

A Discussion with Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetsky on “SSA”

By: ARTHUR GOLDBERG

Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetsky is Rosh Yeshiva of the Talmudical Yeshiva of Philadelphia and a member of the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah of America. For more than ten years he has also been a staunch supporter of JONAH,¹ the only world-wide Jewish organization that specifically works with men and women struggling with unwanted same-sex attraction (SSA). Hakirah asked Rav Kamenetsky if he would be willing to share his thoughts and beliefs on this issue. He graciously accepted and this article is the result of lengthy discussion sessions he had with Arthur Goldberg, co-director of JONAH.

During an interview earlier this year, Rav Kamenetsky spoke of his pain in discussing the impact of secular thinking upon the Torah world in regard to SSA, expressing regret that so many people have been misled in the process. He strongly asserted, however, that “it is no longer a subject that can be swept under the rug” and expressed regret that so many observant Jews “are afraid to speak up” even though, as the Rosh Yeshiva made clear, “the truth must be known. Meiri, in his commentary to the *Mishnah* in *Avos* 5:20, says, ‘A person must always strive to uphold the truth and to dispute anyone who attempts to corrupt it, because the truth fears no one’.”

¹ In March 2000 Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetsky (also referred to herein as the “Rosh Yeshiva” or “Rav Kamenetsky”) became the first major rabbi to endorse the activities of JONAH <www.jonahweb.org>. Ever since, he has provided counsel and advice to innumerable individuals struggling with these issues as well as to the organization itself.

Arthur Goldberg is the co-director of JONAH (Jews Offering New Alternatives for Healing).

The Torah's Unequivocal Message

"Anything the Torah forbids, the human being is able to control."

(Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetsky)

According to the Rosh Yeshiva, whether out of malice or ignorance, many blatantly misconstrue the clear and unequivocal language of *Vayikra* 18:22: "You shall not lie with mankind as with womankind. It is an abomination."

The Rosh Yeshiva asserted that this language unequivocally condemns the practice of homosexuality, but **not** the person. Rav Kamenetsky stated that struggling individuals who seek health and wellness should **never** be confused with those who identify themselves as "out and proud," nor with the leaders of the homosexual movement who seek to reinterpret Torah in order to justify homosexual behaviors and identity. This distinction is crucial, according to the Rosh Yeshiva, as the latter group seeks to distort the meaning of Torah. He finds their attempts to reinterpret Torah to justify their way of life "mind-boggling." Separating these two groups reflects the difference between what Hashem asks from all of us and what He unambiguously prohibits. The Rosh Yeshiva believes we need to do everything in our power to lovingly uplift struggling individuals toward a full and healthy life, one that is filled with love, joy, and the wisdom of the Torah. Unfortunately, as Rav Kamenetsky poignantly stated, "most gay-identified people are unaware they have options" and that "change is always possible."

Just as any non-observant individual may always change from being a Torah desecrator or simply one who does not follow Torah commandments, and thus retains the power to "return" to observant Judaism by doing *teshuvah*, the Rosh Yeshiva believes that those who seek to challenge and ultimately overcome their unwanted same-sex attractions can do likewise. Citing *Shabbos* 156a, the Rosh Yeshiva indicated that human drives can be altered or changed and thus "expressed in a kosher way."²

² *Shabbos* 156a: "If one was born under *mazal* Mars, he will spill blood. Rav Ashi said: He will be a bloodletter, bandit, slaughterer or *mohel*." (He can channel his disposition for something neutral, for *aveiros*, or for *mitzvos*.) The Vilna Gaon in *Even Shelaimah* 1:7, building on *Shabbos* 156a, implies

“Everyone is capable of overcoming an inclination that is prohibited by the Torah,”³ said Rav Kamenetsky. Change is not only possible, but, according to the Rosh Yeshiva, it is imperative and crucial for every G-d-fearing person. The Rosh Yeshiva recognizes two distinct types of “change” (which he used interchangeably with the word “control.”) To accomplish such change, he said, “counseling is the best thing—if a person is willing to engage in it.” Two separate and distinct types of change relevant to *mishkav zachar* may occur: (a) virtual elimination of the thoughts, feelings, and behavior, or (b) significant decrease of the desire, combined with knowledge of the tools necessary to redirect one’s feelings if the desire returns. He indicated that all of us face challenges of one sort or another but as humans we have been given by our Creator the capacity to overcome them. In March 2000, he forcefully expressed this sentiment when he wrote in a letter endorsing JONAH, “Anything that the Torah forbids, the human being is able to control.”

