

Commonality of Abraham and Pope Francis and Same Sex marriage.

A reversal of Pope John Paul II who wrote "gays are suffering from a disorder"

Jews have been concerned with who marries who ever since the first Jew, Abraham.

In this week's Torah portion Abraham decides it's time for his son Isaac to get married. But he doesn't want his son getting married to any of the local idol worshippers. No doubt he was afraid if Isaac married a local girl, he'd get absorbed into her family with their idol worshipping ways instead of the other way around. So, he sent his servant Eliezer back to "the old country" to find a bride for Isaac. He tells Eliezer,

Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but will go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac.

"Put your hand under my thigh,"!!! which is by the way, a euphemism: think of where the word **"testify"** comes from. Abraham took this mission very seriously.

Eliezer goes on his mission and finds one of his master's kinsmen. He spots a maiden, very beautiful. Eliezer, no doubt tired and thirsty from his long journey says to the maiden,

"Please, let me sip a little water from your jar." "Drink, my lord," she said, and she quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and let him drink. When she had let him drink his fill, she said, "I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking."

The rabbis say this is how Eliezer knew he had found the right woman for Isaac – not because she was beautiful, but because she was kind. She tended not only to Eliezer, but to his camels as well.

If this is an example for the type of person we should marry, later in the Torah, in the book of Leviticus chapter 18 we get a comprehensive list of forbidden relationships – who we should NOT marry. We're told "None of you shall come near anyone of his own flesh to uncover nakedness: I am the

LORD.” And then we get a complete list, mother, stepmother, half-sisters, granddaughters, etc., all on the forbidden list. Prohibitions against adultery and bestiality, and then Leviticus 18:22: “Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence.”

That one verse in the Torah has been responsible for a lot of emotional anguish, and not just for Jews. Christians also struggle with how to interpret this verse and what the implications are for gay people.

Pope Francis was recently in the news because he came out in support of civil union for gays and lesbians. This created quite an uproar in the Catholic church – some felt it represented a revolutionary approach for Catholics, who have traditionally banned any same sex relationships.

A little background is helpful to understand the significance of the Pope’s remarks.

The traditional Catholic view has been similar to the traditional Orthodox Jewish view – which was also the traditional Conservative Jewish view until about 20 years ago. Sympathy toward gay people, but condemnation of homosexual acts. In essence, homosexuals were told they may not be able to control their feelings, but they shouldn’t act on them: they should be celibate.

A previous pope, John Paul II wrote a pastoral letter where he said,

Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus, the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.

Thus, Pope John Paul II judged gays as suffering from a disorder.

In July 2013 Pope Francis got a lot of attention when he said at a press conference, “If someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has a good will, then who am I to judge him?”

This was a big change. Previous popes had no problem judging gay people and judging them as sinners. Here was a pope saying he was NOT going to judge them.

What got all the recent attention is a documentary which has a scene where the Pope is counseling a gay man who with his partner want to raise their children as Catholics. He was sympathetic; he cautioned the man that “not

all people will share your choice of having a family like that.” And then Pope Francis is heard to say,

Homosexual people have a right to be in the family. They are children of God. They have a right to a family. Nobody should be thrown out of the family or made miserable over this. What we have to make is a law of civil coexistence, for they have the right to be legally covered. I stood up for that.

This was a remarkable statement: a sitting pope supporting, not simply tolerating, civil union for same-sex couples. And very publicly, on camera. It certainly seems to be far more accepting of homosexuality than anything the Catholic church has officially said to date.

Unfortunately, the documentary edited out an additional sentence, which perhaps makes the Pope’s statement a little less revolutionary. He continued, “That does not mean approving of homosexual acts, not in the least.”

In other words, he was being very supportive of homosexuals as people, saying it should be possible for them to have a civil union; but they should live celibately. Which of course is not very realistic. The Pope’s statement does not really change church doctrine – it’s just a little kinder.

Many in the Jewish world would agree with the Catholic approach. Orthodox Judaism would probably largely say the same thing – be accepting of gay people, but homosexual acts should still be forbidden.

How to approach the question of same sex marriage remains a controversial issue in Conservative Judaism. As a pluralistic movement, we have many different opinions. In December 2006 the Rabbinical Assembly’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards passed two contradictory halachic rulings, both of which passed with support from 13 out of 25 rabbis (one rabbi voted for both). Rabbi Joel Roth’s paper said gays and lesbians are welcome in our congregations and should not be denied honors or lay leadership positions, but our rabbis and cantors are forbidden from performing commitment ceremonies for same sex couples, and the rabbinical and cantorial schools should not admit openly active homosexual students, and such should not be admitted to the Rabbinical or Cantors Assemblies.

On the other hand, a paper by Rabbis Elliot Dorff, Daniel Nevins, and Avram Reisner ruled very differently. It also passed with 13 in favor and has since been adopted by the movement’s rabbinical schools. It allows for same sex

commitment ceremonies and allows for ordaining gays and lesbians as rabbis. Many in the LGBTQ community feel it doesn't go far enough. It allows "commitment ceremonies," but does not provide for *kiddushin*, Jewish marriage. It continues to ban one particular sexual act between men, interpreting the verse in Leviticus 18:22 very narrowly. Many people feel it's not appropriate to tell a couple you acknowledge as a couple what they can and can't do in the bedroom.

Rabbi Steven Greenberg, the first openly gay Orthodox rabbi, describes what's wrong with the approach of trying to be supportive of gay people while telling them to be celibate. He talks about the response when he came out:

"Orthodox rabbis were largely not vicious, because they knew my intentions were good, though they wanted to affirm that it was a prohibition. But one rabbi said that to say that one is an orthodox rabbi and gay is like saying one is an orthodox rabbi who eats cheeseburgers on Yom Kippur. He insisted I was a reform rabbi." A newspaper asked Greenberg to respond to the attack. "I said that I don't argue that this is a unique stance, but what I will say is that nobody jumps off a bridge, or takes Prozac or gets electric-shock therapy on account of a cheeseburger. To deprive a human being of love and companionship is not to deprive them of a cheeseburger."

Rabbi Greenberg was part of the film *Trembling Before G-d*, which tells the stories of different gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews. When someone asks one of the women in the film, "why not just go to a Reform synagogue where you'll be accepted?" she responds, "Because I'm not Reform. I'm an Orthodox Jew. I'm both Orthodox and lesbian, I can't just choose between one or the other. I'm both."

Civil society in North America – in Canada, the US, and Mexico – has advanced faster than religious society. Same sex marriage is legal throughout North America.

In the religious world we're making progress, but slowly. The Pope's recent statement on same sex civil unions is an incremental move in the direction of greater acceptance, and that's good. Rabbi Dorff's teshuvah on same sex relations is a much bigger jump, but it's still somewhat short of recognizing true equal rights and status for gay and lesbians.

Our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters are equally created in the Divine Image. May we see the day when they don't have to settle for half measures, but are fully accepted in our society, both civilly and religiously.