

TOLERANCE IN THE PARK

THE OPINIONS of the "Holier than Thou" people who have graced your Letters to the Editor pages in the last few weeks have incensed me. To an outsider, our Jewish community in Melbourne appears a cohesive and dynamic group, whose members care about each other and about the state of Israel. This may be true until one becomes intimately involved with the religious politics within this diverse community.

Is it acceptable for a "religious" person to be dishonest in business? Is it acceptable for a person who is "Jewish" (but not the acceptable sect of Jewishness) to be refused an aliyah at another shul? Is it acceptable for our children to be exposed to an affluent and flaunting lifestyle where there is no consideration for others? Is it appropriate for people to judge others and to gossip about them incessantly? Is it correct to treat our fellow man with disrespect? And yet, it seems that it is not acceptable for some Jews to express their sexuality in a way that they feel is appropriate; by setting up a stall at a community function for all Jews.

Do we, who resent the opinions of the "Holier than Thou" people, know or care what happens in their bedrooms and judge them for their obsessive behaviour about the Eruv or other controversial issues? Is it because it's "socially acceptable" to be dishonest in business, to gossip and to treat people with disrespect that we all sit idle and let our children learn these distressing habits; and yet something such as homosexuality which somehow threatens the innards of most people causes their homophobia to take over.

Helen Shapira
Caulfield North

AS A "straight" couple who married under a chuppah, we are deeply offended by the homophobic, self-righteous, vitriolic diatribe by Robert Weil and the nonsense from Tuva Rosengarten against lesbians in our community. Who do you people think you are to preach who is or is not acceptable in our community? Get real. Families come in all shapes and sizes and Jewish families are no different. The Concert in the Park was advertised as a community day and we thought the lesbian group were to be commended for playing their part.

Bob Kochen and Leora Black

SINCE it is the z'man (season) for asking questions, I would like to ask a few on the issue of intolerance.

Why do letters that start with phrases such as "I believe I speak for the silent majority..." (R. Weil AJN 14/4) often express views intolerant of something?

Why are newspapers that print letters with views contrary to our own accused of being "hijacked" and "manipulated"?

How is it possible "to be tolerant towards the complexities of human behaviour..." (T. Rosengarten AJN 31/3) and in the same breath say "this does not mean that we have to accept (lesbians)?"

Why should a concert held to express the rich diversity of Jewish life exclude part of it simply because some people oppose some aspect of that diversity? And why is it justified by suggesting children are at risk: "Please refrain from peddling your wares in front of our children?"

Why do people cite religious law as a means of justifying their own prejudice?

In my humble opinion, and speaking only for myself, I understand tolerance to be about accepting (without embracing) other people with different lifestyles whether I agree or disagree with them, and having the right to criticise their views, but not the right to impose my views.

I am sure that if you poke me hard enough you will find a limit to my tolerance, but a lesbian stall at the Concert in the Park falls well within that limit.

Harold Zwier
Elsternwick

IDF MORALE

IF THE prestige and morale of the IDF is compromised it has little to do with the tasks assigned it, (van Creveld, AJN 14/4). The apparent ineffectiveness of the IDF is attributable to organisational and philosophical shortcomings. Chief amongst these is the fragmentation of the IDF through the indiscriminate use of civilian conscripts. This engenders the command and policy dislocation now observed at all levels. The recent politicisation of the upper command echelon of the IDF by the current government, serves a convenient and consistent policy of paralysis.

The implementation of national security matters should never be left to 90 day wonders. The maintenance of such a feudal system serves an effective platform for the government's ulterior agenda of political concession. If the IDF were properly organised and acquitted

itself accordingly, there would be little domestic countenance of the "paper" peace.

A physical barrier will not do away with endemic incompetence. Contrary to van Creveld's maxim armies who fight weak opponents usually win. There will always be some Arab faction engaged in terrorism against Israel. If there is an erosion of will to fight terrorism it is due to civilian interference in the operational modes of the IDF. The mitigation of military imperatives to meet the hypocrisies of polite society is a prescription for failure.

In the West, mostly professional armies do the dirty work that civilians find uncomfortable. However, this discomfort does not extend to any economic benefits which may be so derived.

Military efficacy housed within defensible borders has a remarkably quiescent effect. The IDF threat

make up most common in the Jewish population I was told. I therefore asked my family in Israel to run a campaign there, at the time there were less than 5,000 potential donors on the Israeli registry. They were told it would be fruitless to run a campaign where thousands of volunteers would come forward only to be turned away without being tested. Why was this the case I inquired, feeling very confident as one can imagine. Well the only tissue typing lab capable of conducting mass testing is at the Hadassah Medical Centre in Jerusalem and they can only analyse 30 tests a week. In comparison in Victoria the lab can analyse some 250 tests a week.

Why is that we asked the Israeli Centre. We are short of staff and equipment was the reply.

It's hard to put into words what goes through one's mind in times like these. Perhaps those readers who are parents can imagine how they would feel when told no treatment is available, that their child could not be treated due to lack of funds and just plain indifference.

I found out I was not the only one to receive such a response.

The Jay Feinberg campaign from the US, Sue Harris from the UK and most recently Lior Novick an Israeli of South African Parents all faced the same brick wall. They would not take no for an answer and independently organised donor drives in Israel and flew the samples to a lab in the US that can analyse large numbers of samples for a considerable price.

