



And Justice for ALL – A Reform Jewish Voice Shabbat Text Study: *Vayeira*, Genesis 18:1-22:24

The story of the destruction of Sodom resonates with particular strength this Shabbat as we lift up the issue of Marriage Equality. Defenders of LGBT equality are all too familiar with the frequent citation of Sodom's destruction as one proof of God's prohibition of homosexuality. When the two angels are taken in by Lot, Genesis reads, "the townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old – all the people to the last man – gathered about the house. And they shouted to Lot and said to him, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them'" *Genesis 19: 4-9*. Lot refuses to present the angels, instead offering his virginal daughters, but the Sodomites refuse his proposal and become infuriated.

1. Why do the Sodomites appear at Lot's door?
2. Discuss Lot's willingness to sacrifice his daughters for the two strangers?
3. What does Lot's negotiation strategy say about his hierarchy of values?

W. Gunther Plaut, in his Torah commentary, explains "that we may be intimate with them" signifies that the Sodomites wanted the men in Lot's house for "homosexual or other deviate practices (hence the term sodomy for unnatural sexual behavior)."¹ Plaut seems to confirm that homosexuality is forbidden by the Torah, since all the Sodomites are destroyed by the angels. We also read more explicit Biblical condemnations of homosexual relations:

Leviticus 18:22, "Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman. It is an abhorrence."

Leviticus 20:13, "If a man lies with a male as one lies with a woman, the two of them have done an abhorrent thing; they shall be put to death- their blood guilt is upon them."

1. What exactly are these passages prohibiting?

¹ W.G. Plaut, "The Torah A Modern Commentary" pp.127-8.

2. Are there other ways to interpret them through a more *modern* lens?

Despite the numerous Biblical proscriptions of sexual relations between men, other Jewish texts, including *Pirkei Avot*, rabbinical responsa, and sermons have very different approaches to homosexuality.

We read in Pirkei Avot 5:16 that, “Any love that is dependent on something--when the thing ceases, the love also ceases. But a love that is not dependent on anything never ceases. What is [an example of] a love that is dependent on something? The love of Amnon for Tamar. And one that is not dependent on anything? The love of David and Jonathan.”

1. Why in this interpretation is male-male love superior to male-female love? (hint: On what might Amnon’s love be dependent ?)

Rabbi Bradley Artson, Dean of the Rabbinical Studies School at American Jewish University, has asserted, “Traditional Halakhic sources are either about use of homosexual force, pagan worship, or casual, inconsequential sex. The sources are not about committed, loving relationships....Just as God does not deal despotically with creation, so too we must not deal despotically with deep-seated and un-changeable drives. Homosexuality is to be considered a halakhically-acceptable sexual orientation, provided that this sexuality is expressed within the context of a mutually-exclusive committed adult relationship.”

1. Do you agree with Rabbi Artson’s definition of “halakhically-acceptable” homosexuality?
2. Discuss the provisions that Rabbi Artson requires for relationships to earn *halakhic* approval. Would you add any of your own? Remove any?

In a responsa on gay and lesbian marriage, the Central Conference of American Rabbis writes, “But while ‘abhorrence’ may be a proper reaction toward many of the forbidden sexual unions (*arayot*), it does not apply to the case of homosexuality, for the issues cited in the sources as rationales for the prohibition fail to strike us as convincing on moral grounds. This is especially true in that we, unlike our ancestors, are aware of the possibility of committed, stable, monogamous, and loving relationships between members of the same gender. This structure of human life, which parallels the institution of heterosexual marriage, does not produce moral evil; it neither abuses nor betrays the innocent. Nor can we seriously contend that it threatens the family unit and the bringing of children into the world. In a social climate of increasing tolerance, homosexual people are correspondingly more likely to resist entry into heterosexual

marriage for the sake of appearance and propriety. An acceptance of homosexuality does not, therefore, augur the breakdown of a household that is less and less likely to exist in the first place.”

1. How does the Reform rabbinic association treat same-sex marriage?
2. What are their arguments for addressing same-sex marriage?
3. Do you agree with their interpretations? Are there other arguments or comments you would add?

Concluding Discussion:

1. In light of these three commentaries, how have rabbis dealt with the increasing incorporation of homosexuality into mainstream Judaism?
2. Do you feel these texts treat homosexuality with the appropriate level of openness and tolerance?
3. What are additional ways we can argue against inflexible interpretations of Biblical scripture that continue to condemn homosexuality and same-sex marriage?
4. Moving forward: Discuss ways that religious organizations can work together, using sacred texts as a tool to defend the LGBT community and fight for marriage equality and other essential civil rights.