

Rabbi urged to face facts about sexuality

A leading Australian Orthodox rabbi has come under fire for a new book in which he shares his views on homosexuality and same-sex marriage, writes Yael Brender.

RABBI Dr Shimon Cowen, director of The Institute for Judaism and Civilisation, has elicited powerful and passionate responses from LGBTIQ+ families and Jewish community groups with the launch of his new book *Homosexuality, Marriage and Society*.

The book claims that homosexuality is a learned behaviour, possibly brought on by trauma, and that the children of homosexual unions are subject to identity deprivation and inferior parenting.

“Homosexuality does not define the essential dimension of any person. Rather, homosexuality is a behaviour, derived from sources extraneous to the central being of the human,” Rabbi Cowen writes. He points to external factors such as psychological trauma and difficult familial relationships as the “cause” of homosexual behaviour.

However, his claims have been slammed by other communal leaders and groups. Stating that “people are born with their sexual orientation defined,” Jewish Community Council of Victoria chief executive David Marlow says, “we want everybody, no matter their orientation or gender identity, to feel included.”

He fears that reading Rabbi Cowen’s book “will make people feel unloved and unwanted, and that is not what the Jewish community is about.”

Rabbi Jeffery Kamins, senior rabbi of Sydney’s Progressive Emanuel Synagogue, says, “Scientific, medical and psychological research demonstrates that sexuality and gender are deeply embedded within the self, and not necessarily determined by external factors.”

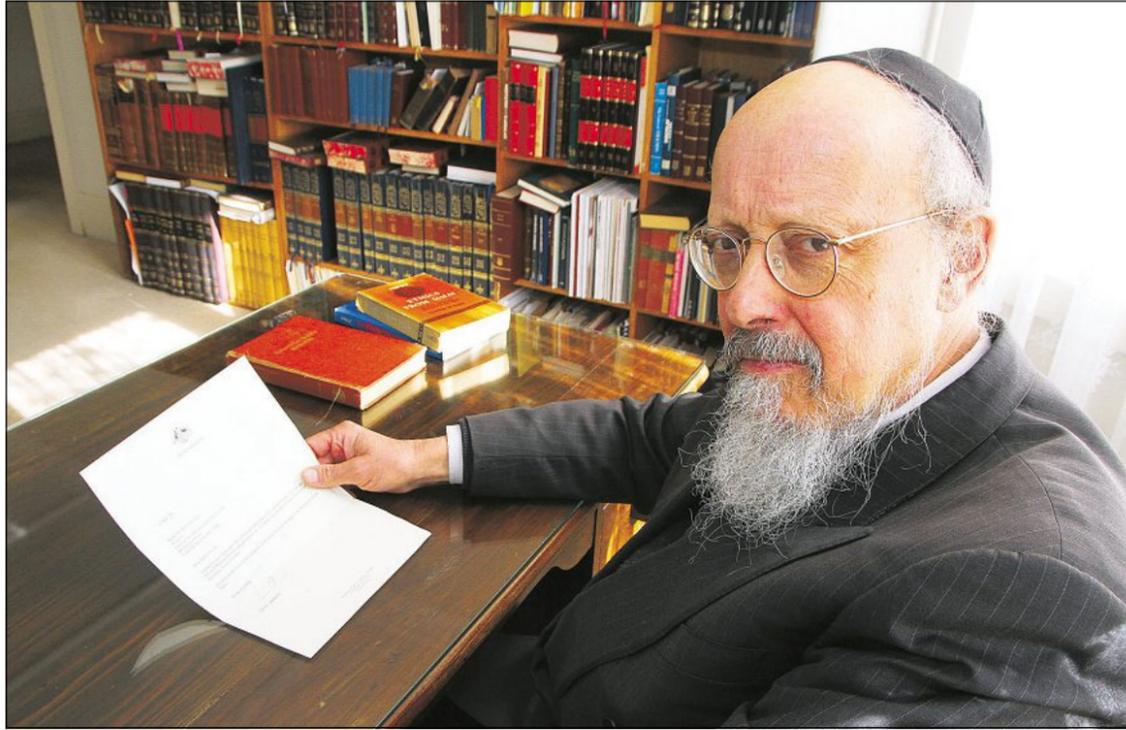
The shul’s Rabbi Jacqueline Ninio adds that his views are also at odds with Jewish teaching.

“In the Torah, we are taught that each of us is created in the image of God. Our sexuality is part of who we are and our creation,” she says.

But it’s not just the Progressive community which is at odds with the rabbi.

Dr Gavi Ansara – founding coordinator of Rosh Pinah, an affirming Orthodox Jewish network for people with same-gender loves, trans and/or non-binary gender experiences, and intersex bodies – says that he hopes the Jewish community realise that Rabbi Cowen’s “extreme views do not reflect those of the many Orthodox rabbis in Australia who are committed to welcoming same-gender partners and to helping us to live meaningful, Torah-observant lives as full members of the Jewish community”.

Underlining that view is Sydney



Rabbi Shimon Cowen.

Photo: Peter Haskin

Orthodox Rabbi Selwyn Franklin, who says he “personally welcomes” members of the LGBTIQ+ community to Or Chadash synagogue “with open arms”.

“It is very important for all people to realise that we are all the children of God and we need to treat each other in a sensitive and humane way,” Rabbi Franklin says.

Addressing Rabbi Cowen’s assertion that homosexuality is a “behaviour”, Alex Linker, president of Sydney Jewish LGBTIQ+ group Dayenu, says, “You could argue that many things are just ‘a behaviour’, but that’s incredibly dismissive to queer people’s life experience.

