

Gayness and God

By Rabbi Steven Greenberg

Originally appeared in a 1993 issue of *Tikkun* under the pseudonym of Rabbi Yaakov Levado.

Rabbi Greenberg shares his own often painful journey to the acknowledgement of his sexuality. He discusses halachic teachings regarding homosexuality, and offers a path to possible new halachic strategies that will permit Orthodox Judaism to respond positively to gay people.

A note on terminology: *Halacha* (Hebrew for *law*) refers to the legal portion of the Talmud and of post-Talmudic literature, a *halachist* being a student and interpreter of that law. *Hesed*, often translated as “steadfast love”, is used in the scriptures to denote the perfect devotedness that can exist between husband and wife as well as the love of God for his people.

I AM AN ORTHODOX RABBI, and I am gay. For a long while I denied, rejected, railed against this truth. The life story that I had wanted—wife, kids, and a family that modeled Torah and *hesed*—turned out to be an impossible fantasy. I have begun to shape a new life story. This essay is part of that life story and thus remains unfinished, part of a stream of consciousness rather than a systematic treatise.

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It is hard to say how or when I came to know myself as a gay man. In the beginning, it was just an array of bodily sensations; sweaty palms and that excited sort of nervousness you feel around certain people occurred without awareness. The arrival of the hormonal hurricane left me completely dumbfounded. Just when my body should have fulfilled social expectations, it began to transgress them. I had no physical response to girls. But I was physically pulled, eyes and body, toward guys. I remember my head turning sharply once in the locker room for an athletic boy whom I admired. At the time, I must have noticed my body’s involuntary movement, but it meant nothing to me. I understood nothing. How could I? I had no idea what it meant to be homosexual. *Faggot* or *homo* were words reserved for the boys hounded for being passive, or unathletic.

None of this said anything about sexual attraction. There were no categories for this experience, no way to explain the strange muscle spasms, the warm sensation on my face, or the flutter in my chest. Not until years later, after countless repetitions of such events, did it slowly, terrifyingly, break through to my consciousness.

When other boys were becoming enraptured by girls, I found my rapture in learning Torah. I was thrilled by the sprawling rabbinic arguments, the imaginative plays on words, and the demand for meaning everywhere. *Negiah*, the prohibition to embrace, kiss, or even touch girls until marriage, was my saving grace. The premarital sexual restraint of the Halacha was a perfect mask, not only to the world but to myself.

My years in yeshiva were spectacular, in some measure because they were so intensely fueled by a totally denied sexuality. There were many *bachurim* (students) in the yeshiva whose intense and passionate learning was energized with repressed sexual energy. For me, the environment deflected sexual energy and generated it as well. The male spirit and energy I felt in yeshiva was both nourishing and frustrating. I do not know if I was alone among my companions or not. From those early years, I remember no signs by which I could have clearly read my gayness or anyone else's. I only know that I was plagued with stomachaches almost every morning.

Later, on one desperate occasion, beset with an increased awareness of my attraction to a fellow yeshiva student, I visited a sage, Rav Eliashuv, who lives in one of the most secluded right-wing Orthodox communities in Jerusalem. He was old and in failing health, but still taking visitors who daily waited in an anteroom for hours for the privilege of speaking with him for a few minutes.

Speaking in Hebrew, I told him what, at the time, I felt was the truth. "Master, I am attracted to both men and women. What shall I do!" He responded, "My dear one, then you have twice the power of love. Use it carefully." I was stunned. I sat in silence for a moment, waiting for more. "Is that all!" I asked. He smiled and said, "That is all. There is nothing more to say."

