate, and others who are happily married to members of the opposite sex.

Isn't it unfair to ask homosexuals to restrain their inclinations when heterosexuals get to indulge theirs?

Actually, Judaism puts lots of restraints on

heterosexual behavior: Jews may not marry non-Jews, for example. And couples are expected to wait for their wedding before having intercourse - and even then they are subject to the laws of *niddah* - family purity relating to the menstrual cycle. That means that during a woman's period and for several days thereafter, sex is prohibited.

But there's a broader point: *Judaism (unlike post-'60s America) is not about "being who you are."* It's often about being better than who you are.

In a memorable passage in *Pirkei Avot* (the part of the Mishnah that talks about the "ethics of the fathers"), Ben Zoma is reported as saying: "Who is a hero? (Who is strong?) He who controls his inclination."

While resisting desires for same-sex erotic love and relations is tremendously hard for some Jews, our tradition looks upon one who succeeds in overcoming illicit desires as a hero.

Gays and lesbians often describe their coming out as "being true to themselves." But here's another way of thinking about it: For many, coming out as gay means letting their libidos define them, even at the expense of their heritage or their values. Whether or not homosexual inclinations are a matter of choice, every single Jew can make the choice to follow the wisdom of the Torah and the Jewish tradition about bedroom behavior and family format.

But how can the Torah expect a gay Jew to enter into a relationship with someone he or she can never really love?

The question assumes Judaism shares Western culture's glorification of Hollywood-style swept-off-your-feet romantic love. In truth, Judaism's expectations for a beautiful Jewish home are realistic and modest - though deeply meaningful - and unrelated to romantic or erotic ecstasy. It's Western society that

says that in choosing a marriage partner, we should look hardest at the people with whom we think we can have the most satisfying erotic relations.

Contrast that to Jewish norms: there's only one word for "loving" in Hebrew, *ahavah*. And the Torah uses it to command us to love the Lord our God, our neighbors, ourselves - but never specifically our spouses. This situation is underscored by the way the Torah describes the marriage of the patriarch Isaac (Genesis 24:67):

"And Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother; he married Rebecca, she became his wife, and he loved her; and thus was Isaac consoled after his mother."

Our forefather Isaac grew to love Rebecca only after marrying her. Thus, in Judaism, *ahavah* isn't a prerequisite for marriage; it can grow out of sharing values, building a home, raising children together. *Nowhere are we told*



that we should live out our lives with partners who provide effortless intimacy and great sex.

Here's how one rabbi I consulted in preparing this booklet put it: "In the eyes of Torah, love is not something we 'fall' into - it's something one works to earn and attain. A Jewish marriage is the beginning of a relationship, not the culmination of one," he wrote me. "Singles bars and courtrooms and prisons are filled with people who once were 'madly in love' but whose 'love' was really for themselves alone. They mistook superficialities for true meaning, and misconstrued lower feelings for holy ones. They were more mad than in love." The Torah, he continued, "gives Jews - all Jews, no matter what their natural or environment-molded inclinations - the ability to live holy lives. All we need to assert is the most powerful and most meaningful thing we possess: our determination."

Is Judaism homophobic?

Absolutely not. True, Judaism has espoused opposite-sex relations as part of God's plan for us for thousands of years. But for those who feel they had no choice in developing a same-sex orientation, Judaism is actually quite accepting and embracing.

Think about it:

- 1) Orientations aren't against Jewish law; acts are.
- 2) Some people have successfully changed their sexual orientations, or at least deliberately chosen to live an opposite-sex lifestyle despite same-sex desires.
- 3) Violating Jewish sexual norms does not make a person any less a cherished member of the Jewish community.
- 4) Nonobservant gay or lesbian Jews who wish to become more observant can start observing other commandments before trying to follow the laws about sexuality.

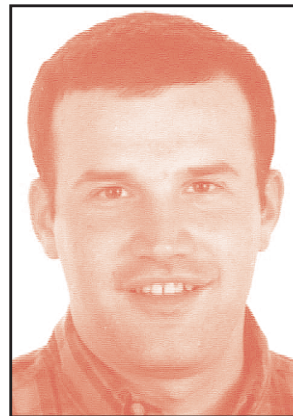
While living up to the Torah's sexual ideal is tremendously hard for many of today's gays and lesbians, it's not out of reach, and it comes with everlasting rewards.

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For those struggling with same-sex attractions who wish to learn more, please visit www.isjudaismhomophobic.com. That site contains answers to questions such as:

- What, exactly, are the Jewish laws about homosexuality?
- Aren't traditional Jews picking and choosing which Bible verses they uphold and which ones they ignore?
- Can gays and lesbians become straight?
- How can a person deal Jewishly with same-sex attractions?

In addition, anyone grappling with the issues discussed in this pamphlet is strongly encouraged to speak to a qualified therapist and/or Orthodox rabbi.



David Benkof was a gay activist for more than a decade, including eight years as a columnist, editor, and entrepreneur in the gay press. He's the author (as David Bianco) of *Gay Essentials: Facts for your Queer Brain (Alyson, 1999)* and *Modern Jewish History For Everyone (History For Everyone, 1997)*. More recently, though, he has become Torah-observant and now looks forward to marriage and, God willing, many children. He can be reached at DavidBenkof@aol.com.

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