

Are Yes and No Both “Living Options?” — Not When the Bible Answers the Question

Tuesday, December 5, 2006



The Conservative Jewish movement is poised to redefine its position on the moral status of homosexuality, especially as related to the ordination of homosexual rabbis and the blessing of homosexual unions.

A panel of rabbis will meet December 5 and 6 in New York City in order to establish the movement’s position on the moral status of homosexuality. But, strange as it may sound, the movement may adopt *positions* instead.

Here is how *The Washington Post* explains the situation:

“I think the committee is deeply divided — like the rest of society is divided, like our movement is divided,” said Rabbi Joel H. Meyers, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, the main association of Conservative rabbis. “But the tension has grown to the point that the committee is hard-pressed to give some clear guidance to the movement.”

Clarity, however, may not be forthcoming. Rabbi Avis D. Miller of Washington’s Congregation Adas Israel said the “rabbinical scuttlebutt” is that the panel — the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards — will approve two conflicting answers, one upholding the status quo and one calling for change.

Two answers? This is possible because it only takes six of the 25 rabbis to establish an authoritative interpretation.

Some openly celebrate the possibility:

If two or more contradictory answers are accepted, “that will be the strongest statement for America, because everything in America spiritually and religiously seems to have become political, and the way you know it’s political is that it’s either ‘yes’ or ‘no,’” said Irwin Kula, a Conservative rabbi who heads the New York-based National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership.

“In a genuine spiritual tradition, ‘yes’ and ‘no’ are both living options. . . . Both sides are right, and we’re not used to that, because in a political reality, only one side can be right,” he said.

Get this straight — the movement may well decide that homosexual behavior is simultaneously sinful and sinless, shameful and honorable, legitimate and illegitimate.

Note that Rabbi Kula describes the presence of a clear ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as evidence that a position is “political.” In his words, “the way you know it’s political is that it’s either ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Would the rabbi apply this to all moral questions?

Thankfully, Moses did not come down from the mountain with a list of ten “yes and no’s.” With one of the most pressing moral issues of our times at stake, Rabbi Kula’s approach is to offer no answer at all.

Oddly enough, *The Los Angeles Times* reports that one of the most influential rabbis on the panel will propose

banning some male homosexual practices, while allowing others. [Warning, [this article](#) contains sexual material.]

The Conservative movement in American Judaism emerged in the early twentieth century with an approach that stands between Orthodoxy and Reform Judaism. The central theme of the Conservative movement is the embrace of both modernity and tradition. The issue of homosexuality will test the plausibility of that proposal.

Rejecting the suggestion that the movement adopt two contradictory positions, Rabbi Joseph H. Prouser argued:

The proposed changes would result in legal incoherence, unprecedented even in our famously pluralistic movement. A “movement” in which certain relationships are treated simultaneously, by some as worthy of sanctification — and by others as violating biblical norms of the most profound gravity — evinces doctrinal anarchy, inviting ridicule from outsiders and dismissive contempt from those who seek our guidance.

Rabbi Prouser is absolutely right. A morally serious movement cannot treat a serious moral question in this manner. Most importantly, it cannot act as if the Bible does not answer the question.

At the cultural level, the decision of Conservative Judaism to normalize (some or all) homosexual behaviors will add momentum to the larger movement to normalize homosexuality in the culture.

At another level, the debate within Conservative Judaism should alert Christians to the fact that similar proposals are now found in some denominations. Just allow two positions on this controversial question, they argue. The church must answer “no” clearly and boldly. Not on this question — and never when the Bible speaks so clearly. When the Bible speaks, “yes” and “no” are not both “living options.”

We discussed this issue on Monday’s edition of *The Albert Mohler Program* [[listen here](#)]. My guest was [Rabbi Bruce Ginsburg](#) of the [Union for Traditional Judaism](#) and rabbi of [Congregation Sons of Israel](#), Woodmere, NY.

