

Rabbi Dweck, Judaism, and Homosexuality

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have never had the pleasure of meeting Rabbi Joseph Dweck in person. But I have been in touch online and electronically. I know him to be an exceptional rabbi. After a highly successful career in the United States, he moved to London to head the [Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue](#), where he has enthused many people and brought them closer to Torah. His rabbinic qualifications are impeccable. He is connected to the most revered and scholarly Sephardi authorities. He is an articulate and an inspiring leader. In addition, and possibly most importantly, he is a very caring person.

A few weeks ago, he gave [a lecture in London on homosexuality](#). It was a brave attempt to grapple with the challenges that other cultures present to traditional Torah texts. He traced the history, the terminology and the ideas behind homosexuality in the pagan and post pagan world. He brought sources from Torah, Talmud and great post Talmudic masters to illustrate the nuances and variations in attitudes. And while expressing absolute commitment to Jewish Law he said that he was grateful for the challenges that current Western attitudes towards sexual matters have presented to Judaism. It was forcing traditional Jews to examine their core values and attitudes towards loving relationships. As with any unscripted lecture he might have used some infelicitous phrases which I would have avoided, which he has since sought to clarify. Nevertheless, his brave attempt to grapple with a problem rather than avoid it has brought the wrath of his enemies down on his head.

[A public rebuttal of Rabbi Dweck](#) (not his ideas, which were hardly addressed and were largely misrepresented when they were) has come from one Aharon Bassous. He is an Indian-born Sephardi rabbi, educated in Ashkenazi yeshivot, who set up his own synagogue in Golders Green, London. In a faltering, simplistic tirade reminiscent of Savonarola, he attacked the integrity, faith, and scholarship of Rabbi Dweck as if he were a heretic. The vindictiveness of his speech, in my opinion, was a far greater betrayal of Torah values than anything Rabbi Dweck might have said.

It is typical of such men that they think that by throwing mud you can stop people thinking for themselves and by shutting mouths you turn off ideas. Similar excoriations without dealing with the substantive issues have appeared in the USA and on the internet—usually by men not noted for their broadminded intellectual achievements. They are all ad hominem attacks that ignore the issues and scream for blood. That to me, at any rate, is a clear breach of Torah values.

Rabbi Dweck has said nothing new in terms of Jewish law. His sensitive approach was pioneered by Rabbi Chaim Rapoport. He is well known in rabbinic circles as an impeccably Orthodox authority (and a Chabad Chasid). His book [Judaism and Homosexuality: An Authentic Orthodox View](#) was prefaced by

the late Berel Berkowitz, Dayan of the Beth Din of the Federation of Synagogues. He describes it as "the first meaningful attempt to articulate a strictly Orthodox perspective on the question of homosexuality." The book's forward describes Rapoport as "a courageous figure who has written on a difficult subject that many would rather avoid," designed "to mitigate the painful consequences of Orthodoxy's uncompromising rejection of homosexuality." Interestingly his book was waved before the cameras by Rabbi Bassous as if it were acceptable. Except he merely used some general words from the introduction that stressed the uniqueness of Torah, instead of quoting Rabbi Rapoport's actual views.

Rabbi Dweck said, "Homosexuality in society has forced us to look at how we deal with love between people of the same sex, and it has reduced the taboo of me, my children, and my grandchildren being able to love another human being of the same sex genuinely, to show them affection, to express love without the worry of being seen as deviant and problematic." I agree that this is an infelicitous and ambiguous statement. But you'd have to have a devious mind to take this as an endorsement of the act or of rejecting the Torah. He goes on to say, "The act remains an issue. But if we can deal with the peripheral issues, it changes how we address these things. That's good for society." Of course it is. Clearly his attackers had not read or heard what he actually said. It is fine for them to go on living in closed societies and insist on adherence to their worldview without question. But for those of us who live outside and have to deal daily with human problems, simply putting up shutters is no solution.

There are two aspects to the challenge that homosexuality presents to traditional Jews. No one would argue the fact that the Bible considers homosexuality to go against its primary value system of heterosexual relationships as the normative way to create families and rear children. But this does not mean that biblical law doesn't allow for exceptions—those who choose not to marry altogether for example—even if this is not ideal. Or that it cannot accommodate genetic variations. The Talmud certainly did. Modern knowledge of the way genes influence us, that was not available previously have changed the way we understand the nature of freedom and choice. This does not change our laws. But it does affect the way we relate to individuals.

For example, one could well argue that having caring, loving parents of any sex or sexes is preferable to a normative family where there is abuse, conflict, and tension. As for the act itself, we have never posted policemen in bedrooms or sought to make a person's private sexual life a matter of public concern. Not only, but embarrassing people in public is regarded as one of the most serious of moral deficiencies by our great rabbis. As a result, many Orthodox rabbis apply tolerant standards to the private lives of their congregants. And welcome everyone into their communities without prying into their private lives.

It is true that halacha, despite its preference for leniency and its escape routes, is not completely relativist. We are expected to respect the law of the land, and to take measures that mitigate hatred, and to strive for peace and good relations. This does not mean sacrificing one's own values.

Regardless of our halachic imperatives, we try to be sensitive and try to find ways of being constructive where possible, as Rabbi Dweck does. He is a caring, admirable man and a great rabbi who wants to make this world better, happier, and more tolerant. I hope he triumphs over those who do not!

The Sephardi world has a long tradition of tolerance and open arms to the wide range of religious ideas and standards. Ashkenazi Orthodoxy has always tended toward rigidity and exclusion. It could always shunt people it did not like off to Reform. Sephardi communities have no Reform. As a result, their rabbis have had to encounter views they did not agree with. It would be a tragic betrayal of Sephardi inclusiveness if Rabbi Dweck were to be hounded from his pulpit. Banal comparisons that Bassous made with previous schisms are puerile. This is not a theological challenge to Torah from Heaven, but rather a way of seeing to what extent one can talk about and explore issues and challenges within the framework of Torah. If Rabbi Dweck were to be punished for that, it would be a very sad reflection on Orthodoxy and on anyone who tries to restrict an honest, open exchange of ideas by besmirching and insulting a good, honest, thinking man.