The Rosh Yeshiva further indicated that Hashem does not play cruel tricks on His creatures, nor does He create impossible situations for a human being that would cause the individual to violate a Torah prohibition. The *Gemara (Avodah Zarah 3a)* affirms this concept: “Because the Holy One, blessed be He, does not deal imperiously with His creatures.”

Rav Kamenetsky spoke emphatically to the question of change of sexual orientation in the *haskamah* (approbation) he wrote after reviewing my book:⁴

that every [inborn] drive has some form of outlet that is acceptable within Torah.

³ “Overcoming” in this context is best thought of on a spectrum ranging from total eradication of the inclination and resolution of the previous unresolved feelings leading to the behavior to simply controlling the behavior. The outcome may depend upon several factors such as the personal motivation and will to overcome unwanted SSA, the amount of work done by a person in counseling, the amount of co-morbid emotional issues the individual presents with (e.g., depression, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, addictions etc.), the length of time the person engaged in homosexual ideation or behavior, etc.

⁴ *Light in the Closet: Torah, Homosexuality, and the Power to Change* (Los Angeles: Red Heifer Press, 2008)

Our Sages teach us that every human being is capable of changing for the better. Those who make the false claim that human beings cannot change their tendencies are comparing them to animals. Indeed it may be very difficult to change one's nature, but it is definitely possible if one so desires.

Eight years earlier, in his original endorsement letter to JO-NAH (March 2000), the Rosh Yeshiva explained that "to say that a person's genetic constitution prevents him from controlling these deviations is definitely wrong." Rav Kamenetsky clearly expressed in his letter that "the proper approach for anyone who is struggling with same-sex attraction is to get help and healing through therapy," whether that be with a mental-health professional or a rabbi trained or knowledgeable about these issues.

The Rosh Yeshiva spoke of several conversations he held throughout the years with a number of mental-health professionals who believe in a Torah way of life, including, for example, Dr. A. J. Twerski and Dr. J. Werblowsky. He understood from these conversations how it is psychologically possible to change emotional responses. According to Rabbi Kamenetsky, "We retain the power to overcome drives or desires to which we are drawn."

The Rosh Yeshiva strongly asserted that "no one is born gay with an inability to change." Rather, the condition can be best described as an attempt by the person struggling to fulfill emotional needs that went unmet. If one understands that the condition is simply an emotional adaptation, it follows that change or re-adaptation is possible. However, such a person "*must want*" to help him/herself. It cannot be done without motivation.

"It is a horrible thing," he said, to see the distortions of the truth by those who oppose, belittle, besmirch, ridicule, and try to destroy the idea that appropriate therapy or gender-affirming processes can help an individual dealing with SSA. "What someone afflicted with this issue ought to do is to see a mental-health professional trained in transformation processes." Those who are not motivated to change, and their allies who object to the concept of change, attempt to block knowledge of the change process by providing the "born that way" rationale for a person's lack of change. The Rosh Yeshiva pointed out, however, that this rhetoric is simply "a crutch." The knowledge that change is possible and that

people can change sexual orientation is a major threat to the homosexual movement. If one is able to change his/her sexual attraction, it undermines the argument that gay-identified individuals should be viewed as “victims” and falsely define their essence as “gay” or “lesbian.”⁵

The rationale that a gay-identified person would never have chosen this attraction voluntarily is one of the standard ways in which persons with this condition attempt to excuse themselves. While this oft-repeated phrase is partially correct—in most cases it was not a conscious choice to develop SSA—the elements of free will and choice play a bigger role. G-d grants each of us the ability to make choices: whether one chooses to accept and/or celebrate these feelings, to act upon them, or to work to overcome them always remains within the power of each individual. The Rosh Yeshiva illustrated this point by referring to Internet pornography addiction as a “terrible problem” that he characterized as “a growing one in the Jewish community. Such an addiction can pull people like a magnet.” Nevertheless, he said, just because one does not consciously choose a struggle or difficulty, does not mean that one cannot overcome it.