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Rav Eliashuv's words calmed me, permitting me to forget temporarily the awful tensions that would eventually overtake me. His trust and support buoyed me above my fears. I thought that as a bisexual I could have a wider and richer emotional life and perhaps even a deeper spiritual life than is common—and still marry and have a family. For a long while I felt a self-acceptance that carried me confidently into rabbinical school. I began rabbinical training with great excitement and a sense of promise. At the center of my motivations were those powerful rabbinic traditions that had bowled me over in my early adolescence. I wanted more than anything else to learn and to teach Torah in its full depth and breadth. I finished rabbinical school, still dating and carefully avoiding any physical expression, and took my first jobs as a rabbi. There were many failed relationships with wonderful women who could not understand why things just didn't work out. Only after knocking my shins countless times into the hard wood of this truth was I able fully to acknowledge that I am gay.

It has taken a number of years to sift through the wreckage of "my life as I wanted it" to discover "my life as it is." It has taken more time to exorcise the self-hatred that feeds on shattered hopes and ugly stereotypes. I am still engaged in that struggle. I have yet to receive the new tablets, the whole ones, that will take their place in the Ark beside the broken ones. Rav Nachman of Bratzlav teaches that there is nothing so whole as a broken heart. It is in his spirit that I continue to try to make sense of my life.

Although much has changed in the past few years as I have accepted my gayness, much remains the same. I am still a rabbi, and I am still deeply committed to God, Torah, and Israel. My religious life had always been directed by the desire to be a servant of the Lord. None of that has changed. The question is an old one, merely posed anew as I strive to integrate being gay into my life. Given that I am gay, what is it that the God of Israel wants of me!

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Of course, many will hear this as an illegitimate question—fallacious in thinking that the God of Israel can somehow accept and move beyond my gayness. Leviticus 18:23 instructs: “Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman, it is an abhorrence.” I do not propose to reject this or any text. For the present, I have no plausible halachic method of interpreting this text in a manner that permits homosexual sex.

As a traditionalist, I hesitate to overturn cultural norms in a flurry of revolutionary zeal. I am committed to a slower and more cautious process of change, which must always begin internally. Halacha, as an activity, is not designed to effect social revolution. It is a society-building enterprise that maintains internal balance by reorganizing itself in response to changing social realities. When social conditions shift, we experience the halachic reapplication as the proper commitment to the Torah’s original purposes. That shift in social consciousness in regard to homosexuality is a long way off.

If I have any argument, it is not to press for a resolution, but for a deeper understanding of homosexuality. Within the living Halacha are voices in tension, divergent strands in an imaginative legal tradition that are brought to bear on the real lives of Jews. In order to know how to shape a halachic response to any living question, what is most demanded of us is a deep understanding of the Torah and an attentive ear to the people who struggle with the living question. Confronting new questions can often tease out of the tradition a *hiddush*, a new balancing of the voices and values that have always been there. There is no conclusive *psak halacha* (halachic ruling) without the hearing of personal testimonies, and so far gay people have not been asked to testify to their experience.

Still, one wonders what the impact might be if Orthodox rabbis had to face the questions posed by traditional Jews, persons they respect and to whom they feel responsible, who are gay.

How can halachists possibly rule responsibly on a matter so complex and so deeply foreign, without a sustained effort at understanding? Whatever the halachic argument will be, we will need to know much more about homosexuality to ensure that people are treated not merely as alien objects of a system but as persons within it. Halachists will need to include in their deliberations the testimony of gay people who wish to remain faithful to the Torah. Unimagined halachic strategies, I believe, will appear under different conditions. We cannot know in advance the outcome of such an investigation. Still, one wonders what the impact might be if Orthodox rabbis had to face the questions posed by traditional Jews, persons they respect and to whom they feel responsible, who are gay.

There is one quasi-halachic issue I must address—that of choice. One of the mitigating factors in halachic discourse is the presence of free will in matters of law. A command is only meaningful in the context of our freedom to obey or disobey. Thus the degree of choice involved in homosexuality is central to the shaping of a halachic response. There is indeed a certain percentage of gay people who claim to exercise some volition in their sexual choices. But for the vast majority of gay people, there is no “choice” in the ordinary sense of the word. Gay feelings are hardwired into our bodies, minds, and hearts. The strangeness and mystery of sexuality is universal. What we share, gay or straight, is the surprising “queerness” of all sexual desire. The experience of heterosexuals may seem less outlandish for its being more common, but all sexual feeling is deeply mysterious, beyond explanation or a simple notion of choice.

