

For The Sin Of Homophobia

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Al Heit Sh'Chatanu Lifanecha... For the sin we have committed by hurting others in any way.

Al Heit Sh'Chatanu Lifanecha... For the sin we have committed by failing to respect those made in the image of God.

Al Heit Sh'Chatanu Lifanecha... For the sin we have committed through narrow-mindedness.

Al Heit Sh'Chatanu Lifanecha... For the sin we have committed by turning a deaf ear to the cries of the oppressed.

Al Heit Sh'Chatanu Lifanecha... For the sin we have committed through silence and indifference.

Al Heit Sh'Chatanu Lifanecha... For the sin we have committed through senseless hatred.

We. For the sin we have committed. All through these *Yamim Noraim* we confess in the plural. *We* have sinned. Forgive *us*. Why? What does it mean for *us* to have sinned?

There are, of course, many answers. Saying that “we” have sinned is a reminder that all of us are, in the words of the Vilna Gaon, one body. When my right hand sins, my entire body is responsible. And, so too, if one of us sins, then in some way we are all responsible. That’s part of what it means to be a community. It’s also a reminder to challenge ourselves to think a little more deeply about how we may have sinned, ourselves. By including myself in every single listed sin, I force myself to ask not whether I have committed the sin of, for example, turning a deaf ear to the cries of the oppressed, but when, and how. It’s a push to look deeper into my actions of this past year and root out those transgressions which I might otherwise ignore.

But, what if it’s also the case that there are some sins which we actually commit, together? What if there are some transgressions of which we, as a religious community, are guilty? If we committed the sins as a religious whole, then maybe we can only repent, maybe we can only begin to repent, together.

There are. There most certainly are. To our great shame, religions, and religion in general, have too often been on the wrong side of oppression. Every religion has a moment, probably many, when, together, they failed the call of a God who loves justice. And, thank God, we have often seen the error of our ways, repented of our sins, and begun to fight for what is right. It happened with slavery, which was long justified by religious leaders, and then fervently opposed by many of the same. And, it happened again, in almost the exact same way, with segregation.

And, I believe it's happening again, now, in our own day. I believe it's happening with lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people and the rest of the "non-straight" population. For too long, religion has been a force, quite possibly the single most vociferous, vicious, effective force, leading the way towards the oppression of our LGBT brothers and sisters. We have quoted Bible verses which sought to marginalize, and justify the oppression of, and often physical violence against, people whose only supposed sin was found in the loving of a person of the same gender. We have spoken out in defense of "tradition," while not admitting our own willingness to pick and choose from that tradition, and thus joined with, or at the very least given cover to, those who revel in their hatred of LGBT people. We have committed the sins of silence and indifference, and we haven't even noticed when we've turned a deaf ear to the cries of the oppressed. And, with thanks to that God who loves justice, it's ending. The arc of history is bending, maybe less slowly than it used to, towards justice. And I am proud to be part of that movement.

Many of you will not be surprised to hear me speaking out on this issue. I've done so before — on Shabbat, in classes, and in writing. But, I thought it was important to take a moment and express to our community, our whole community, joined together as we are, why I take this stand, and why I think it's important that we all do.

Many have referred to the struggle for LGBT rights as the next great Civil Rights movement. You can count me among them. There are not many groups left that I can openly disparage, about whom I can publicly spew forth venomous hatred, and whom I can describe in subhuman terms, and then find myself declared a hero by a depressingly large swath of our population. I can argue against their right to continue to exist as they are, to share in some of the basic rights of our society, and I can politely discuss those views on a seemingly respectable television show. I can claim that God hates them, and millions will offer me their most fervent "amen."

If Judaism is driven by a core ethical impulse, if there is one compulsion which undergirds the entirety of Jewish morality, then it is surely the imperative to protect the weak. Time and again our Bible, especially our prophets, enjoins us to protect the widow, the orphan and the stranger. To protect those who, in ancient society, were the most vulnerable, and the least protected. There are, sadly, many groups who, today, can be included in that sorry fraternity of powerlessness. But, at least in our society, lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people have a place of privilege among them. They are our widows and orphans — the oppressed who, by their very oppression, call out to us.