I asked the Rosh Yeshiva about the claim that homosexual attractions are so deeply ingrained as to constitute the halachic equivalent of *oness*. Those individuals who argue this position claim that

⁵ The Rosh Yeshiva and I discussed more fully the concept of how an erroneous self-identification can be used as a crutch to prevent change. The Talmudic account of Elisha ben Abuyah, one of the great Sages of the Talmud, is instructive. He wandered so far from observance that he acquired the nickname of Acher, “the other one,” and erroneously perceived that he was disqualified from repenting. When urged by his student, Rabbi Meir, to repent, he would reply, “There is no *teshuvah* for Acher” and explained how he heard a *bas kol* (Voice from Heaven) saying, “Turn back to me, O lost children—except for Acher.” Unfortunately, like others who falsely self-identified, Elisha ben Abuyah misunderstood the meaning of G-d’s words. G-d challenged Elisha to cast off the false identity of Acher, “the other one,” but tragically Elisha ben Abuyah chose to identify the wrong he had done with his very essence. In turn, he took on the false identity and foreign personality of Acher, using this false identity as his rationalization, or crutch, for inaction.

homosexuals “act out” under a psychological compulsion, and hence are unable to control their desires. Thus, they insist, homosexuality is a form of duress even though the duress does not come from a third party (such as having a gun held to one’s head), but from within one’s very own self.

The Rosh Yeshiva responded that characterizing SSA in this manner is a misrepresentation and he reiterated his personal awareness of many who have successfully changed sexual orientation, several of whom participated in JONAH programs. These individuals are living testimony to the fact that change is real. From a religious perspective, he said, *halachah* sets forth three categories of transgressions for which *ones* cannot be used as an excuse: idol worship,⁶ murder, and certain sexual prohibitions (including specifically *mishkav zachar*—homosexual relations).⁷

While any therapy may be difficult, and sometimes gut-wrenching, the process of looking deep inside ourselves and uncovering deep-seated issues does not come about without some internal upheaval. Rav Kamenetsky stated that “some people may have to work longer or harder. For some it may even be a lifetime undertaking, but that does not excuse the person from engaging in the necessary counseling.” This is true for almost all therapies, be they

⁶ The homosexual lifestyle is replete with frequent references to body worship and sexual idolatry. An ultimate transgression in Judaism is idolatry, the worship of something—anything—other than G-d. In this context, idolatry can include an idea, a force, a habit or obsession to which we have surrendered sufficient authority or power to interfere with our observance of the Commandments. For an in-depth discussion of this point, see, in particular, Goldberg, *Light in the Closet*, pp. 359–367.

⁷ It is apparent that those attempting to apply the *ones* exemption to homosexual behavior are relying on the premise that a “gay gene” exists, or at a minimum, a presumption that the condition is congenital and unchangeable. In other words, these advocates suggest that homosexuals have no choice in the matter: not only is their sexuality predetermined, but they lack the free will to choose to live as heterosexuals; such a position denies a basic Torah principle of free will. Rav Kamenetsky pointed out that a consequence of this position is the denial of any treatment options for those who would desire change. In stark contrast to the position of *ones*, of course, is the fact that innumerable individuals have successfully changed sexual orientation.

for depression, anxiety, addiction, or any other life issue. Progress and growth do not come without challenge.⁸

Nurture or Nature?

The fact that childhood emotional wounds are a primary risk factor causing homosexuality is relevant to the Talmudic explanation of the meaning of “*to’eivah*” in *Vayikra* 18:22. Rav Kamenetsky focused on a provision within *Nedarim* 51a in the Talmud. It there states that the word “*to’eivah*” should be understood, on a deeper level, that a person with same-sex attraction (or one who violates the prohibition expressed in *Vayikra* 18:22) has been “led astray.”⁹ That provision can mean that something went wrong in the process of a person’s development or that his psycho-social or psycho-emotional development either stopped or was arrested at an early age; hence, he was led astray. Corrective action is, however, available. Such corrective action can be done in a manner similar to the process of *teshuvah*. Rambam explains that *teshuvah* is a process in which one first understands the past, then focuses on changing patterns of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in the present, and finally internalizes those new practices as part of his/her future.¹⁰ The psy-

⁸ Some “gay activists” and their allies argue, however, that the process of engaging in such therapy is harmful and may be a primary cause of suicide. To the contrary, however, individuals who see themselves unwillingly trapped in the homosexual lifestyle and who therefore see no way out are the ones who represent a significant percentage of SSA individuals who commit suicide. Most tragic suicides resulted from individuals who do not see an option for themselves. Those who may have had therapy for suicidal ideation understand there are alternatives available and suicide is not their only option. Drs. Michael F. Gliatto and Anil K. Rai, “Evaluation and Treatment of Patients with Suicidal Ideation,” *American Family Physician* (March 15, 1999) <[http:// www.aafp.org/afp/990315ap/1500.html](http://www.aafp.org/afp/990315ap/1500.html)>.