These are only the cases we hear about because they were able to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars and even millions to fund the campaigns and immediately fly the samples to the US. What about all those we do not hear about, the patients who might have had a chance had the Israeli registry been operating to its full capacity?

Why am I telling you all this? So that when another appeal is made for your charitable dollar to one of the many causes around, stop and think which investment will yield the best return. Which is the one that may benefit you and those dear to you should God forbid a loved one ever need life saving treatment such as this.

Yehuda Kaplan
East Bentleigh

of massive retaliation upon the Syrian capital has kept that border area free of occurrence since 1974. Up to 1967, there were some 400 incidents with the Syrian army.

The Maginot mentality of wall building is not a substitute for an efficient, well organised and professional defence force governed by a policy structure which attends to military necessities. The deterioration of the IDF can be attributed to the extent such military exigency is compromised by political or ideological interference sourced either internally or from without.

John Reisner
Kew

BLUE BOX

AS A JNF collector I have just come back from Israel and was most impressed with the work JNF does. One reads a lot over here about

planting trees, the forests, road construction, reservoirs and many other projects, too many to mention. But as the saying goes "seeing is believing" and I was very pleased and impressed with what I saw. JNF also helps with the absorption of new immigrants and the jobless. Anyway, however the money is spent, it is always for the good of Israel.

So one should not complain or object about giving, and what better way of attachment to Israel is a contribution to the Blue Box. The Israelis have a hard life in Israel, with pressures and tension; especially the soldiers, who give the best years of their lives. So let us give as much as we can so we can be proud of our land and ourselves. The kind of giving we can do is so easy compared with the lives our young soldiers give.

Margit Meier
Caulfield

DEBATE over the religious significance of unconventional sexual identity has raged in Israel since last fall's Supreme Court ruling that El Al must give free flights to an employee's homosexual partner, as it would to any employee's common-law spouse. As usual, attacks on accepting homosexuals have been based on the Biblical proscriptions against a man "lying with a man as with a woman", deeming this "an abomination" and "punishable by death" (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13).

Indeed, such arguments have long been used. Rabbi Moshe Tendler, for instance, once cited Leviticus on these pages, and urged us to "express shame and indignation" in response to homosexuality.

No matter how categorical scripture seems to be, though, one never assumes that a subject is closed. The classic example is the "stubborn and rebellious son" of Deuteronomy 21, to be stoned at the initiative of his parents. The Talmud, in Tractate Sanhedrin, creates such unlikely rules for convicting such a child that it concludes that a real one "never was and never will be".

In a matter closer to the question of sexual "deviation", the Bible excludes eunuchs from "entering the assembly of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 23:2) — that is, from marrying. Tractate Sotah, however,

A blessing over differences

Orthodox Rabbi Tzvi Marx argues that we need a new look at Jewish texts that appear to exclude homosexuals

explains that the prohibition applies only to one made a eunuch by human action, but not to a congenital eunuch — apparently distinguishing between culturally chosen and physically determined deviation.

There's also a subtext of divergent rabbinic views on unconventional sexual identity in Tractate Bekhorot. There the sages discuss the Torah's requirement (Exodus 34:19) that first-born animals be consecrated unless they are physically blemished. An animal with both male and female genitals is seen by Rabbi Ishmael as having a "blemish of which none is greater". But others, as Rashi comments, consider it neither male nor female, but a creature in its own right! In the latter view, a biological deviation is to be appreciated, not deprecated.

Defining sexual identity is made an issue in the opening verses of

Tazria: "When a woman at childbirth bears a male, she shall be ritually impure seven days... and if she bears a female, she shall be impure two weeks" (Leviticus 12:2, 5). But

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what of a child that is both male and female, or neither (*androgynus* and *tumtum* respectively in Talmudic terminology)? Rather than exclude them from the law and the community because of their unusual sexual

identity, the sages in Tractate Nidah set requirements for them between those for a male and those for a female — and so recognise such sexual identity as a category in itself.

This invites the further question, not pursued by the early sages, of how to regard a child who is conventionally male or female in some ways but not others — that is, a homosexual. While this characteristic is obviously not discernible in infancy, the long-term question is about legitimacy.

Can the Jewish community be categorical in excluding those whose differences put them outside standard sexual identity? What if those differences are a product of genes, not choice? A direction toward an answer, I suggest, can be derived from Tractate Brakhot, which teaches that one who sees a physically unusual person should recite:

"Blessed are You, Lord, who makes creatures differently". In the 13th century, the Meiri — Rabbi Menahem Meir of Perpignan — explains the blessing as a response to "experiencing of new things, without necessarily enjoying or being troubled by them". What it expresses is blessed wonderment at the different forms of divinely created life.

This isn't necessarily approval. It does imply acceptance, and a willingness to include in our society those destined to be different, it is consonant with the fundamental Jewish teaching that each individual is entitled to say "for me was the world created", as stated in Tractate Sanhedrin.

Appreciating God's creation means appreciating variations along a continuum not really divided. Reciting a benediction over human variety translates into creating a society in which differences are respected rather than attacked. The sacred texts, Biblical or rabbinic, which appear to block such inclusion invite creative reinterpretation under the impact of new insights.

▲ Tzvi Marx is an Orthodox rabbi, director of applied education at the Shalom Hartman Institute and author of *Halakha and Handicap: Jewish Law and Ethics on Disability*. This comment first appeared in a recent issue of *The Jerusalem Report*.