

A LINE ON LIFE

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Sexuality — A Jewish View

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In another article, we discussed the Catholic view of sexuality. However, since this is a Judeo-Christian culture, how do the views of Catholicism relate to **Judaism**? It is important to be aware of the views of Judaism on sexuality, since the roots of Christianity are in Judaism. Balfour Brickner*, the Senior Rabbi of the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York City, has summarized these views.

Unlike Catholicism, Judaism has no one person to determine its basic philosophy. In Judaism, what you believe is less important than what you do. Good deeds or "*mitzvahs*" are at the core of Judaism. Likewise, with some variations, the following philosophy expresses the core of Judaism as related to sexuality.

**If God's works are viewed as "*perfect*",
how can sexuality
— as part of his divine plan —
be viewed as obscene?**

Love and Obscenity. In Judaism, sex and love are permanently linked. There is no distinction between various types of love. Love between God and God's creatures, between people, and between a man and a woman are all expressed by the same Hebrew word for love — "*a'havah*." Since there is no real distinction between the physical and the spiritual, the Bible and Rabbinic literature are both "*frank and outspoken in dealing with the sexual component of human experience*." Thus Jewish literature is — by definition — neither obscene or falsely modest, pornographic or prudish. Since God's works are seen as perfect, sex organs and sexual intercourse — part of God's design — cannot be obscene.

This does not mean that Judaism believes or teaches that "*anything goes*." Judaism emphasizes concern for the family unit and sexual responsibility. However, American Jews have assimilated into the larger culture. Along with the general population, they have been affected by our changing value system.

Divorce. Divorce has always been recognized by Jewish tradition. However, it is seen as a tragedy. In the **Talmud** (an interpretation of Jewish religious laws), a large portion is devoted to divorce law. The laws specifically emphasize protection for divorcing spouses and responsibility for the training and welfare of the children.

Abortion. Judaism permits abortion. In Judaism, the fetus is not considered a full human being until it is born into the world. For this reason, abortion is not perceived as murder. (While not all rabbis would agree with this position, it is a norm for Judaism.)

Even with this liberal viewpoint, Judaism has trouble with the argument for "*abortion on demand*." A fetus — while not identical with an infant with its independent life system — is still something more than "*mere tissue*." Its existence evokes special consideration, because it is potential human life. Although the fetus has some rights, they are less than those of a fully born person.

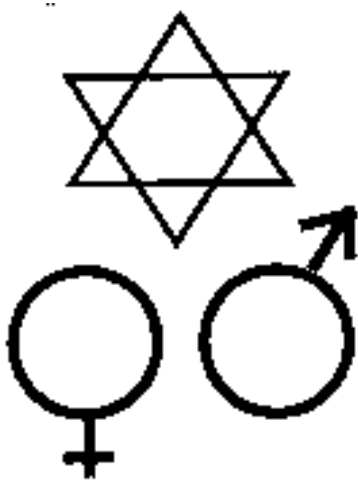
Judaism emphasizes life — "*l'chaim*." The fetus' right to life is compromised when it threatens someone else's life — its mother's or even that of its prospective siblings. But where there is no threat to life, the Jewish value of life leads them to protect and revere this "*life potential*."

Homosexuality. No topic divides Jewish thought more. The Biblical attitude is clear and condemning toward homosexuality. "A man that lies with a man as with a woman, shall be cut off" (Lev. 20,13). Rabbinical thought is just as condemning — homosexuals are to be cut off from the community.

The problem lies with the cause of homosexuality. If it is merely an alternate life-style chosen by the individual, then this view would be justified. However, if this sexual orientation is organic in nature, the view is different. Then — even according to the rabbis — guilt cannot be attached to the homosexual, because the "fault" is not that of the individual. In this case, no homosexual should be "cut off" from the community.

With new scientific research, homosexuality is no longer considered a mental disorder. Further, homosexuality is seen as an externally caused condition. However, the specific cause(s) of homosexuality are still unknown. But whether it is genetic, familial, or culturally induced by the society as a whole, or any combination of such factors — the individual is not at fault and should not be punished. If God created a heterosexual norm, who is to deny God's right to create or permit the homosexual exception?

On the other hand, if homosexuality is against Biblical law, should it go unpunished? According to Rabbi Norman Lamm (president of Yeshiva University), "*The practice of homosexuality belongs to a category of acts that are free from legal punishment by human agency, but forbidden. If there is to be punishment, it must come from God and not human beings.*"



Whether you agree with these views or not, this article should give you a better understanding of why some people feel the way they do. Each of us struggles with the problems of right and wrong, but none of us have all the answers. Looking at contrasting views of others may help us to make our own decisions.

These two articles are not an attempt to promote — or negate — any specific values. Cherish your values. However, if you understand the origins of other values, you are less likely to label them as "evil."

* Brickner, Balfour, "Judaism and Contemporary Sexuality," *SIECUS Report*, May-June 1987, pages 5-8.