

Communications

Tradition welcomes and encourages letters to the editor. Letters, which should be brief and to the point, should not ordinarily exceed 1000 words. They should be sent on disk, together with a double-spaced hard copy, to Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, Editor, Congregation Beth Jacob, 1855 LaVista Road NE, Atlanta, GA.

HOMOSEXUALITY: A POLITICAL MASK FOR PROMISCUITY

TO THE EDITOR:

Nathaniel S. Lehrman's piece, "Homosexuality: A Political Mask for Promiscuity" (*Tradition* 34:1, Spring 2000), is important in that it puts the lie to many of the politically correct myths concerning this issue.

However important it is to correct these myths, I fail to see how *Tradition*, as "A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought," is the appropriate vehicle for this. The article, well-written and documented as it is, does not address issues in Orthodox thought as much as what should be the thinking of any person, Orthodox, Jewish, or subscribing to any moral code at all.

A journal of psychology or sociology might have been a more appropriate venue.

GERSHON DUBIN
Brooklyn, NY

TO THE EDITOR:

Dr. Nathaniel S. Lehrman decries the "common misconception that homosexuality is irreversible" once that behavior has begun. There is, in fact, little to substantiate such a notion. To substantiate his own claim to the contrary, he provides a few anecdotes, and quotes a few gay writers who are not psychiatrists. He refers to "[m]any reports . . . in the psychiatric literature," but his 47 footnotes do not specify one such report. Psychiatric efforts to turn homosexuals into heterosexuals—what some people now call "reparative therapy"—have a decades-long track record, and on balance, the record supports the "common misconception," not Dr. Lehrman.

Dr. D. Haldeman, in the April 1994 issue of the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, reviews various studies of attempts to change sexual orientation, and discusses both their results and methodology. Consider two examples, one from 1962 and one from 1980.

Dr. Irving Bieber and his colleagues surveyed psychoanalysts with homosexual patients. According to the analysts, out of 76 men who were exclusively homosexual before treatment, only 14 (less than 20 percent) were exclusively heterosexual after treatment. Dr. Haldeman points out that many studies like Bieber's conflate the figures for homosexual and bisexual clients, and thus overestimate the success rate of treatment. Dr. Lehrman blames "ubiquitous gay support groups" for a decline in therapy's success rate, but he cannot blame them for Bieber's statistics: in 1962, when Dr. Bieber's research was published, gay-rights organizations had virtually no influence. The conservatism of the Mattachine Society of New York (MSNY), one of the earliest "homophile" organizations, is a case in point. At the start of the 1960s, MSNY leaders avoided claiming that homosexuals were as mentally healthy as heterosexuals, and they looked down on those who were promiscuous or flamboyant. At the end of the decade, the MSNY had fewer than a dozen members willing to reveal their sexuality in public. (See Toby Marotta's history, *The Politics of Homosexuality*, for more information about the MSNY.)

Dr. E. Mansell Patterson and Myrna Loy Pattison evaluated men affiliated with Exodus International, a coalition of Christian "ex-gay" ministries. They reported on their research in the December 1980 issue of the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. Out of 300 clients in the organization's files, the Pattisons found thirty people who claimed to have changed from homosexuality to heterosexuality, and got permission to interview eleven men; they concluded that "eight of our eleven subjects [less than five percent of the original 300] amply demonstrated a cure." The remaining three subjects had a major behavioral and intrapsychic shift to heterosexual behavior, but the persistence of homosexual impulses was still significant." Again, to blame these figures on gay-support groups strains credulity. At Exodus, according to former directors of the organization (interviewed in the documentary *One Nation Under God*), counselors advised clients to avoid media with pro-gay messages. Clients were actively religious, according to the Pattisons, and saw becoming "straight" as their religious responsibility. If gay-support groups were powerful enough to influence people in those circumstances, we should wonder why anybody in America today is heterosexual.

