

## Achrei Mot-Kedoshim; Leviticus 16:1-20:27

By Rabbi Denise Eger

Again this week we have a double portion of Torah before us. These are two very rich portions that emphasize holiness. The reason for observing many mitzvot in these sections of Leviticus is that the observance of them will imbue the individual with holiness: You shall be holy because, I, Adonai, your God, am holy (Lev. 19:1).

In both of these portions also discussed is a detailed list of sexual offenses. In both Achrei Mot and Kedoshim everything from incest, to adultery, and bestiality are described as abhorrent and an affront to God. These acts do not bring about holiness and are describe in Achrei Mot as “practices of the land of Egypt...” and “of the land of Canaan...” (Lev. 18:3). These are associated with pagan worship and idolatry and therefore punishable by death as described in Kedoshim. “All who do any of those abhorrent things — such person shall be cut off from their people.” (Lev. 18:29). Karet—or being cut-off from the people was seen as a kind of death if not a physical one as individuals had to be part of a household, clan or tribe.

It is also in these two portions of the torah that we read the two verses that state: Do not lie with a male the lying of a woman with a man: It is abhorrence. These verses Lev. 18:22 and Lev. 20:13 are traditionally pointed to as forbidding homosexuality. But these verses have been debated greatly. The Torah does not have a framework for sexual orientation as we do today. It presumes that heterosexuality is the overlay for all.

Much has been written about these two verses in trying to discuss them. In the recent teshuvah by the Conservative movement written by Rabbis Elliot Dorff, Daniel Nevins, Avraham Reisner, — these verses discuss the prohibition against anal sex between two men in Jewish tradition. Further writings discuss that the reason for this prohibition of this sex act between two men are really outlawing male on male rape — an act of terror, humiliation and domination often used by invading armies to terrorize a population. While yet others have discussed this prohibition in relationship to pagan worship. In many pagan cults the priests and priestesses of the various gods and goddesses were often sex surrogates for the local deity. If it was a male god, they were served by female priestesses. If it was a goddess they were often served by male priests. In Judaism of the Bible we have a male deity served by male priests — thus the prohibition of male –male receptive sexuality.



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Today gay men and lesbians are fully included in the life of the Jewish people among Reform and Reconstructionist denominations without any bar to full spiritual fulfillment –including the right to be a rabbi if qualified and married under the chupah. The Conservative movement has just recently voted to ordain gay men and lesbians as rabbis and cantors although the prohibition on anal sex between men remains.

From this understanding of the book of Leviticus—it is hard to argue that what is being discussed is a committed, same gender loving relationship. The torah doesn't address gay headed families at all. I believe that gay men and lesbians have a full place in our society. These two verses so often used wrongly as justification for violence and murder of gay men and lesbians are being completely misunderstood by many fundamentalist Christians in their narrow reading of the Bible and their lack of understanding of these Jewish teachings.

Today we believe that there is a pathway to holiness for gay men and lesbians. That gay men and lesbians can and ought to be true to their selves and true nature as God made us. Thus gay men and lesbians are created in the Divine image no less than heterosexuals or bisexual men and women.

All too often the Bible and these verses are used to keep gay men and lesbians from full equality in our society. This is wrong. We are not talking about pagan worship today when two gay men fall in love and form a family. We are not talking about “imitating the idolatrous practices of the Canaanites” when two women fall in love and want to affirm their relationship beneath the chupah- the wedding canopy. We must not and should not use these verses in the Bible to undermine the values of equality that are guaranteed in our U.S. Constitution.

It is time to make sure that when we approach Leviticus –the path to holiness is examined in its fullness and not isolated as with these two verses. The Path to holiness also includes reaching out to the poor, being fair in weights and measures and never insulting a parent. These are how we ought to be and ought to strive for holiness, while including gay men and lesbians in the fullness of our families, our society and our Judaism with equal opportunity and equality.

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