

A “Great Moral Issue” of Our Time
Parashat Vayera
October 23, 2010
Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham

This book (the Humash) has brought much inspiration to many people over the centuries. It has helped them aspire to and reach heights of decency, kindness and justice. It has also served as a pretext for cruelty and violence, and has brought much pain and distress.

Many people, in the name of this book, have done wonderful things.

Others have done shameful things.

In today’s parashah, we are introduced to the city of Sodom, a place of great evil and depravity. In the part of the parashah we read today, we weren’t told precisely what kind of evil took place in the city, but later in the parashah we learn that the men of Sodom are not only inhospitable, brutal and cruel – but also homosexual.¹

Now, this is the Bible. So it has a lot of authority to it. And by associating a metropolis of evil and depravity, a place so horrible that it was worthy of God’s deliberate destruction, with homosexuality, the Bible is making clear what it thinks of people who would engage in such conduct. *They’re not worthy to live.*

There aren’t very many texts in the Bible that mention or allude to homosexuality, but each of them, like this one, appears to condemn it.² It is no surprise, then, that anyone raised in a religious faith based on the Bible, whether it be Judaism, Christianity or Islam, gets a clear message that homosexual conduct is wrong. Not just wrong, but *really* wrong.

Think of the pain and distress this has caused over the centuries! Men and women who happen to be attracted to those of the same gender rather than those of the opposite gender – otherwise decent, kind and moral individuals – have been mocked, maligned and persecuted. And this persists even up to our own day.

Just the other day, I heard Rush Limbaugh mocking Congressman Barney Frank on his radio program. Limbaugh may have been motivated to do it because of Barney's politics or even because of his personality, but the focus of his mockery was Barney's sexual orientation. And this repulsive belittling of another human being was broadcast as if it were perfectly acceptable.

Recently, you may recall, a young gay student at Rutgers University who was still "in the closet" discovered that his roommate was secretly videotaping him in his room. He later jumped off the George Washington Bridge.

Suicides of young men and women who discover that they are gay are more common than many of us think – and sometimes young people are motivated or inspired to act by traditional religious condemnation.

Steven Greenberg, an openly gay Orthodox rabbi, was recently speaking to a prominent and well-respected Jewish religious leader. He told him that there are many Jewish gay men and women who are devoted to the Torah and in a great deal of pain. "Many have just left the community," he said. "Some young gay people," he told him, "become so desperate they attempt suicide." What was the rabbi's reply? "Maybe it's a mitzvah for them to do so." (See "The Cost of Standing Idly By," by Rabbi Steven Greenberg, *The Jewish Week*, October 15, 2010)

Now, this response is, of course, extreme. But it demonstrates a simple truth. As Greenberg puts it, for many religious people, "it would be better for [gay people] to disappear, one way or the other." The response to this antipathy is clear: As Greenberg puts it, "When teenagers come to understand how intense the communal desire for their erasure is, how brutal it can be, they can easily give in to despair as a number of them did just last month."

Discomfort with homosexuality hold astonishing power over many religious people. It will come as no surprise that in the land of Israel, the center of the three Abrahamic faiths, there isn't a great deal of interfaith schmoozing. In Jerusalem, for the most part, religious Christians, Moslems, and Jews pass each other in the streets without a lot of contact, much less constructive dialogue. And yet a few years ago, representatives of the Jewish, Christian and Moslem faith communities did manage to agree on something, namely, that a gay pride parade should not be held in the streets of Jerusalem.

The secular society of which we are a part is not unmindful of this intense religious opposition to homosexuality. It has an effect on all of us.

Now, a tremendous amount of progress has occurred within the broader society during the last few years. Increasingly people are realizing that the state of being a homosexual is not a sin; that homosexuality should no more be associated with depravity (as it is in the story of the city of Sodom) than heterosexuality.

Nonetheless, traditional distrust and hostility persist.

A few weeks ago, a young couple who grew up in Conservative Jewish families, who met at a Jewish day camp, who are very involved in Jewish life – one of them is a recipient of a Wexner Fellowship, the same fellowship I received when I went to rabbinical school – sent the announcement of their upcoming wedding to the local Jewish paper, and, after some deliberation, the paper ran it. The couple happens to be gay, and this was the first time that the paper had run such an announcement.