⁹ Someone can be led astray by a variety of influences, be they his/her own emotions, upbringing by parents, or relationship with peers, or by societal norms that stress “anything goes.”

¹⁰ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Teshuvah* 1:1.

chological process of gender affirmation and healing follows the same pattern.¹¹

Rav Kamenetsky pointed out that isolation or identifying as an “out and proud” homosexual can lead a person astray. Connection with others in recovery is essential. Moreover, he is aware of a very strong network of *frum* individuals who have overcome their same-sex inclinations and are ready to help and support others going through the process. The Rosh Yeshiva commented about the incredible bravery of those who seek to turn their lives around from a path of physical and spiritual destruction and look toward building a kosher *bayis ne’eman b’Yisrael* (an everlasting house in Israel).

The Rosh Yeshiva asked me about the most widely accepted theories among counselors and therapists as to the root causes of homosexuality. After responding that the consensus of those who believe in reparative therapy conclude that something went awry in a person’s childhood development and that many possibilities and/or combinations of factors may lead to same-sex attraction, the Rosh Yeshiva agreed that the explanation made sense and that it fits with the Torah perspective on this issue. It is essentially nurture, not nature, which has the greater influence. Whether the child had emotional or sexual abuse inflicted upon him/her; or whether his/her sensitive nature allowed the person to perceive emotional harm when none was intended; or whether s/he grew up in a dysfunctional family or experienced same-sex peer wounding as a child or teenager; the net effect felt by the person was an inhibition to properly bond with those of his/her own gender. There may be other issues, but the underlying factor is a developmental deficiency to appropriately bond with someone of the same sex, one which

¹¹ Both *teshuvah* and gender-affirming programs involve personal transformation, empowerment, and growth. They are both processes. Both involve intensive intellectual, psychological, and behavioral work. Rarely is a single dramatic act decisive. Indeed, there is a structure to *teshuvah*, and like any structure, it needs to be built from the ground up. Many modern rabbis divide the structural components of *teshuvah* into three parts: (1) Regret (nullify the conditioning that caused the unwanted feelings/behavior), (2) Rejection (in the present, change existing emotional and behavioral responses), and (3) Resolution (internalize in the future new responses that prevent repeating the patterns of previous responses).

may then manifest itself in a desire to connect with those of the same gender in an inappropriate sexualized way.¹²

Everyone Is Capable of Healing from Unwanted SSA

“When it comes to homosexuality, from a Torah perspective there is no other option other than working at overcoming.” (Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetsky)

What about individuals who claim that they have sincerely tried to heal but were not able to?

Not everyone succeeds in his/her current therapy, but as the Rosh Yeshiva previously stated, “everyone is **capable** of healing.”¹³ And, since there are many modalities of therapy, it should be obvious that what works for one individual may not work for another. There are many different forms of therapeutic assistance that can help people overcome their same-sex attraction.¹⁴ The person involved may not have chosen a therapeutic modality that “reaches” him/her or, alternatively, may not yet be in the right space to achieve his/her goal. For some, it requires hitting rock bottom to be in that space. For others, they may not yet have been in the space that enabled them to release certain blocks. This is not about blame in any way, but rather an explanation of the reality why some people succeed and some don’t. The fact that a person has not

¹² Mental-health professionals that accept sexual orientation change models believe that the wounds may include homo-emotional wounds (such as defensive detachment from the father figure), hetero-emotional wounds (such as those from the mother figure), social or peer wounds, sibling wounds and other family dynamics, body-image wounds, temperament, sexual abuse, cultural wounds, gender double-binds, and other factors.

¹³ The Torah requires us to exert continuous effort toward growth and healing. Half measures are insufficient. According to the Rosh Yeshiva, preventing oneself from sinning by simply controlling one’s behavior is merely the first step of the process.

