

Gay Parade

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In an uncharacteristic show of unanimity, the Jewish, Muslim and Christian clerics of Jerusalem have united in calling for a ban to a projected Gay Parade in the Holy City. This confirms an opinion I have long held, that fundamentalists across the religions have more in common with each other than they do with liberal members of their own religion. There are many shared values amongst fundamentalists of different religions, even though they each loudly proclaim that they are the sole purveyors of absolute Truth and all the others are in error.

The issue of Gay Rights and parades actually highlights the strength and the weakness of much of religious opinion. This is precisely the sort of thing that all fundamentalists point to when they excoriate the decadence of the West. "If," they argue, "Western culture and values permit and encourage such practices, then we must oppose them by withdrawing into our own communities and fight for our own traditional values and ground." The more liberal society becomes, the greater the pressure to offer a counterbalance. And, it must be said, the notable resurgence in orthodoxies of all religions attests to the power and attractiveness of such a position. Orthodoxies are on the increase, while liberals are, in general, assimilating out of their religious communities (although numbers don't prove anything—otherwise we'd all have to be Chinese Communists).

Of course the intellectual position of fundamentalism is riddled with inconsistencies, even if orthodoxies have an amazing capacity to justify their own circularity of thought. "We are right and everyone else is wrong, even when we are manifestly wrong and everyone else is right." After all, there are still people who believe the earth is flat and others that the world has been visited by creatures from space.

What modernity has added to life, and even to religion, is the importance and value of individuality and personal freedom. This can mean switching from one sect or body of practice within a religion, something rare in the past except for major revolutions or new movements. It has also allowed for a great deal of movement within urban communities—shul-hopping as well as community-hopping. It has also allowed for people to pursue personal agendas, from role-swapping to celibacy to homosexuality. In one way, the battle lines are drawn over this issue of individual freedom. Yet, in fact, even within Orthodoxy individuals choose to ignore demands or dictates of their religious leaders on issues such as lavish celebrations, watching television, use of the internet and of mobile phones, to mention only the most obvious. So, in effect, a mood has developed within parts of Orthodoxy that allows for, tolerates or looks benignly on "exceptions", "individualists", or "eccentrics" so long as they do not publicly flout or challenge their norms. Without taking sides, it seems to me that the Orthodox world, while not agreeing that homosexuality is a normative lifestyle or equivalent to heterosexuality, does usually choose not to make an issue of it and even,

rarely, to be positively benign. Of course, in liberal terms this is not enough, but in Orthodox terms this is a significant concession.

One might argue that the Orthodox world consistently seems to brush its problems, particularly the sexual ones, under the carpet and therefore, its opponents might argue that forcing it to recognize "others" by giving them a bloodied nose might get somewhere. If only. Sadly, it always has the opposite effect. But it's not a question of giving in, so much as finding other ways of winning battles.

Problems always arise when one side in a cultural or religious divide tries to impose its views and demands on others. This has happened in Israel where religious Jews try to impose their demands on secular Jews. But it works both ways. When secular advertisers put semi-naked women on public advertising in religious areas this is as offensive as religious people trying to require Sabbath observance of others. In a democracy one allows freedom of action, provided one is not affecting others or impinging upon them. The truth is that both sides of the divide are guilty of insensitivity and of imposition.

Maybe it is because of Orthodox coercion that gays feel the need to parade within Jerusalem. In Tel Aviv such open flouting of religious values is the norm rather the exception, so had the parade been held there one would not have felt so strongly about it. But to go into a city which is holy to all the faiths that, whether rightly or wrongly, find homosexuality offensive, or at least problematic, is simply asking for a counter reaction that will only set back the cause of tolerance another generation.

Orthodoxies put a lot of emphasis on "modesty". I happen to think that in our day and age we have gone too far in overt and public displays of intimacy. Those who want to flaunt their sexuality in public need to stop and think, and realize it is as hurtful to others as is the crude hatred and antipathy that is directed towards them. It is sad that human nature seems to be so much more willing for a fight than for amicable accommodation.

In a free society one simply has to learn to live and let live. This allows people to choose their own personal lifestyles as well as allowing for abuses. But letting the other "live", cuts both ways. At the moment it seems to me that both sides are wrong in their different ways. Sadly, this is an example of gratuitous offence from people who ought to know better, if only because they too have suffered from intolerance. The fact that this is taking place in Israel underlines the general mood of destructive divisiveness and depersonalization that permeates Israeli society in the way it deals with its own. How can one, therefore, expect much understanding of Christians, Muslims and other religions (let alone politics), if we can't show minimal sensitivity to our own?

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