

Responses of Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women to Lesbian Desires

By Joseph Berger, Ph.D., FRCP, DABPN, DFAPA

Female homosexuality is considered unacceptable in Jewish Law. Although the Bible only explicitly prohibits male same-sex sexual relations, traditional Judaism does not rely upon the Bible alone, but has a whole "Oral" tradition that originated at Mount Sinai, and in that Oral tradition that eventually came to be written down and codified, female homosexuality is also explicitly prohibited.

The Oral tradition was first written down between 1,500 and 2,200 years ago in what is called the Talmud, which consists of the basic laws and guidelines that had been handed down, and the elaborations and discussions by the rabbis, teachers, and judges of the great academies and courts, and the Talmud is considered the basic source work of Jewish authority.

But about 1,000 years after its completion, some of the greatest scholars started putting its main rulings into codified form, taking into account the various adjustments that had been made over the centuries as new questions had come up that had not been discussed directly in the Talmud.

That process has continued until today, and the process of modifying rulings in response to contemporary questions is called the Responsa literature.

The rabbis of the Talmud and the Codifiers all agreed that female homosexuality was also unacceptable, and based their ruling upon a passage that is also biblical, but is *implicit* rather than *explicit*. The passage refers to the Jewish people being instructed not to imitate the ways of their pagan neighbors, and the commentaries specifically indicate that this refers to female same-sex relationships.

For ultra-orthodox Jews tempted by same-sex fantasies and desires this presents an enormous problem.

A fascinating recent article in an Israeli newspaper describes the attempts of three women to "resolve" this problem. The article is based upon interviews the writer of the article conducted with the women who were featured in a documentary movie that was due to be shown at a film festival in Tel Aviv at the end of March and beginning of April 2004.

Most ultra-orthodox women (and men) are brought up in one of two types of families that in practice live almost identical life-styles.

The families are often very large, birth control is discouraged. (My own psychological speculation based upon some understanding of the backgrounds of many of these people is that the wish to have very large families is to replace the huge losses that were suffered in the Holocaust, when 72% of European Jewry was murdered. Most ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel, Europe, and places such as Boro Park, Williamsburg, and Monsey in New York, come from Holocaust-survivor families.)

They live a very intensely Jewish life. The men are at prayer three times a day, and many men are engaged in full-time Jewish learning or teaching or performing some form of ritual community service such as the preparation and supervision of kosher food. The men wear distinctive clothing, usually black in color except that shirts are white. Their heads are covered at all times, either by a large hat or a large black skull cap, and on the Sabbath or Jewish festival days they may wear special hats and/or long black coat-like garments.

Married women also cover their heads, with wigs or cloth. They wear long dresses or skirts — never pants or jeans — and the dresses or blouses have long sleeves. From an early age even young girls wear thick stockings. (In Israel, the temperatures for eight or nine months of the year are usually in the 70s or 80s and for at least three or four of those months may regularly reach the upper 80s and 90s, but the women will still wear these heavy clothes.)

Marriages are arranged, there is no such thing as dating. Marriages are arranged by families or relatives or well-meaning friends or even by professional marriage brokers, and the couple is usually very young. The young woman is rarely older than 18 or 19, the young man in his very early twenties. Within marriage sexual activity is restricted to about half a month, because it is forbidden during the time the woman is menstruating and for a period of at least seven days after that.

Perhaps the most important thing for outsiders versed in psychology to understand about this community is that it is most successful when the people are brought up in that framework from earliest childhood. They see it all around them from infancy, and they know what to expect and how to behave when they become adult. From early childhood boys and girls have been in separate schools, and as teenagers mixing of the sexes is strongly discouraged. Sexuality is not discussed until young men and young

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women are about to get married, when individual instruction by an older person is usually offered. Open displays of physical affection by a married couple or even an engaged couple are almost non-existent.

On the other hand, within this community what most therapists would consider to be old-fashioned attitudes towards physical punishment of children still exist, both at home and in many of the schools, and beatings are not unusual, especially in larger families.