¹⁴ Examples include but are not limited to several mainstream approaches such as: psychoanalysis, psychodynamic models, integrative approaches, cognitive-behavioral treatment, affective therapy, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, interpersonal therapy, object relations therapy, family counseling and pastoral approaches.

yet achieved healing, even after major effort, is not proof that s/he cannot eventually achieve healing.¹⁵

Rav Kamenetsky rhetorically asked, “How can we tell the world it is okay for some people to give up trying? Doesn’t the halachah provide different people with different degrees and forms of challenges? How can there be any message other than **everyone** is **capable** of healing?” A perfect example demonstrating the Rosh Yeshiva’s point is a JONAH client who struggled through therapy for SSA for seven years before achieving success. What if he said after five years of major struggle that he is one of those individuals who can never change? Should he have simply given up? The Rosh Yeshiva concluded this line of questioning by stating, “When it comes to homosexuality, from a Torah perspective there is no other option other than working at overcoming.”

Accepting a False Identity as “Gay” Is Inconsistent with Torah

The Rosh Yeshiva was emphatic about the need to expose the false notion that a person should identify him/herself as homosexual and emphasized how this position is clearly against the Torah. Homosexuality is not a personal identity; there is no word in the Torah for homosexual. Homosexuals should not view themselves as mutants of some sort who have been destined by G-d for a life of exclusive homosexuality. A proper Torah perspective is to view the situation as a struggle to overcome just like any other struggle that a

¹⁵ An example came to mind that proved the Rosh Yeshiva’s point. I am familiar with a person who was 100 pounds overweight for most of his life. He struggled for 40 years with diets but was never able to successfully maintain any weight loss beyond a short period of time. Then, at 50, he finally lost the 100 pounds he so desperately sought to lose. Ten years later, he has still kept the weight off. This individual sincerely wanted to lose weight all his life. His not succeeding for 40 years does not mean he was incapable of success. It meant that he was not in the right emotional/mental space to fully deal with the emotional or mental blocks that were preventing his success.

person may deal with.¹⁶ Defining oneself as “gay or lesbian” would be the equivalent of adopting a personal identity as a proud promiscuous heterosexual Jew or accepting an identity that incorporates any other Torah violation. As the Rosh Yeshiva explained, it is the utmost disrespect to have “pride” in a desire for a Torah violation and to then consider it as a personal identity. It is a *chillul Hashem* (desecration or profanation of G-d’s name).

Obligation of the *Rabbanim*

Another essential observation made by the Rosh Yeshiva is the special obligation of the *Rabbanim* to help create an atmosphere where anyone, and in particular a teenager dealing with these issues, can speak freely within the community to a parent, rabbi, or mentor and, when he does so, is to be treated with love and compassion. Authority figures can then guide same-sex strugglers towards a path of transformation that enables them to overcome their inclinations. The key point to remember is that those who struggle are primarily innocent victims—unless they choose to accept a false identity and subsequently choose to mislead others.

Dangers and Risks of Homosexuality According to Independent U.S. Government Reports

The Rosh Yeshiva expressed concern about health issues that affect those engaging in a homosexual lifestyle. He recognized that homosexual activists are trying to promote the notion that identifying as a homosexual is no different than being heterosexual when it comes to love, marriage, and relationships—a position he believes is not true. The Rosh Yeshiva thus asked that we provide research in this article about some of the unhealthy consequences of living a homosexual lifestyle.

Dr. Kevin Fenton, MD, a director of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), after referring to a series of statistics released in 2010 by the CDC for men who have sex with other men, noted that HIV and AIDS remains “a crisis that is far from over in this

¹⁶ The Talmudic example of Elisha ben Abuyah, cited in footnote 5, illustrates the dangers of internalizing or accepting a false identity.

community” and “exact a devastating toll on men who have sex with men.”¹⁷

After pointing out that those men who engage in sex with men (MSM) account for a minute percentage of the U.S. male population aged 13 and older, Dr. Fenton reported how this small group is affected by the following catastrophic numbers:

- (1) One in five homosexual or bisexual men is infected with HIV.
- (2) Men who have sex with men (MSM) are 44 times more likely to get infected with HIV.
- (3) MSM account for more than half of all new HIV infections in the U.S. each year even though they constitute less than 2% of the population.
- (4) Nearly half of HIV-infected men were unaware of their HIV status.
- (5) 532,000 gay men are currently infected with HIV in the U.S. About 300,000 gay-identified men have died from AIDS within the U.S.¹⁸

However, the CDC report points out that beyond the consequences of HIV and AIDS, several other catastrophic risk factors are present for gay-identified and/or bisexual men. This population has higher percentages of risk when focusing on other diseases. They include:

- (1) In 2006, 64% of the reported primary and secondary syphilis cases were among men who have sex with men (MSM).¹⁹
- (2) Approximately 15%–25% of all new hepatitis B virus (HBV) infections in the United States are among MSM.²⁰

¹⁷ <http://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/Newsroom/ngmHAAD2010Press_Release.html>.

