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It Is To'evah
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Parshat Aharei Mot

V'et zachar lo tishkav mish'k'vei ishah to'evah hee; you shall not lie with a male as if lying with a woman; it is to'evah. (Leviticus 18:22)

This verse has been used through the centuries to prohibit sexual relations between two men. It is *to'evah*, we are told. But perhaps there is another way of understanding it.

First, let us enter a literalist mind-set. On an absolutely literal level – **You shall not lie with a male in the manner of lying with a woman** – the prohibition is virtually trivial. One does not; the typical, most comfortable (for most people) positions are different. But the Torah does not forbid that which is not done anyway; we cannot rest on such a trivializing interpretation of a Command, and we must therefore examine it more closely.

I submit that this verse may not be about sexual relations at all. Virtually all the clearly sexual prohibitions are couched in terms of **lo t'galeh ervah; do not uncover the nakedness**. Not so here; here we are told **lo tishkav; do not lie with**. The difference in wording, our traditional sources tell us in so many other instances, must indicate a difference in meaning. If so, then it is up to us to ferret out that difference.

We also find that this verse is separated in two ways from the clearly sexual prohibitions which precede it. First, there is the intervention of a cultic prohibition – that we may not allow any of our children to pass through the fire to Moloch (a Canaanite deity) nor to profane G*d's Name. Then there is the even clearer intervention of a break in the Torah reading; our verse is the very first of the seventh section of the Torah portion (the fourth when this portion is read in combination with the one which follows it). Thus, we have three strong indications that this prohibition is, somehow, different from the clearly sexual prohibitions in verses 6-20. It is phrased differently; it is separated from them by clearly non-sexual prohibitions; it is separated from them in that it is part of a separate section of the reading. It therefore does not mean the same thing as they do. What, then, can it mean?

None of the clearly sexual prohibitions carries the dread designation *to'evah*. This does. It is not only a prohibition; it is *to'evah*. Well may we ask, then, exactly what *to'evah* is. The word *to'evah* – usually translated into English as *abomination* – is used about a dozen times in the Torah. In every instance, save this, it is used to refer explicitly to something that is forbidden to a certain class or category of people, not universally. The first use of the word *to'evah* is in Genesis 43:32, where we are told that, when Joseph's brothers came to Mitzrayim (Egypt) the second time, bringing Benjamin with them, the Mitzrim (Egyptians) would not sit down to a meal with them, **kee to'evah hee l'Mitzrayim; for that is to'evah for the Egyptians.**

And similarly, whenever the Torah tells us that something is *to'evah*, it is so for a certain class or category of people, not for everyone. We may reasonably conclude that there is a certain category of people for whom same-sex sexual relationships are *to'evah*. Who, then, are those people?

While the standard rendering of *to'evah* in English is *abomination*, that may not convey the implication fully; there is always something that “gets lost in the translation,” even in the best and finest translation. As our sages tell us, anyone who translates a verse literally is a liar. Perhaps a better rendering (although too verbose to be generally used) of *to'evah* is *an act which wholly violates one's own personal integrity*. To sit down to a meal with foreigners, with aliens, was so contrary to the essence of who the Egyptians of Joseph's day were, so wholly violative of their personal and cultural integrity, that it passed the realm of prohibition and became for them *to'evah*.

What man's personal integrity – for it is clear that this verse is directed to men – is so wholly violated by sexual relations with other men as to pass beyond the category of mere prohibition into that of *to'evah*? The verse itself, I would suggest, tells us. ***V'et zachar lo tishkav mish'k'vei israh; you shall not lie with a male as if lying with a woman.*** A homosexual man does not “lie with a man as if lying with a woman.” He has no desire to “lie with” a woman at all. A bisexual man is usually aware whether, at a given time, he desires a man or a woman; he usually is clear about his choice, and he generally does not “lie with a man as if lying with a woman.”

Who's left? A heterosexual man! And now we can offer a slightly different interpretive rendering. **When you want a woman, do not lie with a man as a substitute, for that violates your personal integrity.**

Why would a man who desires a woman even consider taking another man as a substitute? In wholly male societies – prison, for example, or perhaps an extended military operation – there are no women present, and even the most thoroughly heterosexual man may become so frustrated that he becomes willing to use (and I use the word *use* intentionally) a man as a substitute. Or, regardless of the nature of the society, he may wish to “experiment.” Or it may be a way of exercising power over another man, especially, again, in a prison.

The Command, then, would seem to be directed to heterosexual men. A heterosexual man is strictly forbidden to engage in homosexual sex; it would be a violation of his personal integrity, his personal essence. **Do not lie with a man as a substitute for a woman; it is *to'evah*.** For a gay man, however, it is not a violation of personal integrity; it is not *to'evah*, for it is who he is.

To an understanding of our own individual integrity and to the determination to maintain that integrity – even when it differs from another's – may we soon be led.

Shabbat Shalom.