The Halacha addresses activities, however, not sexual identities; thus, in halachic Judaism there is no such thing as a gay identity—there are only sexual impulses to control. The tradition describes all sexual desire as *yetzer ha'ra* (evil impulse), rife with chaotic and destructive possibilities. Heterosexual desire is redeemed and integrated back into the system through a series of prescriptions and prohibitions that channel sexuality and limit its range of expression. Confined within marriage, giving and receiving sexual pleasure, even in nonprocreative ways, is raised to the level of *mitzvah*.

Homosexual desire, in contrast, is not seen as redeemable and thus remains an implacable *yetzer ha'ra* that needs to be defeated rather than channeled. In this argument, gay people are treated as people with a dangerous and destructive sexual desire which must be repressed. The spiritual task of a gay person is to overcome the *yetzer ha'ra* that prods one to have erotic relations with members of the same sex.

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The unfairness of this argument begins with the recasting of homosexuals as heterosexuals with perverse desires. The Torah is employed to support the idea that there is only one sexuality, heterosexuality. God confirms heterosexual desire, giving heterosexuals the opportunity to enjoy love and companionship. With the impossibility of another sexuality comes the implicit assumption that gay people can “become” straight and marry and, indeed, should do so.

This has in fact been the ordinary state of affairs for many, if not most, gay men and women throughout history. I know a number of gay (or bisexual) men who have married and sustain relationships with their wives. Of those, most have had an affair at some point that did not end their marriage. Two gay rabbis I know were married and are now divorced, and a third remains happily married, surviving recurrent bouts of depression and emotional exhaustion. What disturbs me most in this sometimes heroic attempt at approximating the traditional ideal is the cost to the heterosexual spouse.

While in my first rabbinical post, I decided to come out to an older rabbi and seek his advice. He counseled me to find a woman and marry. I asked him if I was duty-bound to tell her about my attractions to men and my general sexual uninterest in women. He said no. I was shocked to hear that it was all right to deceive a woman who could very easily be damaged by such a marriage. It made no sense to me.

Surely some heterosexual women might be willing to marry a gay friend who could provide children and be a wonderful father.

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There have been rare instances of gay women and men who have worked out marriages where the “uninterest” was mutual. I struggled for a number of years to find such a woman, gay or straight, with whom to begin a family. Sometimes I still torment myself to think that this is all possible, when it is not. I still feel ripped apart by these feelings—wanting a woman at the Shabbat table and a man in my bed. If I am judged for some failure, perhaps it will be that I could not choose the Shabbat table over the bed, either for myself or for the forlorn woman who, after dinner,

wants the comfort of a man who wants her back.

Having rejected this option, the standard Orthodox position is to require celibacy. Many recent articles and responsa regard gay sex as indistinguishable from adultery, incest, or bestiality. The heterosexual is asked to limit sexuality to the marital bed, to nonrelatives, to human beings; the homosexual is asked to live a loveless life. I have lived portions of my adult life as a celibate clergyman. While it can have spiritual potency for a Moses or a Ben Azzai, who abandoned sexual life for God or Torah, it is not a Jewish way to live. Always sleeping alone, in a cold bed, without touch, without the daily physical interplay of lives morning and night—this celibate scenario is life-denying and, for me, has always led to a shrinking of spirit. What sort of Torah, what voice of God would demand celibacy from all gay people? Such a reading of divine intent is nothing short of cruel.

Many gay people now and in the past have been forced to purchase social acceptance and God's love through a denial of affection and comfort and, worse, a denial of self. Today many simply leave Judaism behind in order to salvage a sense of dignity and to build a life. This understanding of homosexuality leaves no sanctified option for gay people, no possibility of *keddusha* or *keddushin*.