¹⁸ <<http://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom/docs/FastFacts-MSM-FINAL508COMP.pdf>>.

¹⁹ <<http://www.cdc.gov/std/Syphilis/syphilis-msm-fact-sheet.pdf>>.

²⁰ <<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/Populations/msm.htm>>.

- (3) Men who have sex with men are 17 times more likely to develop anal cancer than heterosexual men. Men who are HIV-positive are even more likely than those who are uninfected to develop anal cancer.²¹

Given the factual dangers of living a homosexual or bisexual lifestyle, the Rosh Yeshiva expressed several concerns. “How can we encourage people to accept such a devastating way of living for themselves? How is such a consideration considered caring and loving when the medical community evidences how physically destructive such behavior is to their health? Should the United States be legalizing and promoting a lifestyle that is a direct threat to one’s health and life? Can anyone seriously believe that reparative therapy or gender-affirming processes are more dangerous than a lifestyle that infects one out of five of its members with a deadly disease?”

Understanding the Threat of the Homosexual Movement to Observant Jews: How Long Before Rabbis are Targeted?

The Rosh Yeshiva also spoke about the political climate in America and our need to recognize that many current societal practices adversely affect our religious freedoms. He specifically mentioned the push to legalize homosexual marriage and the military’s recent changes to the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, and the effect such policies have on our ability to live our lives consistent with what the Torah expects of us. His concerns are partially premised on what he perceives as the elevation of homosexuality into a legally recognized social institution, one that violates the clear commandment of *Vayikra* 18:22. While Rav Kamenetsky indicated there is nothing new about this phenomenon, citing, for example, the sexual excesses among the Canaanite population that had become sanctioned by custom or statute, Torah Jews have an **obligation** not to elevate immorality as the law of the land. Our obligation is to incorporate the Holiness Code (*Vayikra* 19:1) into our everyday civic and communal life. When we do so, argues Rav Kamenetsky, concerned in-

²¹ <<http://www.cdc.gov/msmhealth/STD.htm>>.

dividuals can positively affect the direction of society and make a difference in our world.

We discussed several current examples where religious individuals or organizations were punished for upholding their religious beliefs against the current secular societal views. One example involved how homosexual activists successfully applied “non-discrimination” or “hate” laws to a Christian family-owned photography business. In a complaint brought before New Mexico’s Human Rights Commission, the photographer’s privately owned company was ordered to pay close to \$7,000 for declining a demand to take pictures at a same-sex “commitment ceremony” in Taos, N.M., despite the fact that neither marriage nor civil unions are legal for members of the same sex within New Mexico. In a New Jersey case, two lesbian couples succeeded in having a property tax exemption removed from the Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association after they refused to permit their facilities (exempted on religious grounds) to be used for a same-sex commitment ceremony even though such a ceremony directly violated their religious principles. Rhetorically, the Rosh Yeshiva wondered whether a *frum* photographer or a kosher catering hall’s action would be considered equally liable.²²

The Rosh Yeshiva then asked, how long will it be before rabbis are persecuted for presenting Torah-based views? I responded by citing an incident in 2010, when Rabbi Mendel Kaplan, the spiritual leader of Chabad’s Flamingo synagogue in Thornhill, Ontario and the Jewish chaplain for the York Regional Police, north of Toronto, had a complaint filed against him by a homosexual advocacy group (Kulanu Toronto) asking the police to remove Rabbi Kaplan

²² Recognizing that these examples are simply the tip of a huge number of similar incidents and to show how far societal norms have gone, many other cases can be cited. In Canada, Sportsnet TV host Damian Goddard was fired the day after he stated his opposition to “gay marriage” in a Tweet and expressed his view that traditional marriage was the only true marriage. And, after Olympic gold-medalist gymnast Peter Vidmar signed on as the United States’ “chief of mission” for the 2012 London Olympics in April, he was forced to step down under pressure after news reports showed he had donated \$2,000 to help pass California’s Proposition 8, a ballot initiative that prohibited same-sex marriages in California.

from his position for allegedly making “homophobic” remarks. In February 2011, after a five-month investigation, the police department allowed Rabbi Kaplan to remain in his position and determined the statements made were a “technically correct interpretation of Scripture through his role as rabbi” and “were not viewed as hateful.” The case shows, however, how far a homosexual activist group will go to achieve its goals.