What happened next turned this into a national story. Local Orthodox rabbis complained to the newspaper's editorial board, and a week later, it issued an apology for the "pain and consternation" the announcement had caused members of the Orthodox community. It promised not to run similar announcements again. This, of course, just stirred the pot even more! Now, Conservative and Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis weighed in, as well as other people, who asked the paper whether it cared about the "pain and consternation" their retraction of their congratulations might have caused the couple. The newspaper's staff apparently heard the backlash loud and clear, and the next week, it issued a statement reconsidering its reconsideration. It stated that it may have acted too quickly by listening to only one segment of its readership. (See *The New York Times*, "Whiplash Can Follow a Car Crash, or a Wedding Announcement", Oct. 6, 2010)

I don't tell this story to condemn the newspaper editors. I'm sympathetic. After all, if they alienate the Orthodox, they could go out of business. On the other hand, if they alienate their liberal readership, they could also go out of business. On the third hand, maybe this is an issue on which they have to take a stand, come what may. The paper's editors, of course, could and should have anticipated that their original decision was going to be controversial; that should have been obvious to them. But the back and forth

is not surprising. *This is the key social policy issue of our time: the “third-rail” of American politics.* Witness what’s happening with “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell!” An administration that opposes “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” goes into court and gets an appeals court to reverse a decision by a District Court to abolish it immediately. (As the joke goes, “What’s the state of the law right now?” The answer: “Don’t ask!”)

What should the role of religious authorities be in such a context? Let me share with you one response. I have in my hand a postcard I recently received. “Alert! Alert! Alert!” it says. “Guide Your Flock – Protect Your Religious Freedom!” it says. This postcard urges me and my colleagues to look carefully at the candidates running for office in my area, determine their positions on the “great moral issues” of our time, and to distribute voter guides to our congregations, informing all of our members of those positions. Of course, I’m told, I should avoid “endorsements, partisanship or rancor.”

And what are the great moral issues of our time that deserve the cost of this effort? “Same-sex ‘marriage,’ the sanctity of life, and religious liberty.” (The card was sent to me by the National Organization for Marriage, “founded to protect traditional marriage between one man and one woman and the faith communities that sustain it.”)

I have a different approach. In my view, we have to cleanse our consciousnesses of the automatic, righteously indignant, condemnation of homosexuality if we are ever to live in a world in which young people, men as well as women, are not ashamed of their sexual orientation. This is not a matter on which we can afford to be equivocal. It’s a matter of life and death.

Even if it weren’t, I would want us to be forthright in welcoming the whole spectrum of sexual orientations into and within our community. And the reason, simply, is that it’s the right thing to do. *We understand sexuality different from the way our ancestors did.* That’s not to say that, within Judaism, any possible expression of sexual desire is ok. It isn’t. There are many aspects of contemporary society’s approach to sexuality, such as the pervasive lack of modesty, that are highly offensive.

But troubling issues are hardly confined to homosexual contexts. As we all know, pornography wouldn’t be nearly as lucrative in our country if it were directed solely to homosexuals.

Homosexuals as a class continue to be maligned and condemned and persecuted. We need to convey loudly and clearly that we believe that the bigotry of the past should remain in the past, and that the other messages that our religious tradition *also* emphasizes, namely, messages of *respect*, and of *love of the other*, should reign supreme.

All of us who care about the role religion plays in our society must be forthright. It's no longer acceptable to say, "Well, the Bible says what it says. There's nothing I can do!" We must be explicit: Homosexuality is not a sin. We cannot be equivocal, not when the lives of decent, earnest young men and women are at stake. It's simply shameful to continue to condemn people for an inalterable aspect of their being which is free from moral taint.

As we read this morning, God told Abraham to "instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right." (18:19) In today's world, when it comes to this issue, we know what that means.

Shabbat Shalom.

¹In Genesis 19, we're told that two of the three strangers who had visited Abraham arrive in Sodom and proceed to the home of Abraham's nephew, Lot, in order to tell him of the upcoming destruction of the city and to save him and his family. While they're huddled together with Lot, a gang gathers outside the house, demanding that Lot turn over the strangers so that they can sexually abuse them. Fortunately, the strangers are angels, so they are able to escape. Otherwise, the ugly scene would have become even uglier.

² It is interesting to note that a parallel story in the Book of Judges (chapter 19) depicts a heterosexual gang rape. That story did not, of course, lead to a wholesale condemnation of heterosexuality. The victim in that story, incidentally, was not an angel, so she wasn't able to escape, and the story ends much more gruesomely than the tale told in Genesis 19.