



Halakhic Questions from the LGBTQ+ Community

By Rabbi Jeff Fox, Yeshivat Maharat Rosh HaYeshiva

Dear Rabbi,

I am finally able to leave my parents' house, and I am moving in with the woman I have loved for two years. We are both *shomer shabbos* and *kashrus*. My friend told me that since we are living like *toeva* we should just eat *treif*. I don't think I could ever break *shabbos*, but I am not sure what we should do. I know that we are not supposed to live together, but we still want to be *frum*. Can you guide us? I know this sounds weird, but should I go to the *mikvah*?

For the past many years, I have received questions from frum Jews who happen to be gay. They are trying to navigate a minefield of Jewish Law and Jewish communal expectations. Some seek particular *halakhic* guidance and some simply need a compassionate ear. Too often, when these questions are raised with sincerity, humility and openness, they are received with outright rejection and even hatred.

In these pages, I share a few questions that I have received from individual women that demand deeper communal consideration. While I do not provide my responses here, these letters demonstrate the struggles and pain these women face every day. Even without clear answers, we must show compassion in considering these questions, a quality essential to *halakhic* decision making. I have removed all names and, in some instances, changed small details in order to maintain anonymity.

Dear Rabbi,

I have been married for twenty-five years and our youngest is about to finish *beis yaakov*, *bs"d*. I have been waiting for this moment to tell my husband that I am gay. I know that he will want to wait to leave me until she has a *shidduch*, but I don't know if I can live like this anymore. I would rather not put some of these details in writing, but I have a female partner that I am in love with... What do you recommend?

It is sometimes difficult to understand just how trapped gay individuals feel in unfulfilling heterosexual relationships. These individuals fear harming their children's marriage prospects,



which can be paralyzing in ways that those outside the community don't fully appreciate. How might you advise this woman, likely in her early forties, as she plans her next steps? What considerations must be balanced?

Interestingly, people seem to find my contact information when the time is appropriate. This young woman shares a story that is all too common:

Dear Rabbi,

I just got married three weeks ago. During my *kallah* classes I told the *rebbetzin* that I thought I was gay. She told me that many young women have doubts before they get married and that I would learn to love my husband. The wedding night was terrible, and now I know that I am gay. Someone told me to reach out to you even though we are not in the same kind of *frum* community.

The continuation of this note described the physical and emotional pain of this young woman's wedding night. She was eventually told by her husband's rebbe that she must be doing something wrong. Imagine being told by an authority figure in your community that you do not understand your own body or your own soul. What damage does this cause a fellow Jew, and how can her feelings be acknowledged?

In this brief piece, I only share emails from women, but the men in these relationships are also not physically or emotionally satisfied. The pressure on a woman to marry a man, even when she knows or suspects she is gay, can lead to disastrous realities for both the men and women. Here is a young woman writing even before she is married:

Dear Rabbi,

I just told my mom that I don't want to go on any more dates because I think that I am not attracted to boys. She told me that I must be confused. I have a few friends who got married and they seem to be happy, but one has told me that she has a female friend who helps her have orgasms. Do you think I should still date boys?

One of the realities of living in the closet is that people engage in risky behavior, including promiscuous sex, drugs or self-harm. The experience of living a lie every day leads to anxiety,



depression and, God forbid, suicidality. This girl has nowhere to turn; no one from her own community will even listen to her question.

While I wish that her parents could be more supportive, I understand that we all operate in a universe with a very specific imagined path for our children. If only we could imagine another narrative for our children. If only an alternative *halakhic* discourse could provide hope for these young women.

A common thread through all these painful questions is that the women are turning to me, an Orthodox rabbi, because they are invested in building a Jewish home, grounded in religious life. These women are not interested in leaving the community or the demands of halakha. In fact, the opposite is often the case. They simply want to do their best to build a Jewish home that will be filled with the light of Shabbat and, if blessed by *Hashem*, the joy of children.

The excerpts above are a fraction of what I have received from women around the world. It is certainly the case that other rabbis also receive these kinds of questions, some of whom respond with dismissal or condemnation. How might the rabbinic community create a new discourse built on the awareness of these kinds of questions that is grounded in *halakha* and *mesora*?

Over the course of the next several months, Yeshivat Maharat will engage in a deep analysis of the question of same-sex attraction between two women within the parameters of *halakha*. As a rabbinical school that ordains women, we want to address the questions that are most relevant for our core mission. I hope to show that these questioners are not trying to step out of the *halakhic* system but are actually trying to find ways in. I am confident that we will be able to articulate a path forward that expresses both a fealty to *halakha* and an understanding of the needs of gay Jews.