As this topic progressed, the Rosh Yeshiva expressed surprise and dismay when I cited a measure to ban male circumcision (*bris milah*) in San Francisco that is slated to appear on this November’s ballot. If passed, the measure would make it a misdemeanor to circumcise a boy before he is 18 years old. The maximum penalty would be a year in jail and a \$1,000 fine. No religious exemptions are permitted.

Obligation of the Righteous to Act Affirmatively:

“It is incumbent upon all Jews, particularly the righteous, to have their voices heard on behalf of Torah values.” (Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetsky)

According to the Rosh Yeshiva, we need to distinguish between individuals struggling with their identity, and the ever-expanding movement to use the power of government, media, and secular schools to impose a new order of morality in America. This new order treats traditional views of gender, sexuality, and marriage as hateful and discredited bigotry; it also refuses to recognize G-d’s majesty. We discussed, for example, how non-Torah-observant secular Jews may ignore the sovereignty of Hashem by quoting the *Aleinu* prayer out of context. Secularists use certain words of the prayer as support for the claim that G-d seeks *tikkun ha’olam* (world repair—often referring to social policy legislation that provides extra protection to those potentially at a disadvantage). However, such individuals often neglect to mention the end of the sentence in the *Aleinu*: *b’malchut Shadai* (under the regency of the Almighty), thereby denying G-d’s sovereignty and His commandments.

The Rosh Yeshiva expressed distress over the current onslaught of immorality that is sweeping the world. An aggressive movement exists today to provide those practicing immoral behaviors with

rights and privileges (such as same-sex marriage and educational programs in public school systems) that not only inhibit but actually trump the religious freedoms and rights and privileges enjoyed by the overwhelming majority of society. When a society recognizes and accepts an activity as legal, it is fair to conclude that if legalized, the activity is condoned or at least tolerated on some level of society. Society effectively has made a declaration: it is ready to accept anyone's practice of it. Conversely, the Rosh Yeshiva believes "it is incumbent upon all Jews, particularly the righteous, to have their voices heard on behalf of Torah values," voices that need to be rooted in Torah values. The righteous have an obligation to speak up when they know that people are practicing Torah-forbidden relations, particularly if those who participate in the transgression believe they are doing nothing wrong (as often exists in this situation). After all, current societal messages teach those who engage in homosexual behavior that their actions fall within the confines of socially acceptable behavior. We need to understand that G-d holds human societies accountable for illicit behavior even when such behavior is sanctioned by the law of the land, and even if only a handful of people engage in such practices. There is a thought in *Yechezkel* 9:4 which applies: "The righteous had the opportunity to protest and they didn't protest." The Talmud (*Shabbos* 55a) expands upon this principle when it teaches that one of the commandments of the Torah is to not remain silent when you see a person engaging in forbidden conduct.²³

²³ It is written: "G-d said to the angel: 'Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and mark the letter "tav" on the foreheads of the people who sigh and moan over all the abominations that are done in its midst.'" (*Yechezkel* 9:4). G-d said to the angel Gabriel: "Go and mark a 'tav' of ink on the foreheads of the righteous, so that the angels of destruction should have no power over them; and on the foreheads of the wicked a 'tav' of blood, so that the angels of destruction should have power over them." Said the Attribute of Justice before G-d, "Master of the Universe, what is the difference between these and these?" G-d replied, "These are completely righteous and these are completely wicked." Justice then argued, "But the righteous had the opportunity to protest and they didn't protest!" G-d replied, "It is revealed and known to Me that if they had protested, the sinners would not have accepted it from them." Justice then argued, "If it

Rav Kamenetsky opines that the only way to alter society is to make one’s voice heard. If enough good people protest an activity, eventually it impacts society. Whether it occurs because the media covers their protests or the protests become debated by our political representatives, in the final analysis, there is an obligation of the righteous to make their voices heard so that the world can be changed.

Obligation of Those Who Have Transformed

Rav Kamenetsky expressed concern that too many people “deny the existence of transformed individuals.” He provided an analogy: just as those who were sexually abused have begun to speak up in order to get our community focused on this issue, so too must those with SSA speak up within appropriate settings in order to influence our community. He also mentioned parenthetically that he worries about the existence of sexual abuse in our Yeshiva systems and is aware how such abuse often leads to homosexual identification.

