

“Why Do All Rabbis Hate Me: How the Orthodox community can cultivate compassion and sensitivity toward LGBTQ Jews” by Chaim Nissel, *Tablet*, June 28, 2023. **“Yeshiva University’s Dean Chaim Nissel has not acted like a queer ally and is in no position to teach LGBTQ sensitivity”**, *Orthodox Mental Health*, July 11, 2023

Nissel, an Orthodox Jewish psychologist, discusses a 19-year-old gay client’s having never been so dejected, while asking, “Why do all rabbis hate me and people like me?”

This young man watches rabbis online. One rabbi “used ‘the gays’ as an example for something unrelated to the actual content of his lesson, and painted all ‘gays’ as being agenda-driven in trying to change Halacha, Jewish law. His client tearfully shared how the crowd laughed as a rabbi demonstrated an exaggerated effeminate hand motion as he referred to the gays. My client was devastated, and his pain was palpable. His distress and despair led him to seriously contemplate walking out of his yeshiva and his full-time Torah study, for good.” Empathizing with his client, Nissel told him that he’d talk to that rabbi.

That rabbi didn’t recall his slip, so Nissel showed him the video. “His face fell and he felt terrible. He insisted he did not intend to hurt anyone and had not considered how painful his words and actions were [and] offered to remove the shiur from the web.”

Nissel says: “This rabbi never considered that some of his talmidim, both in-person and online, either identify as gay, are struggling with their sexual identity, or have close friends who do. Although it was not premeditated, the rabbi was guilty of hostile and painful words. Even after the apology, the vision of the rabbi ridiculing him was indelibly engraved in his heart and the hurt remains.”

Victims need to know that what’s felt as “indelibly engraved”, is not a valid verdict. It’s a nasty accuser’s failure to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18) Nissel notes: “One of today’s greatest challenges for the Orthodox community is how to simultaneously balance the primacy of Halacha and sensitivity to community members who identify as LGBTQ. In addition to those who thoughtlessly make hurtful comments, there are those in the Orthodox community who feel righteous in publicly denouncing the LGBTQ community.” Nissel warns: “Rabbinic law frequently expands a terse biblical law to include areas not explicitly mentioned in the Torah.”

Nissel explains: “The rabbis officiating marriages have learned not to ask if a couple had already been intimate while dating, even though the truth impacts the accuracy of the ketubah, or marriage contract. Just as what happens behind closed doors in a heterosexual relationship is private, so, too, all such intimate matters should remain private. As such, LGBTQ individuals who want to be part of the Orthodox community and are trying to find their place in the community should be welcomed. Being gay or identifying as LGBTQ is not a sin. People’s sexual behavior is a private matter and should remain so.”

He adds: “On the other hand, when there are attempts to change the Torah or to say particular Torah commandments no longer apply, the Orthodox community rightfully protests. Halacha remains the bedrock of our system of behavior, and the Torah, which is the word of God, cannot be modified or amended to match today’s ethos. While it is understandably distressing and painful for those who advocate changing Torah, intellectually

honest people should agree that the Torah-observant community cannot accept rhetoric that advocates explaining the Torah contrary to the accepted rabbinic interpretations.”

He advises: “The Orthodox community would benefit from increased awareness and appreciation of how words can, even when spoken unintentionally, cause great pain. We want to create a climate in which the LGBTQ men and women of our communities will want to remain part of our communities. ... We want them to feel loved and welcomed, the same way we would hope to be treated if we found ourselves in an uncomfortable setting. Our community’s emphasis on family structure is a challenge that will need to be negotiated by anyone who finds themselves outside the normative family structure and especially by LGBTQ individuals. Considering our family-centric communities, we need to be extra considerate of, and welcoming to, others and make great efforts to not hurt anyone.”

He notes: “Speech is a very powerful tool that can be used to advance immeasurable good and can also cause colossal harm. Many LGBTQ individuals already feel attacked and marginalized in the Orthodox community and they experience homophobic comments as someone twisting the knife already plunged into their side. The Torah demands, ‘Walk in the ways of Hashem’ [The Name, i.e., God] (Deut 28:9) Just as He is kind, so should we be kind. Just as He is compassionate so should we be compassionate.”

Jesus reiterated: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second law is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Lev 19:18) There is no commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:30f)

Yeshiva alumni in “Orthodox Queer Jews at NY Pride” took offense, attacking *Tablet* and Nissel: “We wish to voice our frustration, disappointment and concern with your decision to platform Dean Chaim Nissel as an example of Orthodox queer allyship. Queer allyship requires taking accountability for one’s own actions, centering queer voices, building trust with LGBTQ stakeholders, and speaking out when it is most difficult.” They “appreciate Nissel’s message of good intent and cast no aspersions against his character”, while they fault his “actions on issues relating to LGBTQ folks over the last 25 years”. Yet, by their identity data, most were toddlers back then.

