Orthodoxy and LGBT Symposium

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For the first time, American Psychoanalytic Association's annual conference dedicated a panel to discussing the intersection of Orthodoxy and LGBT identity from a clinical standpoint. The panel addressed how mental health providers could approach counseling someone struggling with Orthodox Judaism and LGBT identity.

Entitled Symposium: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Jewish Identity, the panel opened with Dr. Alan Slomowitz noting that he and his colleagues are "concerned with theory and praxis." He noted that as mental health professionals, "who each of us is in this room is, affects us in acknowledged and unacknowledged ways and [affects] how we respond to and work with our patients."

To explain the societal elements at play in the Orthodox community, he quoted Rabbi Ari Segal, head of Shalhevet High School in Los Angeles who recently wrote [http://www.shalhevetboilingpoint.com/opinion/2016/09/14/the-biggest-challenge-to-emunah-of-our-time/] "the reconciliation of the Torah's discussion of homosexuality represents the single most formidable religious challenge for our

young people today." He went on to explain to the audience, many of whom did not have in depth knowledge of Orthodoxy, that "Orthodox Judaism has many different strands."

When Dr. Alison Feit took the microphone, she opened by saying "we stand and we speak about things in the world that have meaning…" We speak, she explained, so we can gain "if not the ability to fix a problem...to at least name it and make it visible with all its contours." That is what she and Dr. Slomowitz have done in their clinical work.

Much of both of their talks were based on findings and observations laid out in their paper, "Does God Write Referrals? Orthodox Judaism and Homosexuality."

Questions abound after Feit, Slomowitz, and the other two panelists, Rabbi Mark Dratch, and Dr. Mark Blechner finished presenting. Some people asked about their specific clients and patients, and others asked for general resources, in which case they were referred to the Jewish Queer Youth (JQY) and Eshel websites, which are the only two LGBT organizations serving the Orthodox community.

"It would be safe to say that this was the first session on the combination of Orthodoxy and LGBT issues," explained Wylie Tene, the APA's Director of Public Affairs, who was present at the symposium.

The panel was inspired by a similar event [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/24/orthodox-jews-gay-rights-conversion-therapy-conference hosted at Columbia University two years ago, in which the four of them presented the topic from a similar vantage point. That conference coincided with the height of the controversy around gay conversion therapy and JONAH [http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/196116/judge-orders-jonah-a-jewish-gay-conversion-therapy-group-to-shut-down] [http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/191819/new-jersey-jury-jonahs-gay-conversion-therapies-are-fraudulent] , a Jewish conversion therapy organization that has since been closed due to court order.

Orthodox Judaism has traditionally taken a strong stance against homosexuality, due to the biblical verse in Leviticus 18:22, which outlines the prohibition. The right wing rabbinic position is outlined in a document known as the Torah Declaration. Their stance denies the possibility of a gay identity altogether. It also states that "same-sex attraction can be modified and healed," which is why these rabbinic figures still refer LGBT community members to conversion therapists--

even after it was proven to be fraudulent by a court of law in 2015. These rabbis – both ultra-Orthodox and modern Orthodox – will still not engage in any form of dialogue about the matter.

But in the last five years, and even more so in the last two years, many Orthodox rabbis have recognized the need for empathy and have started what will be a long and difficult conversation for them to figure out how to reconcile halakha and the reality on the ground. The discourse no longer surrounds the question of is it possible to be gay and Orthodox, because facts on the ground-- the existence of Orthodox gay couples-- indicate that it is possible.

One such rabbi is Mark Dratch, the director of the Rabbinical Council of America, a leading body of Orthodox rabbis in the country, which boasts nearly 1,000 members.

Dratch, who spoke on the APA panel, had a marked shift in tone compared to how he spoke about the issue two years ago at Columbia University. Whereas in 2015 he was very up front and quotes a Hebrew verse meaning “I know that I don’t know,” and asking LGBT members of the audience to educate him, now he spoke with authority that there needs to be a communal push to be more inclusive. “Any rabbi that's worth his salt won't just deal with matters based on traditional Jewish text, although that is that starting point and that is the framework in which he is going to operate, but is going to by necessity understand the complexities and the details of the larger world,” he said, saying this needs to be taken account into LGBTQ issues as well. “A rabbi dealing with LGBTQ issues cannot operate in a vacuum.” This is a radical shift it dialogue, one of which has not been seen by a major Orthodox rabbi before.