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Trembling before G-d?

Written by Kate O'Halloran

Tuesday, 13 October 2009 14:44

Can you be a good Jew and a homosexual? Kate O'Halloran investigates.

On the evening of Saturday, August 1 this year a masked gunman injured 15 and killed two people at a queer support centre in Tel Aviv, Israel. *The Australian Jewish News* (AJN) ran several pieces on the incident, and quoted the Israeli Prime Minister as saying that "all people were created in God's image", and "every citizen has the right to be... free and proud".

But not all readers were impressed. An anonymous blogger commented: "...the last thing [...] readers are interested in is what is happening in Tel Aviv snake pits of dreck and perversion".

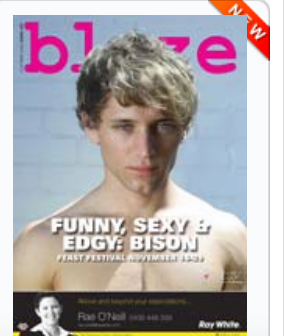
The comment led Michael Barnett (pictured), head of Aleph – a Melbourne-based group offering guidance, support and companionship for Jewish, gay and bisexual men – to circulate other such material to prominent figures in the community. Barnett says he did this to raise awareness of what he sees as homophobia within the Australian Jewish community. This illustrates, that, if nothing else, non-straight sexuality remains as contentious within Jewish religious circles as elsewhere.

What is the Jewish community's relationship to queer sexuality? Is the community divided, as AJN journalist Haviv Rettig Gur suggests of Israel: "along religious lines", and for those who do identify as Orthodox or conservatively Jewish, how do they reconcile their religious beliefs with their sexual desires?

Shaun Miller attends a progressive lay-led synagogue called Kedem, based in Armadale. He spoke of his overwhelmingly positive experiences of the Jewish community. "My family and Jewish friends completely 'accept' [my sexuality] to the same extent that I 'accept' their heterosexuality." This allows Miller's Jewish and gay identities to be "completely relaxed with each other". He in no way considers that his religion condemns his sexuality: "I was made in G-d's image. I am gay. So G-d must have a little gay side too!"

Interestingly, both Progressive and Orthodox Jews share this positive outlook. Jessica Zimmerman, who attended an orthodox Jewish school, writes that while "you would assume I would have been a victim to homophobic hate... I was actually welcomed with kindness and understanding". For Zimmerman, this positive experience has enabled her spirituality and sexuality to remain "very much intertwined". Indeed, Zimmerman believes her sexuality has even enhanced her religion and spirituality: "I thank G-d for making me the person I am!"

Unfortunately, this is not the experience of all queer Jews. One man, who asked not to be identified, spoke of the "extremely trying circumstances" he undergoes as a homosexual *frum* (Orthodox, religious) man. He sees his religion as taking absolute priority over his sexuality, perhaps a necessary consequence of his belief that his religion "absolutely, certainly, and unequivocally" condemns homosexual acts. This is in no small part due to the frum or strict interpretation of the Torah, with its 613 *mitzvot*, or commandments, including:



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157. Not to have homosexual sexual relations among men - Lev. 18:22

460. Observe the laws of impurity of a seminal emission (regular ejaculation, with normal semen) - Lev. 15:16

Orthodox men as such find it near impossible to comfortably act upon their sexual desires. According to this person, "only a very small percentage of *frum* gays choose to abandon *frumkeit*, live a gay life and come out to their family", while others, like himself, are able to function sexually in a marital [heterosexual] situation and choose to do so because of their commitment to an Orthodox Jewish way of life.

Religious Jews who attend progressive or reform temples or shuls regard the *mitzvot* as open to questioning and discussion. Sandra, who attends a reform shul, writes that Reform Judaism "has its own way of praying... allows women to become Rabbis [and]... play significant roles in the community" while still upholding many aspects of Orthodoxy, particularly laws such as fasting on Yom Kippur and the observance of Passover and Rosh Hashana. Sandra speaks of witnessing a "passionate" sermon "about acceptance... *especially* for gay Jews".

For some Orthodox Jewish people, however, these more flexible approaches to the *mitzvot* are regarded as unacceptable offshoots of legitimate Judaism, a watered down approach to religious law. For these people, "homosexual tendencies" are a challenge from God, because they cannot act on them.

As a secular queer woman, I cannot understand but I respect that each of these people sees in themselves something inherently Jewish, and that is an essential part of their identity which they cannot discard. Whether it sits easily or uncomfortably with their sexuality depends perhaps on how they understand Judaism itself, as well as their personal experiences of openness or prejudice.

Aleph gay & bisexual Jewish men: aleph.org.au

Jewish Lesbian Group of Victoria: jlgvic.org

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