I have come to understand my gayness as akin to my Jewishness: it is integral to my sense of self. I did not choose it, but it is mine. To try to escape it would be self-defeating. There is nothing left to do but celebrate it. Whether in or out of the given halachic rubric, I affirm my desire for a full life, for love, and for sexual expression. Given that I am gay and cannot be otherwise, and given that I do not believe that God would demand that I remain loveless and celibate, I have chosen to seek a committed love, a man with whom to share my life.

But so little of life is carried on in the bedroom. When I indeed find a partner, what sort of life do we build together? What is it that the God of Israel wants of me in regard to family and community!

Struggling with God and with Torah as a gay person was just the beginning. To be Jewish is to be grounded in the continuity of the Jewish people as a witness—a holy people, a light among the nations—a blessing to all the families of the earth. How does a gay person help to shape the continuity of the Jewish people? The carrying forth of the Jewish people I accomplished by marriage and procreation. It is both a tool of the Abrahamic covenant and its most profound meaning statement.

We are a people on the side of life—new life, more life, fuller life. The creation story invited the rabbis to read God's blessing of "be fruitful and multiply" as a command to have two children, a male and a female. Every Jewish child makes the possibility of the Torah's promise of a perfected world more real, more attainable. Abraham and Sarah transmit this vision by having children. Often the portrayal of blessing includes being surrounded with many children. Childlessness is a punishment and curse in the tradition, barrenness a calamity.

Gay life does not prevent the possibility of producing or raising Jewish children, but it makes those options very complicated. Being gay means that the ordinary relationship between making love and having children is severed. This is a deep challenge to the structure of Judaism, since its

very transmission is dependent on both relationship and reproduction. For Jews who feel bound by *mitzvot*, bound by the duty to ensure that life conquers death, the infertility of our loving is at the core of our struggle to understand ourselves in light of the Torah.

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This problem, among others, lies at the root of much of the Jewish community's discomfort with gay people. To a people that was nearly destroyed fifty years ago, gay love seems irresponsible. Jews see the work of their lives in light of the shaping of a world for their children. By contrast, gay people appear narcissistic and self-indulgent. Gay people's sexuality is thus a diversion from the tasks of Jewish family and the survival that it symbolizes, and is perceived as marginal to the Jewish community because we are shirkers of this most central and sacred of communal tasks.

This challenge also has a moral chord that strikes deep into the problems of gay subculture. The tradition understood parenting as one of the major moral crucibles for human development. No judge could serve without first being a parent for fear that without the experience of parenting, one could grasp neither human vulnerability nor responsibility. Being heterosexual carries one down a path that demands years of selfless loving in the rearing of children. While not all straight couples have children, and some gay couples adopt them, the norm is shaped less by choice and more by biology. Yet if gay people do not ordinarily fall into monogamous coupling and childbearing, how do we find our place in the covenant? And what of the moral training that caring for children provides; how do we make up for that? Is there another job to be done that requires our service to God and to the Jewish people? Of all the problems entailed in gay sexuality, this one looms for me, both spiritually and emotionally.

Although there is no obvious biblical resource for this dilemma, there are biblical writers who struggled to address God's will in very new social circumstances. Isaiah was one such writer who bridged the worlds before and after the Exile. Some familiar passages have become charged for me with new meaning. In these verses Isaiah is speaking to his ancient Israelite community and trying to convince them that God's covenantal plan for Israel is larger than they think. The covenant begins with Abraham and Sarah but has become much more than a family affair. He speaks to two obvious outsider groups in chapter 56, the *b'nai ha'nechar*, the foreigners of non-Israelite birth, and the *sarisim*, the eunuchs:

Let not the foreigner say,
Who has attached himself to the Lord,
"The Lord will keep me separate from His people"
And let not the eunuch say,
"I am a withered tree."