Of course, we all know that there are many in the religious world, including many in our own Jewish community, who would argue, often explicitly, that this oppression is a good thing. That it is, if we can even say such a thing, holy. This very afternoon, we will read a section from the book of Leviticus, chapter 19. But, in Orthodox synagogues, they'll be reading from the preceding chapter which contains the oft quoted injunction, "do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; it is an

abomination.” And, chapter 20, just after we’re finished with our reading, adds the death penalty for anyone who commits this grave sin. How can I, a Rabbi, presumably a lover and teacher of Torah, stand up here and tell you that homosexuality is anything other than an abomination?

Before I answer that — and I will — allow me a brief aside into the political. Because, even if I can’t convince you of the religious arguments in favor of LGBT acceptance and inclusion, I will still fight, tooth and nail, to keep these, and all verses from our sacred texts out of our political, public lives. The Torah is most certainly not an American legal text, and those who would use it as one degrade both the American legal system and our religious tradition. Some may have a different interpretation of these texts — they most certainly do — but they don’t get to legislate their interpretation over mine.

But, back to mine. How do I get from “it is an abomination” to “it is *not* an abomination?” I can, if you wish, argue from within the text. I can point out to you that the word “abomination” is a terrible mistranslation of the Hebrew word “*toevah*”. In fact, that word doesn’t have the same moralistic judgment that the English does. It’s more of a protection from cultic practices — ancient fertility cults used to use homosexual acts as part of their rituals. God’s telling us that we’re not allowed to do the same. It’s something that they do, and therefore we shouldn’t. It’s a boundary marker, not a piece of universal morality. I could show you evidence that the Hebrew phrase, “*mishkevei isha*,” which is usually translated “lie with a woman” was possibly a technical term referring to all of the sexual prohibitions which Leviticus just laid down for men. In other words, it might actually be better translated as, “all the prohibitions for men also apply, in reverse, for women.” Not to put too fine a point on it, but the verses bandied about by homophobes everywhere might actually have nothing — not a single, blessed thing — to do with homosexuality or homosexual behavior, at all¹.

I could also point out, and I obviously won’t be the first, the hypocrisy of claiming undying fidelity to a book which also prohibits, in exactly the same absolute terms, the eating of shellfish, the sowing of a field with two different types of seeds and the shaving of our heads. Until these hate mongers are willing to picket Red Lobster, I really don’t want to hear them quoting Leviticus, anymore.

¹ So, it turns out I got this one wrong, actually. I couldn’t find the reference about *mishkevei isha*, but I had clearly remembered learning it, so I included it here. But, I had this nagging feeling that something was a bit off. Then, the morning after Yom Kippur, I remembered where I had seen this. It was in Rabbi Gordon Tucker’s amazing responsum (Rabbinic legal opinion) on Same Sex Marriage for the Conservative Movement’s Rabbinical Assembly (<http://goo.gl/JQZPD>, p. 5). I remembered the definition of *mishkevei isha* correctly, but the new translation of that verse is even more dramatic. According to Biblical Scholar Jacob Milgrom, it quite possibly might be rendered as, “All of the restrictions on heterosexual sex apply equally to homosexual sex.” So, the verses bandied about by homophobes might *actually* be acknowledging the legality of homosexual sex, so long as it’s non-incestuous, non-adulterous and the like.

I can tell you all that, and more. But, to be honest, it's a diversion. A distraction. It's pulling us away from the main, fundamental point which must be addressed. And, it must be addressed from the bimah. It is simply this: the Torah, our sacred Torah, was not written by God. It was written by people. It was written by men. It was written by men who, more often than not, were honestly and sincerely seeking God, and God's truth. But, it is their words, not the words of a divine intelligence, revealed through sacred dictation. We have well over a century, and uncountable pages of scholarship to prove this beyond anything approaching a reasonable doubt. I'm sorry if this is overly strident, but there really is no more room for debate on this.