“One could say that Judaism is a behaviour; however, we still consider Jewish people Jewish regardless of their behaviour in terms of practice – why doesn’t that apply to queer people?”

Rabbi Cowen, son of former governor-general Sir Zelman Cowen, further writes that while people seek to justify the notion of same-sex marriage with reference to “equality of love”, “most would agree that the fallacy of the formula is exposed when applied to permit incest between adult siblings (who may marry in Sweden)”.

Linker is quick to dismiss this analogy, saying that “the term ‘equality of love’ is meant to refer to equality of love between people of any gender. By taking it out of context to refer to incest, [Rabbi Cowen] is intentionally degrading queer people in order to further his arguments.”

Linker also says that given many LGBTIQ+ people engage in life-changing journeys to accept their identities, denying them the right to those identities on the basis of outdated views is “an insult to the queer community’s fight for progress and acceptance”.

In response to Linker’s claim that he has “insulted” the queer community, Rabbi Cowen says that it was not his intention to insult homosexuals, but to help them.

“The homosexual is the most poignant victim of the same-sex ideology. They are told that they are who they are and that there is no other

[way]. It traps homosexuals into a fate that is a sad and false fate for them.

“There are great numbers of homosexuals who ... are aware of same-sex attraction as something that they do not want.

“There is a vast spectrum of homosexuality and the majority of homosexuals can be helped,” Rabbi Cowen writes.

Referring to the Victorian Health Complaints Act that was passed this year, he laments, “The homosexual is locked in by the ban on therapy, his or her destiny sealed.”

“The idea that people parent a certain way based on their gender seems more rooted in sexism than Judaism.”

Brandon Smith

However, in 2015, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists released a report saying that they do “not support the use of sexual orientation efforts of any kind”, while the Australian Psychological Society stated that they “strongly oppose any attempts to change an individual’s sexual orientation”.

Furthermore, Victorian Health Minister Jill Hennessy said in January that the government has “zero tolerance for any person purporting to be able to ‘convert’ gay people through medical or therapeutic means. Any attempts to make people feel uncomfortable with their own sexuality is completely unacceptable.”

According to Michael Barnett, convener of Jewish LGBTIQ+ support group Aleph Melbourne: “Telling people that they must not act on their homosexuality is potentially incredibly harmful.”

He adds that Rabbi Cowen seems to come from the understanding that there is something innately wrong with homosexuality, based on his personal interpretation of the Torah.

Ansara goes further, stating Rabbi Cowen’s views are “antithetical to the authentic Torah values of compassion, inclusivity, and strengthening Torah and mitzvot observance for all Jews”.

RABBI Cowen’s other controversial claim is that “a great wrong has been done” to the children of same-sex unions. “The parenting of children from same-sex unions is not on the same level as it is for heterosexual parents. That’s science. That’s been demonstrated,” he insists.

However, the claim is disputed by multiple government studies into same-sex parented families in Australia, which have found that children raised by same-sex parents do at least as well as their peers with

heterosexual parents when compared on a range of social, psychological and educational variables.

“My experience both here and in the US is that children raised by same-sex couples are not at any disadvantage whatsoever,” says Rabbi Franklin.

Rabbi Cowen also asserts that there are more break-ups of same-sex marriages than there are of “heterosexually complementary partners”, in direct contradiction to a study from the Williams Institute published in *The New York Times* that found heterosexual couples are twice as likely as same-sex couples to divorce.

“The ideology of same-sex marriage clashes with the traditional Abrahamic concept of marriage

which makes children the principal concern of marriage,” writes Rabbi Cowen.

“It’s a deep deprivation to be created not to be raised by your biological mother and father.”

Quick to refute these assertions are 26-year-old Brandon Smith and 18-year-old Josh Zwi, both of whom have two Jewish mothers.

“My mothers acted as incredible role models, and nurtured and cared for me in a way that all parents should and can, regardless of their gender,” Zwi says.

Smith agrees: “The idea that people parent a certain way based on their gender seems more rooted in sexism than Judaism. To object to same-sex marriage based on the idea that same-sex couples can’t be successful loving parents is deeply offensive to thousands of Jewish families.

“I would encourage [Rabbi Cowen] to talk to my gay Jewish mothers or my rabbi, who is gay and married, before passing judgment on other people’s families.”

Zwi adds that his parents poured “incredible amounts of time and love into their relationship” with him, and that he always felt that he was their “primary concern”. Neither Smith nor Zwi feel or have ever felt “wronged” or “deprived”.

Rabbi Cowen further writes that children of “homosexual unions” are subjected to a “deprivation of personal identity”.

But Jewish mother Jackie Stricker-Phelps, who has three children with wife Professor Karen Phelps, regards that statement as “the biggest load of rubbish I’ve ever heard”.

“We are raising a beautiful 17-year-old girl, who excels at everything she does. She is not ‘deprived’ and has no ‘identity crisis’.”

Rabbi Cowen insists again that it was not his intention to offend, but to offer help. He believes that his book will be “of benefit to homosexuals”, who he says are being indoctrinated by false teachings perpetrated by “radical members” of the queer community.

Ansara laments that the “unscientific and dangerous statements” made by Rabbi Cowen have unfortunately come at a time when the Jewish community is increasingly welcoming families with same-gender partners.

“We invite Rabbi Cowen and others who wish to make these kinds of incendiary public statements to first pause and actually sit down and get to know the real people behind their rhetoric, instead of dealing in dehumanising stereotypes and misinformation,” he says.



Aleph members taking part in Melbourne’s 2014 Pride parade.