

Parasha Acharei Mot: Lev. 16:1-18:30

In a world where all and any spiritual understandings about the origin and the purpose of reality have been undermined and relegated to the whimsical realm of myth and make believe, we can see that for most people, the morality which derives from a faith understanding of life has also suffered a similar fate. Not only has the biblically based religious worldview of the western world effectively succumbed to the ravages of evolutionary materialism and humanistic relativism, but so have many of the traditional moral and ethical values which derive from our theistic perspective.

One of the most controversial and strangely divisive of these former moral pillars of our society relates to sexual ethics and what constitutes acceptable sexual behaviour. This week's portion comes in the wake of Pesach and the eighteenth chapter of Leviticus warns the House of Jacob not to imitate either the sexual practices of the country from which they have been delivered or those of the region which they are about to conquer.

What follows is a graphic description of acceptable sexual behaviour in which the Hebraic euphemism "discover" is used fourteen times to describe unacceptable sexual partners. This is followed by the use of the term which translates into English as "abomination" and which occurs at least six times in the same chapter.

It would appear that the Holy One of Israel would have His people understand that human sexuality also needs to be an expression of the covenant of holiness which our people have always been called to adhere to. Any violation of that which the Torah stipulates as acceptable sexual behaviour is also a violation of the intrinsic holiness that should always be the single most distinguishing feature of the rabble which left Egypt to become the people of Holy One of Israel.

Now here I want to exercise caution about limiting the expression of our faith to any one particular moral issue or even to any one political expression, be it democratic or republican, or for us in the True North, strong and free, conservative or liberal. Our singular agenda as believers must always revolve around both the proclamation of Messiah's Kingdom and the integration of His kingdom imperatives into our daily lives.

So, in spite of the danger of being labeled a politically incorrect fundamentalist red-necked bigot, this week's Torah portion unequivocally proclaims that acceptable sexual behaviour is not a function of technique or of position but is solely a question who constitutes an acceptable sexual partner. Biblically based sexuality must never violate the three functional limitations which our call to holiness and separateness places upon our sexual behaviour.

Sexuality must never violate kinship, gender or species. Though we understand that in the two beginnings of humankind, our first ancestors and the descendants of Noah's children had to couple with their close blood relatives out of necessity, but when Canaan violated the boundaries of kinship and Ham did nothing to prevent this, we have the first condemnation of the sexual perversion for which the descendants of Canaan became known.

The next prohibition deals with gender and forbids members of the same gender from participating in sexual behaviour of any kind. A violation of this prohibition is the first one to be called an abomination in the six fold discourse. Now I am aware that the practice of homosexuality of either the male or the female kind has been prevalent in various cultures throughout recorded human history, but there can never be any question that such behaviour is not just described as a perversion by the Torah, but is styled as a totally unacceptable abomination.

Some scholars who would have us re-examine the Scriptures in light of the New Testament would also have us believe that no similar condemnation is found in the pages of this, supposedly, more lenient and forgiving document.

It is at this point, as I move towards my concluding remarks, that I would like to express my unfailing devotion to the pairing of the Torah and Haftarah with the Brit Chadashah which our beloved scholar and rebbe, Jeff Feinberg has so conscientiously produced. I Corin. 6:9-11 articulates ten kingdom exclusions which place practitioners of said behaviour outside the triple redemption which the Gospel of our Messiah provides.

Once, during our weekly Yeshiva, I was asked what the Greek word for “catamite” or “abusers of themselves with mankind” was in the I Corinthian 6 passage. As one familiar with the perverted sexual exploits of many of the Greek gods, I was not surprised that the term derives from one of the male lovers of Zeus by the name of Ganymede. Homosexual behaviour is placed under the same level of condemnation as adultery, murder and idolatry.

If anyone were to claim that the Bible does not condemn homosexuality, they would also have to argue that the same document does not condemn any of the other ten kingdom exclusions such as idolatry, murder and adultery.

Now, where does that leave us with those of our people whose orientation is not heterosexual? Do we exclude them, condemn them or perhaps even promote the death penalty for them? How do we promote a Torah observant sexual holiness in the midst of our sexually perverse “metro-sexual” society and deal with those who come to us from sexual lifestyles and orientations which both the Gospel and the Torah forbid?

We need to look at I Cor 6:11 and understand that such were some of us, but that, all of us, have been washed, sanctified and justified, in order that we may discover not just forgiveness, but also a healing which removes us from any desire to either practice or sanction any departure from what the Torah defines as acceptable sexual behaviour. What is forgivable is never acceptable, but the same tenacious grace which forgives us seventy times seven times a day also empowers us to condemn that which the Torah condemns, without condemning those, who like Rahab, come to us with a dubious sexuality and who wish to practice the same sexual holiness which our deliverance from Egypt obliges us to embrace. Chag Pesach Samaech mishpocah.