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## No 'mitzva' to ostracize gays

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ANDREW FRIEDMAN, THE JERUSALEM POST

There could scarcely have been a better illustration of why so many Jews feel distanced from the Torah and from Orthodox Judaism than the cruel reactions from Yeshiva University officials and other members of the Orthodox community to a recent panel discussion about treatment of homosexuals at the university.

Critics said the event claimed that it "legitimized" homosexuality by discussing the poor treatment many homosexuals experience inside the Orthodox world. But even a cursory look at the YU debate shows clearly that there was no discussion of the halachic aspects of homosexual behavior, for the simple reason that there is little debate to be had. The Torah prohibits one, narrowly-defined homosexual act: anal penetration between two men. Traditional rabbinic sources do look down on lesbian sex and other homosexual acts, but these acts are not technically prohibited. That's about the end of the halachic debate on this issue.

But Halacha has little to do with this discussion. Thousands of men and women believe in the divinity of the Torah and the rabbinic system but also experience strong desires to build romantic same-gender relationships. For many of these people, that reality presents an inherent contradiction, one that causes tremendous inner turmoil and pain. That pain is compounded by the poor treatment they receive by much, or even most, of the Orthodox world.

So how does the Orthodox world propose recognizing this pain and the inner conflict? Is it the "Orthodox" view that these individuals should be cast out, ostracized, ignored?

ONE JERUSALEM-AREA psychologist, Sara Halevi, has been treating teenagers for behavioral and emotional issues for more than 20 years. During her career, she has seen dozens of patients trying to come to terms with their homosexuality, including many from Orthodox homes. She considers those in the Orthodox camp who advocate rejection, self-hate and "living a lie" for gay Jews to be at best complicit, at worst culpable in the exorbitant suicide rate among gay religious teens.

It is interesting to compare Orthodox attitudes toward homosexuals and toward those who do not observe Shabbat in a halachic manner. Whereas gays and lesbians are routinely subjected to poor treatment (when they are acknowledged at all) in many or even most Orthodox circles, people who do not observe the halachot of Shabbat or kashrut (arguably far more severe offenses in the eyes of the Torah) are considered mistaken, but they are not snubbed.

But for some reason, homosexuality is different. Whereas Orthodox society prides itself on adhering to even the most obscure, strict details of most rabbinic mitzvot (six hours between meat and milk), the command by the mishnaic scholar Shammai "to receive all men with a cheerful face" (Avot 1:16) is considered optional, at least with regard to homosexuals.

But I am unaware of any early or later rabbinic commentator or halachic authority that grants an exception to Shammai's rule for gays. Rambam does not include such an exception in his Commentary on the Mishna or in his halachic work, Mishna Torah.

AND YET Orthodox society as a whole continues to kick these individuals, many of whom have a deep love for Torah, prayer, the Land of Israel and mitzvot. Their struggle is a non-issue in many, or most, Orthodox circles. Instead, we dismiss the "faigeles" and continue on our merry (but not gay!) way.

The human cost for this attitude is massive. The emotional turmoil of the halachicly-committed gay Jew must be terrible indeed, but his pain is of little interest to far too many Orthodox Jews and their organizations.

Yeshiva University must be commended for taking a courageous step and discussing ways to accept Orthodox, and non-Orthodox, homosexuals. Without "legitimizing" an act that the Torah expressly prohibits, last month's forum was an important step toward recognizing these individuals and toward easing their inner turmoil. For that alone, it was a critical event.

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