

JOFA Conference “Voices of Change”

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Here, Queer & Machmir

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When I was about Bat Mitsva my mother drove me into a parking lot, stopped the car and began to speak, she in the front, me in the back, both facing forward. She told me there were two things that would cause her to cut me off: if I married out and if I went on drugs. I was affronted and amazed: she loved me more than any love on earth, she anticipated my very self, she was my very self. I knew this was a false sermon she had read somewhere and felt obliged to preach.

I have kept my mother's commandments and so I am single and a drug virgin, but I also know that that I could give no such warning to my own daughter, she who is love of my life, warmth of my breath, keeper of my soul. She might put me to despair but I could never threaten to cut her off.

After returning from a trip visiting my mother five years ago, I greeted my thirteen year old daughter and she burst into tears and it unfolded that she was in love with her teacher, a poet and scholar, and that she knew she was a lesbian. In the dimness from jet lag and exhaustion it felt like a dream.

I grew up in Sydney, one of the great gay cities of the world, in an inner city district that was haven to artists, drugs, drunken fights and homosexuals. In the block where I spent my teens, we were one of only two units consisting of mother father biological kids. In a district of deviance, we were the abnormal, and built a high emotional fence between us and our revolving door of wild neighbors.

When at last we moved, into a district with averagely rude neighbors, we befriended the boys- a gay Catholic couple who undertook to take care of the crowd of aging and confused Holocaust survivors around them.

What did I think when my daughter told me she was gay?

Of my Hasidic friends from school who were marrying off their children in weddings with boring services and tasteless menus. Of the wild gay neighbors in Sydney and the gentle ones. Of a Jewish civilization I often despise, but to which I cling to with the passion and persistence of a lover and a zealot.

And yet my daughter's homosexuality would inevitably lead to acts forbidden if not in the Torah then certainly by the Rabbis, and to a lifestyle unblessed by our tradition.

All this went through and through my mind but did not change how I loved my daughter, or enclosed her in my embrace.

I have a weakness for details and so I maintain my legalistic approach to Judaism for myself but do not impose it on my children. I let God fight God's battles; I have plenty of my own.

I do not want to prophesy to the future of Judaism. Which style of streimel will survive into the 22nd century, and who will wear them? No one could have predicted the destruction of Jewry and its renewal in the last century, nor Orthodox feminism nor the child of an American president marrying a Jew under a Huppa with a Ketuba, nor two people of the same sex marrying under a Huppa with a Ketuba. Perhaps the heterosexuality obsession in Judaism will die the death of the virginity obsession. Who asks under the Huppa if a bride is a virgin? Who cares? Brides signing

wedding papers with the same address as their grooms have the same Ketuba as the virginal girls my Hasidic friends are marrying off.

But I know that when God comes down and tells me to sacrifice my daughter, my only daughter, that I have loved, on the altar of Orthodox views, I will tell that God - sorry mate, I can't help you. Because the Ribono shel olam that I know makes poetic threats but does not give up on God's children, never never never never. And that is the God I imitate.

The way in which I can conceive of God is through parenting, just as God is infinitely forgiving, patient, and loving, so am I mimicking God's example in showing unquestioned, unshakable love and devotion even if it is rejected, even if when I show my face the other face is turned away.

Like life, culture must be reproduced. Let us take a thought experiment and imagine Orthodox communities accepting gay couples into their midst. How will this affect the reproduction of Jews and of Judaism?

I only have to raise my children; but Judaism has to raise a new generation that loves its meshugaas in the face of overwhelming competition from Hollywood and Washington Square. Is an open homosexual alternative compatible with reproducing Jews?

Faith for me is infinite love in the face of perplexity and uncertainty. Anyone can believe and be faithful when life is simple and truth is manifest every day.