The first of the three women has ten children. She had recognized same-sex desires even before she married and went to various rabbis for consultation. She was given the advice that following the same-sex path was not an acceptable option, that she should marry and try in that way to overcome her same-sex desires. While the author seems to suggest that she didn't think much of that advice, the author nevertheless is fair enough to write that she had asked the woman whether she was not afraid that the rabbi would gossip and reveal her secret in what is a relatively small and closed community, and the woman had responded expressing her gratitude that any rabbi she had spoken with had kept her confidence.

The woman said that she had never experienced sexual satisfaction in her relationship with her husband. She saw it as her marital duty and she had fulfilled that, but that was all.

After ten children she still had her same-sex fantasies and desires. But in a beautiful paragraph she describes how on a Friday night, the night of the Sabbath that is the center of the week and the religious Jew's life, she looks around at her family at the dinner table and she sees and experiences a sense of holiness, and she thinks of the alternative, of herself sitting in a Tel Aviv (the center of secular life in Israel) bar smoking and drinking.

This woman speculates that maybe one day, when the children are all grown up and have left home (as we noted they marry very young in ultra-orthodox circles), then perhaps she will fulfill her same-sex desires, but for now she has sublimated them by leading this life of the dutiful wife and caring mother and has achieved a certain level of peace with herself.

The second woman became aware of her strong same-sex desires early in her marriage. By the time she had four children she found the desires irresistible and had met another woman with whom she was developing a relationship.

She approached her husband and told him, and his initial reaction was that she had to make a choice between him and the other woman, and that if she chose to go with the other woman, then the children would stay with him, the husband.

However, a few days later the husband changed his mind. He came to his wife and told her that he loved her, that he loved his family, and that he didn't want to lose her or break up the family.

He said that he was prepared to have her fulfill her desires with her friend a certain number of times a week and he didn't want to know the details of what they did. As the woman recounts, she didn't tell her husband, and neither did she tell her woman friend any details of what she did with her husband.

The marriage and the family have so far remained intact with this arrangement. The woman goes off to Tel Aviv two nights a week to be with her woman friend, and the rest of the time is with her husband and children.

The third woman is the youngest of the three, still in her late twenties.

She became aware of her same-sex feelings some years earlier, and in spite of receiving similar advice to that given to the other women, that is, to go out with men, marry, have children, she found herself uninterested and unstimulated by the men she met.

Eventually she advertised to meet what she described as a young religious woman similar to her, but her ad was responded to by a totally secular young woman.

However, when they met they hit it off instantly and eventually moved in together. The woman describes the relationship in very positive terms, even to the extent that the formerly secular partner has slowly taken on some religious practices.

But there is one significant poignant disappointment. The young woman yearns for her family to accept her relationship and her partner, and to do so in a public manner, within their own community, the community the young woman grew up in.

Evidently the young woman's parents have met the partner — in Tel Aviv — and acknowledge that she seems to be a very nice young woman. But they have made it very clear to her daughter that she cannot bring her partner to their home or community (which is a relatively short drive or bus ride from Tel Aviv). This is unacceptable and would cause them extreme embarrassment.

That the daughter still maintains a close relationship with her parents is very positive, but in taking her desires much further than the first two women, she has also had to face a painful loss.

The article is fascinating in describing these three women with their different levels of response to what are basically

the same desires. Each of the women shows considerable courage in her own way. The first adapts, but at a certain cost in terms of her own inner needs. The second adapts by trying to have the best of both worlds, but probably at the cost of leaving both partners with a degree of frustration. The third adapts by giving in to her desires, and pays a very different cost to fulfill those desires.

Some years ago, gay activists insisted that they were born "gay" some from religiously Christian or Jewish or other-religion families would say "G-D made me the way I am," and their view received very heavy support from a few scientific claims suggesting a genetic or other biological component causing homosexuality.

