

Sometimes the Torah is wrong.

When I was in seminary we were taught never to offer a negative proof-text. That is, never use the Torah in a way that says something bad. It was kind of a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy of *midrash*. If you see something in the Torah that violates your sense of right and wrong, just kind of skip it, ignore it, or read it in a way that makes you feel less uncomfortable about what you know it’s really saying. Because the Torah can never be wrong.

And maybe that’s true. Maybe the Torah is deeper than it seems. Maybe the Torah is the wellspring of all truth. Maybe I’m just reading it incorrectly. Maybe. But there are times when the words of Torah are just so much at odds with what I believe—beliefs, I might add, that are based on the Torah—that I feel as if I have no choice but to distance myself from the text, even contradict it. This is particularly true when it comes to the Torah’s attitudes about homosexuality.

No matter how you read it, the Torah considers homosexuality abhorrent. You can parse the text—*Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman, it is an abomination* (Lev. 18:22)—any way you want, but the *p’shat* or simple meaning of the text is what Torah wants us to know. And I think it’s wrong.

I read the Torah critically. That is, I reject the traditional implication that all its words are directly from God. This is not to say that the text is not sacred. On the contrary, I believe that Torah is our conduit to God, it is the literary by-product of a people’s experience of the Divine. But it is a literary product nonetheless. The words were written down by human beings, and whether the authors actually heard those words with their ears or their hearts, whether they encountered the Holy directly or intuited “what the Lord requireth” as a consequence of their experiences, they were still the ones who wrote down the words of Torah. And there can be little question that their *weltanschauung* was profoundly influenced by the host culture of the Canaanites, which is to say, much of what is in the Torah is a commentary on the world of its authors.

The social mores of ancient Canaan were, if we are to take the Torah’s historiography at face value, loose. The tales about *Sodom* and *Gomorrah* tell us all we need to know. Canaan made Las Vegas look like Puritanical New England. Into this context comes the Torah with its highly defined sense of boundaries. And most of the stuff Torah got right. This is clear. It remains for virtually all of Western civilization the standard of ethics and morality. But to my mind the authors of Torah got homosexuality wrong, and we’ve been paying the price ever since. Guilt. Closets. Shame.

We are of a generation that seeks to right this wrong. To remove the societal barriers and taboos is not merely a possibility for us; it is, I believe, a moral imperative. *Mitzvah*. More and more throughout our country states are examining their marriage laws, seeking to redefine what constitutes marriage, and more important seeking to allow all consenting adult partnerships to merit the same civil rights. How can we not? In a nation that is founded on the principle that all are created equal, in a society that is rooted in a tradition that asserts as its first axiom that we are all created in the Divine image and that all that God has created is good—our continued discrimination against our neighbors is shameful and repugnant.

On Tuesday night, November 10, the Town Council of Montclair will gather to vote on a resolution in support of marriage equality. To be sure, the question of “marriage equality” is a matter of civil rights. The words presented before the Council are not of faith or tradition, but rather decency. I will support it—yet not because I believe it is a question of civil rights, but because it is a matter of love.

Not too long ago a friend taught me that most of our choices are rooted in either fear or love. The things we do, the values we espouse, have their foundations in either our fears of or our compassion for others. Maybe it’s time we stop acting out of fear and behave in ways that reflect love. It is a sad but telling assessment of our society that our fears of sexual boundaries can dominate our instinct to love. Even more tragic, it is this failure to act from love that stands in such stark contrast to our nation’s primal values of justice and liberty—values that derive from Torah.

The truth be told, most of the time Torah gets it right. Hopefully we will too.