This fact should not be a shock to you. My saying it, so bluntly, in public, on this holiest of days, might be. But I hope that you know that this book is the product of human work, and often human genius, not of a Divine hand. That doesn't mean it isn't sacred — it is the most sacred book we have, without question or doubt. But sacred means that it is a tool, a device by which we can come closer to God. Divine means that it came directly from God, and is therefore, unquestionably, perfect. That difference is crucial to understand. Treating our Torah as sacred can help us find divinity in our world, which is why we can still turn to it, in spite of its imperfections. Treating it as divine, when it's not, is the definition of idolatry.

And, it's not a harmless idolatry, if there even is such a thing. Because, people who do treat it as divine and perfect, and who therefore, minor hypocrisies aside, claim a slavish devotion to it, are the cause of great suffering in this world. They are oppressing actual living, feeling, hurting human beings based on a text which, by dint of being written by human beings, is imperfect. And that, to be honest, is the real definition of idolatry.

I'm not going to stand here and condemn our ancient ancestors who brought us, and then for centuries interpreted, this most sacred text. They lived in a world which was completely and radically different from ours. They did the best that they could, with the knowledge and insights which they had, to seek out God's will in that world. But, to rely, uncritically and unquestioningly on their insights, and their worldview, would be insanity. Knowing nothing about germ theory, those sages believed that disease was caused by God punishing us for our sins. I hope that no one here would think for a moment of accepting that as our understanding of disease. A wholesale adoption of their views of homosexuality would be exactly the same thing.

But, that's precisely what people do, when it comes to the LGBT community. They take on the worldview of people who knew nothing about our modern understanding of human sexuality, personality development, genetics, hormones, and God only knows what else. And they use that understanding to perpetuate senseless hatred against people who have committed no sin.

We have to be the counterbalance to that oppressive force. We have to be the voice of reason, and of sanity. Our position, as modern, Liberal Jews gives us an almost unique opportunity to speak passionately with the equal voices of faith and reason. All across the world, every day, so-called religious people decry LGBT people in the name of God — in the name of *our* God. It's not enough to simply be silent, and to not hate. To be silent is inevitably to be seen as siding with the loudest of the voices, and those are not, at this moment, voices of love and acceptance. We have to offer an alternative, and a counterforce, to these voices of hate. As hubristic as this may be, it falls to us to participate in the job of redeeming religion from the sin which religious communities have committed for so long.

And so, I return to where I began — we have sinned. We have oppressed. We have turned a blind eye and a deaf ear. Some of us individually; all of us as part of this otherwise great religion. That's a sad part of the mostly wonderful legacy which has been left to us. With that legacy comes the responsibility — the responsibility to undo some of the damage which has been done in the name of our God. If we are commanded to protect the weak, how much more so do we have protect those who are weak in part because we helped make them so?

I will admit, I am myself somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of shared guilt and communal responsibility. It's a complicated, tricky subject, and one which needs more discussion than we have time for at this moment. But, even if you have some reservations, and are not really sure that you feel responsible, what do we have to lose by acting as if we were? Why not err on the side of compassion?

That may not be a bad guiding light for us. It won't solve all of the world's problems, but it can be a step in the right direction. When in doubt, err on the side of compassion. That's how we'll begin to fix our world.

Eloheinu v'Elohei avoteinu v'imoteinu, our God and God of our ancestors, our God who loves compassion and justice, our God who created all of us, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and straight, in Your image: for the sin of indifference, for the sins of blind eyes and deaf ears, for the sin of senseless hatred, and for the sin of failing to protect those who need our strength, we ask for Your forgiveness, as we strive to create a better world. A world united by love, in all of its great and holy forms.