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On Welcoming Orthodox Synagogues

Over the past few years I have had the opportunity to speak to young gay and lesbian people. I often ask them to dream with me about their futures. What sort of Jewish lives were sufficiently possible to hope for or to make happen? What did they need in order to make a traditional Jewish life possible for themselves?

They all agreed that in order to remain involved in traditional Jewish life they needed a synagogue community. Because Sabbath and holiday observance is so communal in nature, it is absolutely necessary to shape Orthodox communities that welcome gay people. Were Orthodox rabbis to go as far they thought possible, and were gay and lesbian congregants to be fairly patient and understanding of the halakhic limitations, a practical way to address the problem might just be available. Many concrete realities are born of a shared policy constructed on the basis of divergent reasoning.

The framework of “welcome synagogues” was envisioned primarily from a scant few congregations that, without any halakhic responsum on the matter, have integrated gay and lesbian congregants into the life of their communities. The principles of a welcoming synagogue are designed for those communities that wish to provide a safe and honest environment for gay and lesbian people, given the present halakhic situation. To do so, a welcoming synagogue

would accept three principles that bind together the rabbi, gay and lesbian congregants and the community as a whole in a covenant of honest inclusion.

1. For rabbis: No humiliation. Rabbis will agree not to humiliate or intimidate gay & lesbian people from the pulpit and work to prevent such humiliation in their congregants.
2. For gay & lesbian congregants: No public advocacy. Gay and lesbian members will acknowledge the limits of the halakhic process and not presume the Orthodox synagogue will adopt the social agenda of the gay & lesbian community.
3. For communities: No lying. Gay & lesbian members will be able to tell the truth about their relationships and their families.

The first stipulation is a given. A rabbi who feels that he must deliver polemical jeremiads in regard to homosexuality will not provide a welcoming home for gay people. Such diatribes help no one and do a good deal of harm. In every community there are closeted gay Jews, parents of lesbian daughters, sisters of gay brothers and young people terrified of a nameless secret.

The second stipulation is harder. Orthodox synagogues cannot provide a platform for a gay liberation because the issue of homosexuality is simply not yet adjudicated. For those gay and lesbian people who want full acceptance immediately, this sort of lukewarm welcome will not be comfortable. To struggle for years against shame and rejection in order to be partly accepted and mostly tolerated will be too painful for some. Nonetheless, many people I hope

will want the unique vibrancy and intensity of traditional Jewish community enough to be patient with the process. As we have seen, the halakhic debate is just beginning.

The last stipulation is the most important for gay Jews and the most difficult for rabbis and congregations. Welcoming synagogues would not require us to lie. This stipulation is really the crux of the matter. Communities must understand that above all else we cannot tolerate the lies that were daily required of us in order to pass. Our self-hatred and shame were products of those lies, and an amazing redemption was made possible by the truth. Our honesty is surely the most unsettling demand for rabbis. How can our rabbi allow Joshua to calmly and publicly introduce his partner and by doing so sanguinely admit to being a sinner? The reason is that our rabbi no longer believes that Joshua's sin is willful, and for the moment, that is enough for Joshua.

What will happen over time no one can tell. But it is likely that we will all become less frightened of one another and more willing to live together when we come to enjoy one another's company. The solutions lie, not in imposing ideologies from side or another, but in nourishing our curiosity about one another and then living with the ambiguities. It is my fervent hope that in time, congregations will find cobbled ways to set aside their fears and that gay and lesbian people will find the courage to risk their hearts for the sake of coming home. Many of us are ready to be woven back into the life of the community, to share its joys and sorrows, its burdens and delights, if only a door is left open and a light is left on.