In the Talmud, a eunuch is not necessarily a castrated male, but a male who is not going to reproduce for various reasons (*Yevamot 80b*). Why does Isaiah turn his attention here to the foreigners and the eunuchs? In the chain of the covenantal family, the foreigner has no past and the eunuch no future. They both seem excluded from the covenantal frame of reference. It is this "exclusion" that the prophet addresses:

For thus said the Lord:
"As for the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
Who have chosen what I desire
And hold fast to My covenant—
I will give them, in My House
And within my walls,
A monument and a name
Better than sons or daughters.
I will give them an everlasting name
Which shall not perish."

The prophet comforts the pain of eunuchs with the claim that there are other ways in which to observe, fulfill, and sustain the covenant. There is something more permanent than the continuity of children provides. In God's House, the achievement of each individual soul has account. A name in the Bible is the path toward the essence, the heart of being. It is passed on to progeny. But there is another sort of a name, a name better than the one sons or daughters provide. The covenant is carried forward by those who live it out, in the present. Loyalty to the covenant is measured in God's House in such a way that even if one's name is not passed on through children an eternal name will nonetheless be etched into the walls. Isaiah offers a place to the placeless, an alternative service to the person who cannot be part of the family in other ways:

As for the foreigners
Who attach themselves to the Lord,
to be His servants—
All who keep the sabbath and do not profane it,
And who hold fast to my covenant—
I will bring them to my sacred mount
And let them rejoice in my house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
Shall be welcome on My altar;
For My House shall be called
A House of prayer for all peoples."
Thus declares the Lord God,
Who gathers the dispersed of Israel:
"I will gather still more to those already gathered."

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So inclusive is God's plan for the Israel in the world that any foreigner can join. The notion of conversion, so obvious to us now, was a striking innovation for the generation of Isaiah. Conversion is about rewriting the past. Like adoption, conversion redefines the meaning of parents and family. Birth and lineage are not discarded. The central metaphor for Israel is still family, but Isaiah and later tradition open up another avenue into the covenant. Those with no future are promised a future in the House of the Lord; those with no past are nevertheless included in Israel's destiny. God can only require the doable. A foreigner cannot choose a different birth, or the eunuch a different procreative possibility. Gay people cannot be asked to be straight, but they can be asked to "hold fast to the covenant." God will work the story out and link the loose ends as long as we hold fast to the covenant. Holding fast to the covenant demands that I fulfill the *mitzvot* that are in my power to fulfill. I cannot marry and bear children, but there are other ways to build a family. Adoption and surrogacy are options. If these prove infeasible, the tradition considers a teacher similar to a parent in life-giving and thus frames a way that the *mitzvah* of procreation can be symbolically fulfilled.

Holding fast to the covenant demands that I seek a path toward sanctity in gay sexual life. The Torah has much to say about the way people create *kedusha* in their sexual relationships. The values of marriage, monogamy, modesty, and faithfulness that are central to the tradition's view of holiness need to be applied in ways that shape choices and life styles.

Holding fast to the covenant means that being gay does not free one from the fulfillment of *mitzvot*. The complexities generated by a verse in Leviticus need not unravel my commitment to the whole of the Torah. There are myriad Jewish concerns, moral, social, intellectual, and spiritual, that I cannot abandon. Being gay need not overwhelm the rest of Jewish life. Single-issue communities are political rather than religious; religious communities tend to be comprehensive of the human condition. The richness of Jewish living derives in part from its diversity of attention, its fullness.

For gay Orthodox Jews, this imagination of engagement between ourselves and the tradition is both terribly exciting and depressing. Regretfully, the communities that embrace us, both gay and Jewish, also reject us. The Jewish community wishes that we remain invisible. The gay community is largely unsympathetic and often hostile to Judaism. There are some in the gay community who portray Judaism as the original cultural source of homophobia. More often, the lack of sympathy toward Jewish observance derives from the singlemindedness of gay activism. Liberation communities rarely have room for competing loyalties.

