

Gay Teens and Jewish Schools

By Steve Greenberg

Traditional Jewish educators are beginning very cautiously to tackle the very delicate problem of sexual orientation. In Tradition Magazine, Dr. Joel Wolowelsky and Rabbi Bernard Weinstein published an article entitled, "Initial Counseling for a Male Orthodox Adolescent Homosexual" (Vol. 29, No. 2, Winter 1995). In the article, the writers recognize a serious human dilemma and take some bold steps, however ambiguous and imperfect, to address the problem. Perhaps the most striking flaw in the article is the absence of any mention of the AIDS crisis. It is rather alarming that this issue is completely avoided, and the likely reason is the authors' refusal to consider that real gay teens, some of whom will be sexually active, actually exist. The counseling interventions described in the article leave no room for the consideration of a reasonably fulfilling life as a gay person. The authors' efforts to counsel gay teens fall glaringly short due mainly to their inability to imagine such a future for these young people.

What should counselors or teachers in a yeshiva do when confronted by a teen who shares with them that he or she is gay? A gay youth comes to a rabbi terrified about what his/her ongoing fantasy life means. Does it mean that he will have no place in the only world he knows? Does it mean that she will be ridiculed and despised by family and friends? Does it mean that he will never enjoy the thrill of a kiss or a passionate embrace, or never have a family?

Of course, beneath these fears lies the fact that the Jewish tradition strongly prohibits sex between males and, albeit less stringently, prohibits similar contact between females. The authors of the Tradition article advise counselors to provide comfort and support to gay students without relinquishing the tradition's rejection of same-sex behaviors. Only a "calm, non-judgmental, open discussion with a religious authority can give the young man an opportunity to come to terms with these past actions and move on to a healthy, productive life." In no place in the article do the authors confront the possibility that "coming to terms with past actions" might include moving on to a healthy, productive gay life.

Their attempt to navigate between gay sexual orientation and the cultural pressures of the religious environment ultimately fails because they can conceive of no scenario for living an adult gay life as a committed Jew. Students are, in effect, told that by therapeutic intervention (i.e., cure) and /or by religious conviction (i.e., celibacy), they can overcome same-sex desires. While this encouragement is intended to be supportive, the student might very well ask, "And what if it can't be cured? Then what? What can it mean to encourage a sixteen year old to consider celibacy as a life option? To these questions the authors have provided no helpful response.

The normative preferences of the tradition notwithstanding, the facts must be faced directly and responsibly. Given that change-therapy has proven generally ineffective (and in many cases harmful), each school needs to reconsider how it shall meet the needs of gay teens. A team of parents, teachers and counselors should be formed with the task of seriously grappling with the question of what they would like their gay teens to do with their lives. It might be helpful for the team to invite gay men and women, perhaps even couples, to speak to them and help them understand the experience of growing up gay. If the school has a religious vision, then it might want to find gay people who share enough of that vision to demonstrate that it is possible to live a gay life supported by the wisdom, practices and faith of the tradition. Such a Jewish religious take on gay life would no doubt encourage youth to hope for and to begin seeking a partner with whom to have an exclusive relationship of love and commitment. Hopelessness can lead a young person to high-risk sexual behavior, drugs, depression and even suicide. A reasonable hope for a good future is what young people desperately need. A school counselor who cannot help gay students imagine for themselves a reasonably good future abandons them and profoundly fails to do his duty.