An oft-posed question concerning those who have transformed is whether a person who has undergone transformation should be encouraged to marry someone of the opposite sex or whether s/he should be encouraged to remain celibate. In response, Rav Kamenetsky explained how we must first recognize that creating a marriage in an atmosphere of holiness and mutual fulfillment is ordained as a basic premise of Jewish life. So, too, is the principle of *p’ru ur’vu* (be fruitful and multiply.) To accomplish these goals, however, honesty and authenticity in the relationship is essential and the spouse needs to be informed before the wedding of the person’s previous struggles (in much the same way as any other major life issue needs to be discussed, whether it be a previous physical illness or mental or emotional conditions such as depression, anxiety, etc.). Several men or women whom we have helped (that is, individuals who experienced unwanted same-sex attractions and who

is revealed before You, is it revealed to them?” The Talmud concludes by quoting verses that demonstrate that not only was Justice victorious in its argument, but that the destruction began with the righteous, thus demonstrating the reversal of the good decree (*Shabbos* 55a).

were open with their intended spouse about their struggle) asked Rav Kamenetsky to bless their proposed marriage. Not only did the Rosh Yeshiva provide such a blessing, but, when he met them, he counseled them on the importance of continuing open, honest, and authentic communication.

The fear of recidivism is a question that many opposed to the healing process raise. What if a person backslides, particularly after marriage? After all, temporary relapses are not uncommon during any kind of a recovery process. Even after recovery, when exposed to certain stress factors, it is possible that the struggler may risk falling back into old, familiar behavioral patterns—including homosexual fantasies or conduct. To avoid this kind of situation, I suggested to the Rosh Yeshiva that continued education and therapy can help the struggler identify his/her unsatisfied core needs and fulfill them in healthy, non-sexual ways. The Rabbi responded that knowing one's own vulnerability is another obligation of the struggler after marriage and that an added benefit of open, honest and authentic communication within the marriage is the ability of the struggler to seek the support and encouragement of his/her spouse.²⁴ In turn, I said that the struggler also needs to develop strategies to avoid relapse by working with his/her counselor to take responsibility for his/her actions, identify high-risk situations, and to develop techniques of self-management and independent external controls.

²⁴ It should be noted that many men and women approach us for assistance **after** marrying. They had never informed their spouses out of fear that disclosing their issues of sexual orientation would have disrupted their marriage plans. They also lacked any knowledge of the availability of a healing option prior to their marriage (taking advantage of which would have been the advisable course of action). During their marriage, the issues reemerged and the involved spouse sought a way to overcome in order to save the marriage. Consistent with the Rosh Yeshiva's counsel about openness and honesty, we advise such individuals to inform the spouse about their issues. In the vast majority of such cases, after counseling (often with both parties to the marriage), the marriages are strengthened and the spouse with the issue learns how to overcome his/her unwanted SSA.

Working Cooperatively with Other Religions

In response to the question of whether we, as Jews, should be working together with Christians or members of other faiths, the Rosh Yeshiva said, “It is halachically correct to work together with them as long as they follow Torah principles. In fact, it is productive to work with them in order to influence society.” He reminded me how Gentiles are obligated to fulfill the Seven Noahide Commandments, which includes the obligation to maintain sexual purity.²⁵

Conclusion: Need for the Torah Community to Respond to Misinformation

After reviewing all of the above with Rav Kamenetsky, we concluded the interview by asking the Rosh Yeshiva what he thought of the “Statement of Principles” issued last summer by a group of Modern Orthodox Rabbis.²⁶ He expressed extreme dismay about that statement and in particular its emphasis on dismissing both the effectiveness of therapeutic approaches to healing and the alleged inability of individuals to change sexual orientation in a manner demanded by the Torah. He restated the idea that Torah-observant Jews need to make their voices heard by appropriately setting forth Torah values and by providing a better understanding about the capacity of individuals to change sexual orientation. ❧

²⁵ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Melachim u’Milchamoseihem* 9:7–11 sets forth the forbidden sexual immoralities of the Seven Noahide Laws. In 9:7, Rambam states, “There are six types of sexual acts forbidden to a ben Noach: Intercourse with one’s mother, with one’s father’s wife [i.e., a stepmother], with one’s sister who has the same mother, with another male, with an animal...”

²⁶ See <<http://statementofprinciplesnya.blogspot.com/>>. See also Dr. Joseph Berger’s article elsewhere in this journal.