

Help for Jewish Homosexuals That is Consistent with Torah Principles

JONAH Stresses Each Person's "Potential for Wholeness"

(The following is an adaptation of an article by Susan L. Rosenbluth which appeared in The Jewish Voice and Opinion, Englewood, N.J., vol. 13, no. 4, December 1999)

The first Jewish outreach organization geared to assist homosexual men and women seeking to change their sexual orientation has been established in New Jersey. Calling itself JONAH, the group intends to deal with homosexual issues in a manner consistent with Jewish principles as set forth in the Torah.

According to the group's director, Rabbi Samuel Rosenberg, the name is an acronym for "Jews Offering New Alternatives to Homosexuality," and represents the biblical prophet who warned the people of Ninevah to "return."

Desiring to be inclusive, the non-profit group will embrace any Jew regardless of religious commitment or their physical location. Its goal is to educate Jews about the causes of same-sex attraction and the possibility of change from homosexuality to heterosexuality.

"We believe this is achievable if the homosexual struggler lives by Torah values, heals his or her unresolved issues, and fulfills unmet emotional needs," says Rabbi Rosenberg. "Many former homosexuals are now married with children and lead more contented, spiritual lives."

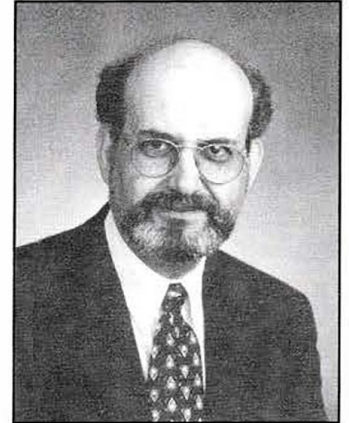
JONAH is also available as a resource for parents and friends of those who struggle with homosexuality. It aims to provide support groups, a speaker's bureau, seminars for interested parties, and referrals to appropriate counselors.

Actions and Fantasies

Rabbi Rosenberg points out that the Torah strongly forbids the act of homosexuality precisely because it recognizes the capacity of anyone to commit such an act. Although the Toranic prohibition relates to actions, not thoughts, JONAH recognizes the need to work also with individuals who struggle with homosexual thoughts and impulses but do not act out their homosexual fantasies or identify with the gay lifestyle.

"Jewish ethics require us to offer assistance to those who struggle with homosexuality and to understand how to

help men and women with same-sex attractions. In today's society, it is important to offer solutions to problems; otherwise, one becomes part of the problem," he says. "We must repeatedly remind ourselves that, in the Torah, it is not the person, but the act that is abhorred. Moreover, even after the act, we have the obligation to promote *teshuvah* ('return') and not censure by the family, leaders, and community."



Rabbi Samuel Rosenberg, L.C.S.W.

The spiritual leader of the Elmora Hebrew Center, Rabbi Rosenberg is a licensed social worker and psychotherapist who was trained at the Family Institute of New Jersey. He received his Master's degree in Social Work from the Wurzweiler School of Social Work of Yeshiva University, and is currently an advanced degree candidate at the Contemporary Center for Advanced Psychoanalytic Studies.

"Genetic Propaganda"

Rabbi Rosenberg points out that even though it is well established that homosexuality exists in the Orthodox community (The World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jews has 48 organizational members and over 30 homosexual congregations; there are underground gay and lesbian support groups in the religious community and on the internet), most religious, social and medical institutions "have failed these men and women." JONAH, he says, has broken through the religious community's "response of silence, cloaked in the pretext of modesty."

"The Orthodox community bought the mythical notion of the genetic propagandist that homosexuality is inevitable for some people. The afflicted individuals feel shunned, isolated, confused, and ashamed, with nowhere to turn for support, understanding, or assistance. Some of our brethren responded without compassion or a helping hand or even a shoulder to cry on," he says.

While JONAH does insist that homosexuality is a treatable condition, Rabbi Rosenberg stresses that the group should

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in no way be seen as license for persecution.

"Let it be clearly stated, without condescension, there is no room in this or any other society for witch hunts directed at homosexuals, or for the denial for their fundamental freedoms, simply because their nature differs from the norm," he says.

But Tolerance Should Not Succumb to Affirmation of the Condition

However, that does not mean that—in the name of tolerance—society should "succumb to acceptance." He maintains that accepting homosexuality as normal and healthy is to doom the afflicted individuals to a life in which "their potential for wholeness will remain dormant beneath their emotional wounds."

"The homosexual lifestyle, with all its social and cultural nuances, is also a matter of choice. It is a learned behavior which can be unlearned," he says.

Helping the Depressed

He is especially concerned about the "depressed, despondent, and tormented souls who struggle with their homosexuality."

"What about those who have tried to explore an 'alternate lifestyle,' only to experience frustration, loneliness, and isolation? To whom do they turn? To whom do their parents turn for help, guidance, and support? To whom do they dare expose their sense of shame, failure, and humiliation? How many suicides must we cover up, how often must we turn a blind-eye before we hear the desperate calls for

help?" he says.

Well-intentioned, but untrained rabbis do more harm than good when they tell homosexuals and their parents simply to accept their condition and abstain from the behavior, he says. "They don't even know that help is available," he says.

He notes that "misinformation that homosexuality is untreatable by the mental-health profession does incalculable harm to the homosexual struggler and to society at large."

"Many ex-gays who have broken out of homosexuality say the biggest cause for their depression was the enormous pressure to accept their feelings as inborn and unchangeable. That way of thinking made them feel trapped."

Support Groups

One of JONAH's services is the establishment of support groups, both for strugglers, and for parents and loved ones. "The aim of the support groups," Rabbi Rosenberg explains, "is to re-establish healthy male-male or female-female bonding...to rediscover their authentic gender...and to better understand the expression of their legitimate love needs for attention, affection, and approval from gender peers which were unmet in their childhoods. In such a peer group, individuals learn that such needs can be satisfied without eroticism."

To receive information, write to JONAH, P. O. Box 313, Jersey City, NJ 07303, or call (201) 433-3444. There is a 24-hour voice-mail service.

All inquiries, he says, will be handled "sensitively and discreetly."