Gay synagogues have filled a void for many, providing a place of dignity in a Jewish community. This work is part of a movement toward a fuller integration in the larger Jewish community for which most gay Jews long. Gay-friendly synagogues may well point the way, modeling a community of families and singles, young and old, straight and gay that is in spirit much closer to my hopeful future imagination than anything yet.

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Gay Jews who wish to be part of an Orthodox community will find very few synagogues in which there is some level of understanding and tolerance. Some gay Jews attend Orthodox services and remain closeted in their communities. It is crucial that Orthodox rabbis express a loving acceptance for known gays in their synagogues even if public legitimation is now impossible. Attacks on homosexuality from the pulpit are particularly painful to those who have remained connected to the traditional

I have hesitated until now to address the central halachic concerns of homosexuality. Real dialogue is necessary before such a process of responsa writing can begin. Still, it appears to many Orthodox Jews that in the case of homosexuality there is little use for dialogue in the face of such a clear biblical prohibition. A number of my colleagues and friends want very much to respond compassionately to gay people, but feel compelled to remain loyal to what they see as the unambiguous word of the Torah. Let me offer the possibility of an intermediate position to demonstrate that real listening may indeed give birth to new halachic strategies.

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The Torah very specifically forbids anal intercourse between two men. If the Torah expressly forbids only this one form of sexual fulfillment, could we articulate a possible "halachic" form of gay loving that excludes anal intercourse but permits a loving physical and emotional relationship between two men or two women? After all, heterosexuality is not a free zone of activity for halachically committed Jews. For the sake of holiness, the Torah requires heterosexual couples to refrain from intercourse during menstruation. Why not offer such a sanctified option to gay men who wish to find acceptance in the halachic community?

For many gay men, this will not be a realistic choice. But until it becomes a real possibility, who knows who will agree to commit? Of course, this challenge to gay Jewish men will be sincere only if the halachic community then takes a lead in accepting the couples who commit in this covenantal fashion. (Lesbian women would be accepted without condition, because

I offer this framework knowing that Orthodox Jews will protest that there are rabbinic prohibitions that invalidate it, and that many gay Jews will feel that it too severely limits the essence of gay lovemaking. Let it then simply demonstrate at least the beginnings of a language of discourse between the tradition as it now stands and the lives of gay people.

For the present, in regard to sexual behavior, I personally have chosen to accept a certain risk and violate the Halacha as it is presently articulated, in the hope of a subsequent, more accepting halachic expression. I realize that this is "civil disobedience." It is not the system itself which I challenge but its application to an issue that has particular meaning for me and for those like me. There is always the possibility that I am wrong. Ultimately, the halachic risks that I take are rooted in my personal relationship with God, Who I will face in the end. It is this faith that makes me both confident and suspicious of myself.

I have, admittedly, a rather privatized form of community. I am closeted and have chosen to write this essay in anonymity to preserve what is still most precious to me: the teaching of Torah and caring for my community of Jews. What concerns me most is neither rejection by the Orthodox community, nor the loss of my particular pulpit. Were I to come out, the controversy would collapse my life, my commitments, my identity as a teacher of Torah, into my gayness. Still, the secrecy and the shadowy existence of the closet are morally repugnant and emotionally draining. I cannot remain forever in darkness. I thank God that for the time being, the Torah still sheds ample light.

... those of us who have withered in the darkness, or in the light of day have been banished, will discover our names etched upon the walls.

I have a small circle of friends, gay and straight, men and women with whom I share a sense of community. We are looking for other tradition-centered Jews who can help build a place that embraces both the Torah and gay people. Not a synagogue, not a building, but a place for all the dispersed who are in search of community with Israel and communion with God. In this place, this House of the Lord, now somewhat hypothetical and private (and soon, I pray, to be concrete and public), those of us who have withered in the darkness, or in the light of day have been banished, will discover our names etched upon the walls.