

Hineni & MonJSS – A Pluralist Panel on Homosexuality & Judaism

Monash University – Caulfield Campus

June 3 2010

I'd like to dedicate my talk this evening to the memories of Danny, Simon, Bobby and the many other beautiful young people who are unable to be here because they were rejected by their families and community.

Good evening. I'm Michael Barnett. I've been the co-ordinator of Aleph Melbourne now for about 13 years. Aleph Melbourne started out in January '95 as a social and support group for gay and bisexual men. In 2007 the group opened its doors to women, and now welcomes gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Jews.

I was born in Melbourne in March 1969. I'm 41 years old now. My parents are immigrants from English speaking countries and their ancestors are traced back to the Yiddish-speaking shtetls in Poland, Lithuania and Russia. I was brought up in what could be called a traditional Ashkenazi Jewish household.

I have been invited to talk on this panel about homosexuality. I will be speaking from my personal perspective. Given the time constraints tonight I will barely be able to scratch the surface of this complex topic so I apologise if I leave things out or don't go into sufficient detail. Perhaps Hineni and MonJSS will schedule another session in the near future.

Homosexuality means different things to different people. For some, it is an abstract notion that they feel doesn't impact their lives; something that happens to other people. These people think they don't know homosexuals, they think they don't see homosexuals, they may even just not think about it at all. Alas there are likely to be homosexual people in their immediate or extended family, amongst their friends, in their community and at their place of work, yet they remain oblivious to it.

For other people, homosexuality is something that affects them for every waking moment of their lives. It is something that dominates their thoughts, their feelings, their actions and just about everything they do. Some of these people, people like me, have acknowledged this aspect of their personality and have learnt to understand and accept it as being a normal part of the diversity of difference in all of us. Other people are less fortunate. They may not understand the feelings, or are scared of them, may think it's bad or wrong to have them, may repress them, or simply deny these feelings exist within them.

If you are homosexual, or same-sex attracted, there is no escaping from it. Similarly, if you are heterosexual, there is no escaping from that either. Our sexuality is hard-wired in our brains. There is no way we can be reprogrammed

to be something we aren't. We can't be fixed, because we're not broken. We are all this way because that's the way we developed in our mother's body.

Some people believe there are ways to convert homosexual men and women to be heterosexual. These programmes are misleading and extremely dangerous to the individual. Every respectable medical and psychological body in the world denounces such practices because they are harmful and ineffective.

When I was a boy, about ten years old, I started finding myself attracted to other boys. There was an awakening within me that changed the way I looked at people. Actually it wasn't everyone. It wasn't girls. It was just boys. I didn't feel anything toward girls the way I did toward boys. I think that must have been the start of me going through puberty.

As I've grown up, those feelings have too, and I find I'm attracted to men, but still not women. The type of attraction I'm talking about is complex. It's an emotional and physical attraction. It's on many levels. Sure, I do have female friends and they're important to me, but the strong relationships I have - and have had with men - are different.

IN talking about homosexuality tonight, some may only consider it from a superficial, physical, sexual level. The sex drive is a primitive instinct in everyone and it needs to be satisfied, one way or another. It is the mechanism that helps us reproduce. Orthodox Jewish understanding is preoccupied with this physical sexual desire of homosexual men and how it is expressed. There is the belief that two men who engage in consensual sex will only do so through anal intercourse, something I understand that is forbidden under Jewish law.

Generally this is the extent of the discussion and goes no further. I should explain to people who have this understanding that homosexual men are capable of satisfying their sexual desires in a variety of other ways as well, and often anal intercourse is avoided.

Since the beginning of recorded history, there is documented evidence of heterosexual anal intercourse, as one form of sexual expression between consenting adults. This is but one of many ways that heterosexual adults engage in sex.

My point is, the obsession by orthodoxy that gay men only engage in a prohibited form of sexual activity is misleading and unfounded. It is also mischievous and unhelpful.

As I have already mentioned, as a homosexual man, I have other feelings and desires. I have the need for companionship, for affection, for love and for a partner. These desires are universal human desires. Everyone has them, to one degree or another. My sexual orientation does not mean they are diminished in any way.

Through finding a partner, someone who is a friend and a person whom I trust and want to be with, I can satisfy these desires and achieve happiness and fulfilment in my life. Without a compatible partner I would be lonely, unhappy and unsatisfied. I say compatible, because if the only acceptable situation for me was to find a female partner that was a friend and someone whom I loved, I

would not be fully satisfied, because the part of me that craved physical intimacy with a man would remain unfulfilled.

Requiring a person to be in a relationship with someone they don't want to be in is harmful and destructive. It is also unfair to the other person. Similarly requiring a person to remain single and not have that special person they need in their life is also harmful and destructive.

Human sexuality and in particular homosexuality is probably one of the most divisive issues on the planet today. All major religions contain elements that dictate to one degree or another how we as humans should conduct our sex lives. They decree which types of sexual activities are acceptable and which are not.

These religious doctrines were codified in a time when society had an inferior understanding of human sexual behaviour. In 2010, our society understands that same-sex attraction is a natural and normal part of the human sexual experience. Our society also understands that deprivation of this behaviour in individuals has dire consequences.

Let me make a few comparisons. We understand that smoking tobacco increases one's chances of getting lung cancer. We understand that excessive alcohol consumption increases one's chances of liver damage. We understand that exposure to asbestos is likely to result in mesothelioma or asbestosis. We understand that abusing children, whether physical, sexual or psychological, can have long-term detrimental effects on the child's development and mental health.

A lot of research has gone into understanding cause and effect on much of what we do in our lives today. We place great importance on this research and we do our best to live the healthiest, safest lives possible, to attain the best outcomes for our species.

Studies performed by La Trobe University's Australian Research Centre into Sex, Health and Society in 2009 revealed that same-sex attracted people are up to 14 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. This was found to be especially prevalent in religious communities intolerant of homosexuality.

This research found that same-sex attracted youth are more likely to have depression, anxiety, experience self-harm and attempt suicide in environments where same-sex attraction was considered unacceptable.

What I am saying here is that religions that denounce homosexuality and the expression of homosexuality are actively contributing to the alarming rates of mental health issues, self-harm and suicide in our young people. There is no acceptable level of intolerance. We need to understand that the only way to overcome these startling statistics is to accept that the religious teachings on homosexuality are a relic from a time before society understood human sexuality as we do now and that they are fundamentally flawed.

If we are concerned about the welfare of our children... of our families... of our community, we must learn to accept same-sex attraction as normal, natural and healthy. Stifling this aspect of a person is like cutting part of them off.

We no longer repress left-handedness in people, yet large sections of the Jewish community actively repress homosexuality. Left-handedness and homosexuality both occur at roughly the same rate in our society – about 7-10%, they are both linked to hormonal changes in a person's development prior to birth, there is no strong evidence of genetic factors causing either and neither can be safely repressed.

Australian society no longer considers homosexuality to be unnatural. Almost all sections of our society are coming to the realisation that homosexuality is just another part of the diversity of human expression and it is adapting to accommodate this understanding. Yet the only place where intolerance of homosexuality is being perpetuated is in the realm of fundamentalist religion. The longer this situation remains the status quo, the more it's adherents will be seen to be practising primitive harmful rituals and beliefs.

If as a community we really care for our people, we must do the best we can to minimise harm and risk. The only way to do this is by showing unconditional love, inclusion and acceptance.

Thank you.