



Clarifications of Shiur on Male Homosexuality Given by Rabbi Joseph Dweck

There has been a wide spectrum of response including a great deal of uneasiness, backlash and controversy regarding several of the points that I presented in my shiur on homosexuality of 8th May 2017. Some have responded in ways that show that my words have been misunderstood and misinterpreted. As a teacher who has been involved in education for over 20 years, I know that when many students do not understand the teacher’s lesson, much of the blame can be found with the teacher.

Being that this is a sensitive topic which is emotionally, morally, and socially charged, there was bound to be a passionate response. Unfortunately, much of the response was used as a political manoeuvre rather than a halakhic or philosophical argument. I am saddened by that and believe that important subjects that trouble our people should not be used for political positioning.

Therefore, in order to correct the misconceptions, I present here some written clarifications on the key points which were disputed or misunderstood in the lecture.

Misconception 1 - ‘Only the act is prohibited’.

This is not what I said, but I should have been clearer. The reason I stressed the act itself was because there is a great halakhic difference between the act itself and the peripheral acts — what are called *abizrayhu* in the Talmud. While I did indicate during the shiur that *abizrayhu* were prohibited (as indicated in source 14), I perhaps did not express it clearly enough. The peripheral sexual behaviours are prohibited in Jewish law. However, on a legal basis, they are not equal to the Torah’s prohibition of male homosexual intercourse. It is rather a separate, blanket prohibition which applies to all illicit unions. This is the meaning of the Hizkuni that I quoted and included in source 8. Thus there is no difference legally between a homosexual male who transgresses the *abizrayhu* and a heterosexual male who transgresses them with a woman — it is the same transgression.

Misconception 2 - The definition and meaning of the word *to’eva*.

The definition of the word *To’eva* in the verse is generally translated in English as ‘abomination’ (usually understood to mean repulsive). This is the classic definition used by the Rishonim. However, even this applies only to the act and not the person. It has been the source of much of the prejudice surrounding and filling people’s thinking (both religious and secular) on the issue. The Hakhamim did, however, present more nuanced meaning to the word.

The Targum Yonatan translates it into the Aramaic as **מרחקא** which literally means ‘distance’ and although it is used as ‘abomination’ in the Aramaic, the root clearly exposes that it is more in the sense of rejection rather than disgust. It is something that is to be kept away, as in *ta’ev teta’avenu ki herem hu* - ‘Reject it for it is proscribed’ (Deut., 7:26).

Radak and Ibn Janah include the word **שנאה** as a definition of the word which clearly means that it is something rejected/not loved (not necessarily hated as in the modern usage - as is clear from Gen. 29:31; Deut. 21:15-17). The Torah is telling us how we should *treat* the transgression rather than how we should *feel* about it. There is a great difference between saying that something is disgusting and that something is to be rejected or ‘kept away’. The former carries with it a great deal of subjective emotional loathing which causes great challenge to our ability to find compassion, while the latter creates firm boundaries and sets societal structures while still allowing empathy. Even if the word is to be translated simply as abomination, the Torah is not commanding us to *feel* something but rather that it defines the nature of the act within humanity existentially.

In the Talmud (Nedarim, source 17) Bar Kappara asks R Yehuda haNasi what the word in the verse means. I indicated that this clearly is not a question regarding the literal definition of the word. Every detail of the story indicates otherwise, not to mention what we know about R Yehuda HaNasi’s specific expertise in the Hebrew language¹. Bar Kappara was looking to expound on the nuanced *meaning* of the word. In other words, how are we to understand it within the context of Torah. Bar Kappara explains saying that the word *to’eva* is to be understood as saying *to’eb ata bab* meaning ‘you go astray through it’ or with it. That is to say that with this act one is straying from the normative behaviours of the general population. Furthermore, while this Talmudic interpretation is clearly not the literal meaning it is nonetheless a valuable meaning that is to be taken into account.

¹ רמב"ם - הקדמה למשנה, מהדורת קאפח, דף 9



Rabbi Joseph Dweck | Senior Rabbi

הרב יוסף דוויך | רב הראשי

Misconception 3 - I said that 'Jonathan and David were homosexual'.

I clearly said that their relationship was NOT sexual. That the word נפלאות indicates that it was beyond any sexual trappings and purely a spiritual bond. I gave no indication of anything otherwise. When I spoke of the covenant that they made between them I did say figuratively that 'they got married'. That was certainly not literal. They most certainly did NOT get married. They did, however, quite clearly enter into a serious covenant of love. There was never any homosexual behaviour between them. Unfortunately, as I said in the shiur people have terrible difficulty in differentiating between sex and love.

Misconception 4 - I said that 'חז"ל are wrong' (!"ח)

I most certainly did not. I should have been more careful in explaining; I was not saying that the assertion the Hachamim made in the Talmud regarding a male teacher teaching a younger male student was wrong, ח"ו. I was suggesting that it is no longer relegated to the fringes of Orthodox Jewish society as it once was due to the developments of Western culture.

Misconception 5 - My goal was to encourage Homosexuality in Orthodoxy.

Simply untrue. The *only* goal of the shiur was to present a genuine Torah perspective on the issue as I understood it.

Misconception 6 - I said that Homosexuality is 'fantastic'.

I did not. The final thoughts were by far the most misunderstood and received the greatest backlash and even anger. Clips of 2 minutes of the last 25 were cut and sent around the world. I can be heard saying: *'I am going to go out on a limb...and I could be completely wrong and very badly ridiculed - I genuinely believe that the entire revolution of...homosexuality...I don't think it is stable and well...but I think the revolution is a fantastic development for humanity. Sure, there are many things that aren't good and that we're not happy with...but [homosexuality in society] has forced us to look at how we deal with love.'* I did not say that homosexual acts were fantastic. I said that the development in society had residual benefits much in the same way that Islam and Christianity did as the Rambam² pointed out. These residual effects in my opinion are that it has helped society be more open to the expression of love between men. I was not asserting law, nor for that matter, demanding a particular way of thought. I was simply presenting a personal observation. Admittedly, 'fantastic' was an exaggerated word.

Further Criticism: Information missing from the lecture - Some claimed that I left out important sources. Specifically the responsa of Rav Moshe Feinstein זצ"ל (Orah Hayim IV:115; Yoreh De'ah III:115). I had chosen not to include it because Rav Moshe z"l's entire approach is based on the idea that there is no natural desire for the act in human beings and, therefore, the transgression can only be deemed a rebellious act. However, being that it is an opinion of a great Gadol and based on his understanding of Talmudic sources I was remiss in not including it as part of a Torah perspective. It should have been included in the shiur as a Torah opinion.

In conclusion, I regret that some people have found reason in this shiur to invalidate my faithfulness to Torah, mitzvot and my commitment to teaching and encouraging living by our Torah. My entire 24 year career of teaching Torah and educating has been reduced by a few to the head of a pin and a 2 minute audio clip. Torah is my life and my only desire is to show the beauty of Torah to Yisrael and to encourage living our lives by and through its beautiful vision. I will, with the help of the Holy One, humbly continue to dedicate my life to that purpose as I have until this day.

ויה"ר שיקויים בימינו וזמלאה הארץ דעה את יי כמים לים מכסים.
ערב חג השבועות תשע"ז. לונדון יע"א.

הצעיר יוסף דוויך הכהן ס"ט
רב הראשי לקהלת הספרדים באנגליא

² Mishne Torah, Melakhim, 11:7-9