Dr. Lehrman regrets that there are no Jewish-affiliated, Exodus-like groups for homosexuals who want to change. Considering the embarrassments that the Christian groups have suffered, perhaps that is just as well. Two of the Pattisons' eight "cured" subjects, Michael Bussee and Gary Cooper, were among the founders of Exodus and helped the Pattisons with their research. In 1979, they dropped out of the organization and announced that they were gay after all. Later, according to Haldeman, they described the Exodus program as "ineffective . . . not one person was healed." Their defection is not unusual: according to *Newsweek* ("Can gays convert?", August 17, 1998), thirteen ministries affiliated with Exodus have had to close because the ministries' directors became "ex-ex-gay." Dr. Haldeman also cites cases of Christian counselors who called themselves "ex-gay" and were later caught having sexual relations with male clients.

After reviewing a dozen studies from Dr. Bieber onward, Dr. Haldeman concludes: "No consistency emerges from the extant database, which suggest that sexual orientation is amenable to redirection or significant influence from psychological intervention." Regarding "ex-gay" ministries, he says, "although many of these practitioners publicly promise change, they privately acknowledge that celibacy is the realistic goal to which lesbians and gay men must aspire."

Note Dr. Haldeman's qualifying phrase, "from psychological intervention." Certainly, some people may change their sexual behavior: a woman who thinks of herself as a lesbian may fall in love with a man, or a bisexual man may choose male partners at one point in his life and female partners at another. Dr. Lehrman, however, makes a more sweeping claim: that all homosexual people could become heterosexual, given the desire to change and "competent counseling." Dr. Haldeman could argue that Mr. Bussee, Mr. Cooper, and every other person who dropped out of a reparative-therapy program didn't really want to change, or didn't have the right counselors, but this "heads I win, tails you lose" argument is the antithesis of science.

When Dr. Lehrman's argument moves from science to *hashkafa*, he is on slightly firmer ground. He quotes Maimonides as saying, "we all choose each day between good and evil, and by our choices we can become as holy as Moses or as evil as Jeroboam." (This quotation has no footnote; I found similar but not identical language in *Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:2.) However, Maimonides also says (*Shmoneh Perakim* 8, first paragraph) that "it is possible for a person to be born with a nature that is disposed to a virtue or a vice, so that one sort of deed is easier than

In 1972, an umbrella group of homosexual organizations, the National Coalition of Gay Organizations, presented a platform that articulated a number of major goals. The most important goals were the widespread acceptance of any form of sexuality, by which they primarily meant homosexuality, pedophilia, same-sex marriage, and same-sex couples adopting children. The major methods of achieving those goals were to infiltrate and influence the media, major religions, and the world of education.

I would respectfully suggest that the widespread acceptance of homosexuality has been achieved. But the other goals have not yet been fully achieved even though the tide may be moving heavily in those directions. Therefore, strong opposition may still have a small chance of limiting those demands. If this is where we stand now, Dr. Lehrman's article, though well intentioned, mostly misses the point.

There are, additionally, some factual matters that need correcting. For example, I know of no psychoanalytic claim that homosexuality results from one particular family constellation and no other. Neither is it a psychoanalytic claim that homosexuality results from being seduced by a homosexual adult. I am unaware of any solid evidence contradicting any psychoanalytic theory. Indeed, one of the major philosophic objections to considering psychoanalysis as a science has been that its theories cannot be measured, quantified, or specifically refuted.

A more poignant source about same-sex marriage than the passage Lehrman cites from *Sifrei* can be found in *Hulin* (91b-92a). The gemara states that there were initially thirty *mitsvot benei Noah*, but the early pagans kept only three of these, one of which was that they did not accept same-sex marriage.

Lehrman mistakenly identifies Thorstad as being a responsible gay writer. I don't think that a founder of the leading North American pedophile organization and a major advocate for pedophilia can be called responsible.

When Lehrman writes that it is more accurate to see homosexual behavior as a matter of choice, he is skating on thin ice. The current scientific evidence suggests that homosexual desires and identifications are mostly a product of psychosexual development, and not of any anatomical, physical, genetic or hormonal variations. What seems to matter most is whether the psychosexual influences occurred very early in childhood or at later stages of development, and how strong those influences were. If the influences occurred very early and were very strong, then unfortunately the element of choice is likely to be minimal.

another.” Our faith assures us that abstaining from *averot* is possible, but the shortage of Jews who are as righteous as Moses proves how difficult the job is. Some gay men may underestimate their capacity for self-control, but Dr. Lehrman trivializes their feelings with terms like “a political mask for promiscuity and “homosexual choice and habit.”