But as it became more apparent in recent years that there is absolutely no strong scientific support for any genetic, anatomic, hormonal, biochemical, or other biological causative factor, gay activists have had to retreat, and now some put forward a polemical position of still insisting that there is no "choice," that given the age-old stigmas against homosexuality who could possibly want to "choose" to be homosexual. They thus leave open the question of causation, with a strong implication that there must be "something" of an inherent or biological nature.

The best psychiatric-psychological response is to say that the most likely causative factors are psychological, and that the degree to which any individual experiences their homosexuality as "natural" as "inborn" and without choice, or as something different ranging from fantasies and strong tendencies to experience homosexual activity to predominantly heterosexual behavior with occasional homosexual fantasy and to very limited homosexual experimentation, most probably depends upon the time in the person's childhood that the psychological factors impacted and the strength of the impact of those psychological factors.

The earlier and more powerful the psychological factors, the more likely the individual will experience their homosexuality as "ego syntonic," as "natural," and have no interest in changing and in psychotherapy.

The later and weaker the psychological forces, the more likely the individual will be uncertain about their identity, might have quite successful heterosexual relationships, might marry and become a parent, and only under certain psychological stresses "retreat" into same-sex behavior or preference.

Quite clearly in these latter people there is a very considerable element of choice, that most manifests itself not just in behavior, but in accepting the appropriateness of seeking professional help.

The first and second of these women clearly demonstrates that in spite of the powerful nature of their fantasies they

have had the choice to act or not act upon their fantasies. They have acted differently, and both have also demonstrated very clearly what physicians know which is that as long as the basic physical "plumbing," *i.e.*, genital organs, are in place and functioning normally, then both sexes are *capable* of having intercourse with the opposite sex, whatever they allege their "orientation" to be.

The third young woman at the time the article appeared had not married nor attempted any intimate heterosexual relationships. She had made her choice, to pursue a homosexual relationship. To her, it may have seemed that she had "no choice," that her desires or tendencies were overwhelming. There is no indication in the article whether she sought any therapy with an experienced therapist to see what psychological factors might have interfered with her development towards heterosexuality, what had so deeply impacted upon her to lead to her desires becoming focused only on someone of her own sex. She might very well believe that she was "born that way," that she has no choice.

Each of the women though should be greatly admired, because each of them has made a very courageous choice, whether anyone else thinks that it is a "right" or "wrong" choice. The first woman has chosen to suppress her own desires for the sake of preserving a family. The second woman has chosen to remain in a marriage knowing that she is not fully committed emotionally to her husband and that her husband knows this, and she has also chosen to act upon certain desires that are considered quite unacceptable in the community in which she lives.

The third woman has chosen to fulfill her sexual and relationship desires to the fullest, even though she knows that her behavior is absolutely against the traditions and standards of her family and the community she has grown up in, and she has pursued her desires at the cost of giving up most of her contact with that community and much of her previous sense of closeness and contact with her family of origin.

The stories of these women provide us with much to think about very deeply.

Additional Elaboration on the Development of Jewish Laws and Guidelines:

After Moses received the "Tablets" or "Ten Commandments," Moses remained on Mount Sinai for three forty-day periods, during which — according to Jewish tradition — G-D instructed Moses in all the details and elaborations of the basic fundamentals that were in the written text.

Moses then taught the next generation of leaders and scholars, and subsequently generation after generation continued this tradition of passing orally the wider appli-

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cation of the fundamental principles to all aspects of the life of individual people and of the nation as a whole.

However, with the various disruptions, scatterings, and exiles of the Jews that occurred over the next 1,000 to 1,500 years, the need became apparent to write down this oral tradition, because it was in danger of being forgotten, and learned Jews in different locations were developing differing understandings of the authentic tradition.

The major learning academies of Jerusalem and of the very large community that had developed in what was then Babylon (modern-day Iraq) debated the laws, and the debates and their conclusions eventually came to be written down in what is known today as the Talmud, which actually consists of two parts; the basic legal part known as the Mishna, and the debates of the great scholars known as Gemarra.

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