

radicalize their tactics, intensifying polarization and cementing their “troublemaker” status in the eyes of the mainstream.

Version Three: Let the Silent Speak


Finally, the call for civil discourse is sometimes read as a request for inside groups to listen to those who have felt ignored, excluded, or oppressed. Marginalized or dissenting voices want a place at the community table, and conveners sometimes want to absorb them into the mainstream as a moderating force.

While the intention to be inclusive and to address grievances is important, this mode of civility can also exacerbate the very polarization it’s trying to undo. For example, inside groups may anticipate that the effort will amount to diatribes of political correctness in which they will be lectured about how horrible they are. They may see outside groups as simply venting anger, with no recognition for the positive work of the establishment or viable solutions to the problems at hand. Marginalized groups, meanwhile, resist co-optation when the goal of the mainstream is to neutralize challenges to the status quo. Constructive communication may fail to get off the ground or be quickly overcome by resentment and defensiveness from mainstream and marginalized groups alike.

What We Learn from Potential Pitfalls

When any of these strategies is the primary goal

of civility efforts, destructive consequences are almost certain to follow. When that happens, participants often leave more disillusioned and cynical than before, vowing not to fall for such nonsense again and making conflict only more intractable. The great challenge is to address the legitimate desires behind calls for civility — turning down the volume in order to speak constructively, stopping those bent on derailing the conversation, and creating an authentically inclusive conversation — without falling prey to the traps.

Getting there requires embracing a different interpretation of civility: a way of treating our conflicts — especially our hardest, most enduring ones — as signposts that there is something essential for us to learn together as a community, something that needs our greatest collective wisdom if we are to learn its lessons. Seen this way, civility transforms us from adversaries to partners in conflict, involved in a generative, collaborative pursuit of the best course of action. This leads us to discipline our speech voluntarily so that it will be heard, and to listen as resiliently as possible to anyone willing to grapple alongside us — especially neglected voices that may contain uncommon but essential insight. Only this version of civility can be a true catalyst for transforming polarization, replacing it with a rigorous, vibrant conversation that advances sustainable solutions and strengthens communities rather than destroys them. 

‘Abomination’ is Hate Speech

JAY MICHAELSON

Most American Jews, according to polls and the official positions of the major religious movements, do not believe that there is anything wrong with homosexuality. Outside the Orthodox community, they understand that sexuality is a trait, not a “lifestyle” or a pathology, and that LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) people lead lives as complex, rich, and varied as everyone else. Many people inside the Orthodox world feel the same way, and wrestle with how best to understand their biblical and halakhic traditions.

Language, though, continues to trip us up. Even people who have put aside strict readings of the Bible believe that the Bible condemns homosexuality and labels it, in Leviticus 18:22, an

“abomination.” Set aside the fact that this is a wild anachronism, since both the word and concept of homosexuality are of recent coinage. The continued use of the term “abomination” is part of the problem. Well-meaning folks who use the term innocently should stop doing so and regard it as hate speech.

“Abomination” is the translation of the Hebrew word “*toevah*” used in the King James version of the Bible. It is neither a Jewish word nor an accurate translation. Really, no one even knows what it means. As I’ve crisscrossed the country talking about my book *God vs. Gay? The Religious Case for Equality*, I’ve asked audiences about the term. The responses usually have something to do with unnaturalness and

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awfulness: An abomination is something that should not exist on the face of the earth.

“*Toevah*,” in contrast, basically means “taboo.” The word occurs 103 times in the Bible, and almost always has the connotation of a non-Israelite cultic practice: idolatry, or *avodah zara* (foreign worship). Other things that are *toevah* include fortunetelling (Deut. 18:10), statues (Deuteronomy 7:25), and child sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3, 2 Chronicles 28:3). The book of Ezekiel uses the term 39 times, almost always in connection with idolatry. There are isolated exceptions — most importantly, the book of Proverbs — but the overwhelming preponderance of the uses of the term connect the forbidden act with idolatry, and with the proper boundaries between Israelites and others. This meaning makes sense in context, since Leviticus 18:21 has to do with child sacrifice, and since Deuteronomy tells us that sex acts between men was part of Canaanite ritual practice. What is forbidden here is one sex act connected to idolatry — nothing more.

Toevah is also culturally relative. For example, Genesis 43:32 states that having a meal with Israelites is *toevah* for Egyptians. Obviously, eating with Jews is not an “abomination,” but it is a taboo for the Egyptians. Similarly, Exodus 8:22 states that Israelite sacrifices are *toevah* for Egyptians. *Toevah* is not some universal flaw, but a culturally relative taboo.

This is still, of course, a serious category of transgression. *Avodah zara* is among the most severely prohibited of acts. But it is not the same as “abomination.” For example, Deuteronomy 14:9 uses the term to refer to foods forbidden by the laws of kashrut. As the humorous website godhatesshrimp.com points out, participating in male homosexual intimacy is the same type of offense as eating a shrimp cocktail. So why don’t we see the religious right picketing the Red Lobster?

In part, I think, it’s because of language. Of course, issues of sexuality and religion have very deep roots, but the way in which we carelessly refer to them matters. “Abomination” is a word that tells gay people, particularly gay children, that they should not exist on the face of the earth. And even among Jews who have a liberal mindset, it suggests that one must choose between the Bible and sexual expression, between God and homosexuality. This false choice causes immense anguish. Religion is the leading factor in instances of parents disowning their LGBT children (LGBT youth homelessness is on the rise nationwide), and, in less severe cases, in people feeling torn between their religious tradition and their emotional health.

The only reason to use the term “abomination” is to perpetuate this harm. It’s inaccurate, it’s hurtful, and it should be banished from polite conversation. 

A History of Hatred: A Lesson for Today

DAVID MAKOVSKY

In the years leading up to the destruction of the Second Temple, the Zealots were known for their efforts in combating the Romans. However, there was one particular Jewish group that focused on killing Jews. As the historian Josephus describes in his classic, *The Jewish War*, members of this group would mingle with crowds in broad daylight, take out a concealed short dagger, stab their victims, then feign the same indignation as the shocked people around them and melt away into the throng. It was for this reason that Josephus referred to them by the Latin plural, “Sicarii,” or “the dagger (*sicae*) men.”

The Sicarii strategy aimed to silence moderates who sought accommodation with Rome, and to provoke a wider rebellion by pinning the resulting mayhem in Jerusalem on the Romans.

Indeed, their actions seem to have set the tone for later attacks on moderates: When the Romans captured towns like Ashdod in 67 C.E., for example, many extremists arrived in the city to take action against moderates whom they suspected of being too accommodating toward Rome.

It is also possible that the Sicarii believed that by forcing a confrontation with Rome, they would also force the hand of the Almighty. The Talmud’s *Avot of Rabbi Natan* mentions that when Vespasian surrounded Jerusalem, “the Sicarii took the initiative and set fire to all the granaries.” The Sicarii believed that if Jerusalem suffered a food shortage during the extended siege with Rome, one of two things would happen: Either salvation would come from the Almighty, or confrontation with Rome would become inevitable.

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