If Dr. Lehrman’s claim about sexual orientation were true, life would be more comfortable for many people in the Orthodox community—especially for Orthodox homosexuals, their families, and the rabbis who counsel them. However, in science (as, *lehavdil*, in *halakha*), the more comfortable theory is not always the more credible one.

SETH GORDON
Allston, MA

TO THE EDITOR:

While basically I am on the same side as Dr. Lehrman, there are some significant problems with his article that need to be addressed.

Fundamentally, I believe that Dr. Lehrman is still fighting a battle that at least for the time being has been lost. Not only have gay activists won the war, but they continue to win big victories as evidenced by the recent successful attempt to muzzle Dr. Laura Schlessinger for her comments about homosexuality.

Norman Podhoretz probably gave the best description of the gay victory in a superb article in *Commentary* a few years ago (“How the Gay Rights Movement Won,” November 1996). Podhoretz had the courage to say that men using one another as women constitutes a perversion. As far as I am concerned, it would still be true even if gay sex no longer entailed the danger of infection and even if everything about it were legalized by all 50 states and ratified by all justices of the Supreme Court. But he made clear then what is now surely beyond dispute, namely, that homosexuality has come to be very widely tolerated, and homosexual individuals are accepted and given numerous special rights.

Attacking homosexuality per se at this time is therefore a futile and wasteful exercise. Certainly, as traditional Jews we need to show strength and support to our young people to remind them that we differ from the prevailing western and liberal societal view in our rejection of homosexual behavior, but the arenas for the more important battles have shifted and we have to respond to that.

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Those are probably the people who are most convinced that they are homosexual and claim to have not the slightest interest in or desire for intimacy with the opposite sex. They are called exclusive homosexuals. If, however, the influences occurred late and are relatively weak, then the element of choice is considerable. Those people are more likely to vacillate between heterosexual and homosexual phases in their adult lives, or to be heterosexual for years, marry and have families, and then under the pressures of various personal crises that may occur in their marriages, sex lives, or businesses, may develop homosexual thoughts and desires and act upon those.

The current most accurate estimate is that exclusive homosexuals make up only 1 – 3% of the population in North America, definitely not the 10% falsely claimed in old propaganda. These people usually have no interest in any treatment, and they claim that homosexuality is a normal healthy alternative that does not warrant any treatment.

But the people in the second group, for whom choice may play a greater role, can benefit considerably from psychotherapeutic treatment if they wish it. Some of them may be guided to the support and influence of various religious groups, as mentioned in Dr. Lehrman's article. Either path, psychotherapy or religion, may lead to some people becoming—or returning to being—comfortably heterosexual.

Should the homosexual be able to fulfill his or her sexual desires in the same manner as is acceptable for heterosexuals? Rabbi Dr. Avraham Steinberg in his wonderful *Encyclopaedia of Jewish Medical Ethics* (Hebrew) best expressed the traditional Jewish position, which is that whatever the cause of homosexuality may turn out to be, be it any physical biologic cause or be it psychological, Jewish law, halakha—as clearly established from the Torah through the gemara to the major codes of Rambam, Tur and Bet Yosef—has clearly defined homosexual behavior as unacceptable, and therefore however strong the urge the person has the responsibility to control those urges.

That of course does not sit well with non-observant homosexuals, and even with some who identify themselves as homosexual and as being within the Orthodox community.

If I had to convey the essence of Lehrman's article to someone in just a few words I would have to say homosexuality is bad. All gay people want to do is be promiscuous. Most of the claims homosexuals make are untrue. My objection is that I don't think that at this time such an approach wins much attention or serious listening. Many of the details Lehrman offers are accurate. But the overall tone is one that

needs to be different if young Jews are to remain strong in their beliefs in the face of skeptical, even hostile, criticism.

