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How Gay Rights Teaches Us Torah

Our Faith Grows Because Text Offers Room to Interpret Issues

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Most religious affirmations of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have been “negative” ones: They argue that Leviticus (and Romans and Corinthians) doesn’t really prohibit homosexuality, or that ancient prohibitions should be set aside in the age of the iPad. But isn’t there a “positive” case, as well — that biblical religious values support the inclusion of LGBT people? Surely, religious people should not be for equality *despite* their religion but *because* of it.

This is a view I develop in my new book, “God vs. Gay? The Religious Case for Equality” (Beacon Press). The book is less about “bad” texts than about “good” ones, like, “It is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18) and “Justice, justice shall you pursue,” (Deuteronomy 16:20), and “Thou shalt not bear false witness” (Exodus 20:16). These are the texts that teach us about the importance of love, compassion, equality and honesty — values promoted by equality and inclusion.

Yet as I talk about the book, people still want to know, “What about Leviticus?” The book does provide detailed answers to that question, but it’s the query itself that I want to focus on here, because I think it points to a mistaken expectation about sacred text that is far larger in scope than LGBT rights specifically.

As many scholars have shown, the two verses in Leviticus that have been construed as forbidding some same-sex activity are limited, contextually determined and unclear. Their scope is undefined (Men only? What sex acts? What contexts?), and the language strongly suggests a link to idolatry.

This ambiguity means that these verses can be interpreted in many different ways. And so the real question is not which interpretation is more sophisticated, clever or seemingly apparent, but which is more in accord with fundamental values such as those listed above. The point is not to find a way to say that Leviticus means X but not Y; that’s the easy part. Rather, since it can mean either X or Y, what matters is which interpretation we choose, and for what reasons.

By way of analogy, the Sixth Commandment states very clearly, “Thou shalt not kill.” Two Hebrew words — “*Lo tirtzach*” — no exceptions, no qualifications. But does that mean that if someone is coming at you with a knife, you can’t kill them in self-defense? Does that mean that no war is ever justified? Does it mean that the death penalty is

forbidden? Well, no. Other biblical texts talk about the rules of war, capital punishment and self-defense, which means that even the highly unambiguous language of the Sixth Commandment is, in fact, subject to interpretation.

Likewise in Leviticus, which can be read in an anti-gay way or a pro-gay way. Both ways work, but only the pro-gay, pro-inclusion interpretation is compatible with fundamental values. If you showed the text to a visitor from Mars, he might read it broadly or narrowly. But if you also taught him Genesis 2:18, then he would conclude that only the narrow interpretation coheres with other biblical values.

In a purely academic context, all readings are equal and may be judged solely on their merits. But our reading of scripture takes place in a context in which children are killing themselves because a false dichotomy has been set up between “God” and “Gay.” So, all readings are not equal; those that accord with our fundamental values (in this case, choosing life, living honestly and sanctifying love) are superior to those that do not.

If we are clever enough, we can interpret texts in any way we want. The talmudic rabbis knew this. They knew that it’s possible to deduce laws from the decorations of the letters in the Torah. They knew that a skilled lawyer-rabbi can rule the same object both pure and impure; indeed, doing so was once a requirement for ordination. They had no illusions about the nature of the interpretive enterprise. And thus they understood that the real religious act is not the exegetical gymnastics, but the reason that one engages in it.

The question “What about Leviticus?”

implies that finding a pathway through the “bad” verse is the important part. But it isn’t. The important part is deciding which path to take. It’s easy to take a reading of the text so narrow that it applies to almost no one today, and it’s equally easy to take one so broad that it bans every same-sex relationship. The real question is how one decides which reading to adopt, what values inform that decision, and how truthful it is to the text and our cardinal values of right and wrong.

This is why Jewish interpreters of Scripture have read literal commandments such as “an eye for an eye” allegorically, since the literal reading would be too cruel. They have said that almost all commandments are to be set aside in cases of *pikuah nefesh*, saving a life. And despite the many calls for the death penalty in the Bible, they have said that a court that metes out a single such penalty in 70 years should be regarded as being “bloody.”

Leviticus does not shape the boundaries of compassion; compassion shapes the boundaries of Leviticus. Our engagement with tradition, dogma and text is always informed by our fundamental values, and those values have always evolved as our capacity for compassion grows. Just as men have begun to listen to the voices of women, and to engage with religious traditions informed by compassion, so, too, are all of us now invited to listen to the voices of sexual and gender minorities, and to act in kind.

The issue of “gay rights” teaches us Torah because, like many other ethical questions, it reminds us that the Bible is not a catechism; it doesn’t have clear answers to every moral question. On the contrary, we grow as religious people precisely because of the space the Bible leaves us to interpret and reinterpret. Were it not for this plasticity, honored by pious Jews throughout the ages, we would forever remain ethical infants, incapable of introspection, barely worthy of the gift of Torah itself.

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