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Women's Whispers: Abominable dilemmas

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In the Sydney suburb where I spent my Orthodox childhood, the holy trinity of mother, father and biological children was the deviant household. Our townhouse complex encompassed singles with adopted children, empty nesters and a multitude of gays. There were conservative working gays, loud carousing gays and lonely single gays. The ones I knew best were the “boys” next door who helped with plumbing disasters and waved to us as we passed on the way to school. They were regular folk, good mates.

Ever more distinct rumblings are being heard in the Orthodox world about the gay question. A new generation has been raised proudly observant in a mercifully pluralistic world. These youths have expressed an unprecedented desire: to remain within their communities and adhere to halacha, even as they publicly declare their gay orientation.

The cinema led the way, with films such as *Trembling Before G-d*. Internet groups, anonymous and without geographic boundaries, have provided support for the development of a deeper and more complex relationship between tradition and what tradition would call sexual deviance.

In forums at Yeshiva University and the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA), frum presenters have come out of the closet before packed audiences.

Orthodox leaders have fumbled with their texts and consciences; some have written apologetics and polemics. One attempt was recently announced by an eclectic group trying to be sensitive to the cause at <http://statementofprinciplesnya.blogspot.com/>.

Religious communities are conservative – all novelty is treated with suspicion. Physical exercise, environmentalism and feminism, among other innovations, are observed from a distance and then examined with surgical gloves and gas masks on. But none of these -isms are necessarily at odds with fundamental Jewish principles.

Male homosexual sex is a *to'eva* and is punishable by death. The majority of Jews today perform acts which the Bible would punish similarly, such as willfully desecrating Shabbat. But male homosexuality is branded not just by severe punishment but by the language of disgust that surrounds it. Associated with the degradation of Egypt, it is among the list of abhorrent sexual deviances we read about on Yom Kippur afternoons – a list which also includes incest and bestiality.

It has been suggested that the gay issue will one day lose its pariah status, even for Orthodox Jews. Two thousand years ago, the sages were obsessed with female virginity. Who discusses it now? No one asked if I was a virgin before I married my haredi spouse, although all manner of other inquiries were made regarding my family and me. Which woman's ketuba value is reduced because she is

cohabiting with her fiancé before stepping under the huppa? Virginity is a social totem whose time has passed. Will it be so for homosexuality too?

Half a life ago, while still worth a whole ketuba, I expressed my perplexity over the gay issue in Judaism to my beloved rebbetzin. There are so many parameters shaping our humanity, I told her: How we treat children, the handicapped and the elderly; what we work at and how much we work; whether we hoard our things or share them with others; which music makes us cry and what we accomplish before we die.

How important can it possibly be whom we have sex with a few moments a week or a month, or ever? My rebbetzin smiled; she did not scold me for my views. Anyone who has lived among the multitude of humanity has come across the lonely, excruciating pain of a person who can never express his sexuality under the canopy of the tradition that is precious to him.

There is nothing more private than the act of love between two consenting adults, no act more eligible for protection as doing harm to no one. But Judaism denies this right to privacy. God comes into that bedroom and condemns the act and the community as His representative condemns it too.

The sexual act is the most basic form of human intercourse, the coincidence of terms is no coincidence. From that act is built the family, the community and civilization. Judaism will not take its judging gaze off adulterous sex, incestuous sex or homosexual sex. The Bible stands and judges.

People with homosexual tendencies exist in every society. We can close our eyes, but the truth will out. How are we to incorporate the venom of tradition against homosexuality into the commerce of modern life? In the Maryland Jewish community of my adulthood, the holy trinity of stay-at-home mother, breadwinner father and biological children is the sanctioned household.

One family has a particularly eligible child: college valedictorian, devoted son, sharp talmudist, handsome. He also sports tanning cream and dandyish clothes; everything in his speech and mannerisms and gait announces his orientation. Yet he attends minyan daily and he dates women.

Recently an Australian cousin called me to confide that her daughter was going steady with this choice catch. I caught my breath.

Should I have said something to her? Would you?

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