(DR.) JOSEPH BERGER
Toronto, Ontario

DR. NATHANIEL S. LEHRMAN RESPONDS:

Dr. Berger is correct: direct attacks on homosexuality, as opposed to heterosexuality, are doomed to fail. But we can win that moral battle if we define the battleground as the struggle of fidelity and the marital *mitsva* against rabid promiscuity.

This approach's accuracy is confirmed by the Coalition of Gay Organization's (C.G.O.) 1972 statement, cited by Dr. Berger, which openly seeks widespread acceptance of any form of sexuality. It was spectacularly validated by the Gores' very public affection at the recent Democratic Party convention—a calculated conjugal rebuttal of President Clinton's promiscuity.

The C.G.O. statement's second strategy—to infiltrate and influence the media, religion and the world of education—demonstrates both that group's successful conspiratorial methods, which Dr. Berger recognizes, and its urgent danger, which demands immediate, vigorous and effective opposition—a danger to which Dr. Berger seems much too resigned.

My paper quoted the experiences of two youngsters recruited into homosexuality. The C.G.O. statement recognizes how the legitimatization of homosexuality by media, religious organizations and schools facilitates the recruitment of such youngsters—a process going on under our noses. Since prevention is far more important than treatment, that is where our primary focus should be.

Concerning the media, we should, for example, be aware of (and seek to correct), *New York Times* political correspondent Richard Berke's statement to the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association that literally three-quarters of the people deciding what's on the [newspaper's] front page are not-so-closeted homosexuals.

Concerning education, we should know about (and seek to correct) the infiltration of our public education system by homosexuals and other promiscuity advocates, as manifested by the teaching of homosexual "fisting" to Massachusetts children and the dispensing of condoms in New York high schools.

Homosexuality, like promiscuity, can perhaps best be seen (and treated) as an often-defiant habit, or even addiction, like that of heroin or tobacco. Dr. Berger's presentation of the usual Freudian explanation of its origins in vague early childhood experiences recognizes neither the defiance element, the faultiness of psychoanalytic explanations from their very beginnings nor the importance of specific sexual experiences in childhood. Indeed, the 1962 Bieber study cited by Mr. Gordon mentions, almost in passing, the considerably higher incidence of homosexual experience before age 15 in its homosexual group (61%) than of heterosexual experience before that age in its heterosexual control group (7%).

The respondents' doubts about homosexuality's reversibility are based entirely on professional literature reports of psychotherapists' lack of success. Those failures are due more to a passive approach than to homosexuality's alleged irreversibility. People's ability, without therapy, to change sexual partners, and to change to partners of different gender, has been recognized for millennia. We cannot dismiss this as merely anecdotal - as though the psychiatric literature encompasses all humanity has ever known on the subject. The greatly reduced number of reports on homosexuality treatment in that literature since the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of psychiatric disorders in 1973 was noted in my paper. It also pointed out the homosexual conspiracies to persuade the professions and society as a whole that therapeutic efforts to help people wanting to give up homosexuality are *per se* unethical!

I made no sweeping claim that all homosexual people, given competent counseling and the desire to change, can become heterosexual. Bad habits are hard to correct, and social supports for them - drug subcultures, homosexual support groups and media endorsement - makes breaking them even harder. Considerable effort is required to give up drugs, smoking or homosexuality. While competent counseling can help, incompetent psychotherapy can impede.

I accept the correction concerning Thorstad, and welcome the citations of Gemara *Hulin* and Rabbi Steinberg, with their insistence that no matter how strong forbidden urges may be—and this applies to both the heterosexual and the homosexual—we are obliged to control them.

After submitting my article, I learned about JONAH—Jews Offering New Alternatives to Homosexuality (PO Box 313, Jersey City NJ 07303; (201) 433-3444). Headed by Rabbi Samuel B. Rosenberg, a trained social worker, it was organized to help Jews unsatisfied and distraught

with their present life choices and unwanted sexual inclinations to change, and sees homosexuality as a choice, one condemned by the Torah.

Judaism created a sacred mechanism for joyfully and constructively channeling our inborn sexual urges: the marital *mitsva*, which commands us to engage in regular, passionate, faithful conjugal lovemaking. This is a treasure which we must defend against both homosexual promiscuity and repressive, anti-sexual celibacy.