

# **A CRITIQUE OF THE CHIEF RABBI'S NEW LGBT GUIDE FOR ORTHODOX SCHOOLS**

**by Rabbi Mordechai Rose**

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# A CRITIQUE OF THE CHIEF RABBI'S NEW LGBT<sup>1</sup> GUIDE FOR ORTHODOX SCHOOLS

## INTRODUCTION

One month ago the Chief Rabbi published a booklet called **“The Wellbeing of LGBT<sup>2</sup> Pupils A Guide for Orthodox Jewish Schools”**. It seeks to provide *“authoritative guidance”* on how Orthodox Jewish schools should deal with the reality *“that there are young Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) students in our schools to whom we have a duty of care”*.<sup>3</sup> In itself there is nothing wrong with this aim. In fact, it might even be considered praiseworthy.

The problem is in the way the Chief Rabbi went about this. The booklet was written together with an organisation called KeshetUK. It is not my purpose here to pass moral judgement on that organisation. It is only to make clear the inappropriateness of such an organisation having anything to do with the presentation of the Orthodox Jewish view on the delicate and complex subject of homosexuality. They are an organisation dedicated to promoting the acceptance of the LGBT lifestyle within the Jewish community. In their own words, *“our priorities include working with schools, synagogues, youth organisations and young adults and other community organisations to broaden LGBT Jewish inclusion.”*<sup>4</sup> They help organise the Jewish presence in Gay Pride parades and celebrate when Jews come out as gay or lesbian.<sup>5</sup> In their own eyes, they are committed to a worthy cause. But obviously the Orthodox Jewish view on these matters is fundamentally different from theirs. This collaboration of the Chief Rabbi with KeshetUK might be compared to the scenario of the United Synagogue collaborating with the Reform movement to produce a definitive guide to Jewish religious belief. Furthermore, representatives from KeshetUK will now play a major role in educating teachers in the various United Synagogue schools on how to deal with students who seek guidance on these issues.

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<sup>1</sup> LGBT is the prevalent abbreviation used to refer to people who have a different sexual orientation to the traditional one. “L” – Lesbian, “G” – Gay, “B” – Bisexual, “T” – Transgender. (Transgender refers to someone who feels that their gender is the opposite to their biological one.)

<sup>2</sup> The “+” sign in LGBT+ comes to include those who change their identification as male or female more than once (“gender fluid”) or someone who thinks of his gender as neither male or female (“non-binary”) or someone who is unsure of their gender or sexual orientation.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated all quotes are taken directly from the Chief Rabbi’s LGBT booklet. The entire booklet can be accessed on the following link: <https://chiefrabbi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/The-Wellbeing-of-LGBT-Pupils-A-Guide-for-Orthodox-Jewish-Schools.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.keshetuk.org>

<sup>5</sup> This subject is dealt with more extensively towards the end of this document.

## GENERAL APPROACH OF BOOKLET

The general approach recommended by the booklet is to allow the school student to define his or her own sexual identity as heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual.<sup>6</sup> They should also be allowed to define their own gender as male or female based on their feelings, regardless of their biological gender. If they wish to declare themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender because that is how they feel, they should be accepted as such. They should be made to feel comfortable with their chosen sexual orientation and helped to fulfil themselves in Jewish life with this identity. It is emphasised that it is wrong to recommend therapy to help them assume a heterosexual orientation. I will now provide quotes from the booklet which illustrate this approach.

*“For a young person who is discovering their sexuality or gender identity, hearing role models such as teachers and school leaders using terms related to LGBT lives sensitively can be hugely powerful.”*

*“People should be allowed to self-determine; it is unhelpful to impose a term as a label. Hurt can be avoided by listening to and noting the terms a young person uses to self-determine, describe the feelings they are having, or indeed the terms they do not use.”*

*“[Schools should have a policy] promoting respect across all protected characteristics, including sexuality and gender identity, in preparing pupils for life in 21st century Britain. The policy should commit to challenging discrimination and aim to provide information about different groups of people, including LGBT+ people, which is non-stereotyping.”*

*“Gender... Is a person’s internal sense of their own gender identity, whether male, female, or something else... Not everyone identifies with the sex that they were assigned at birth. Not everyone thinks of themselves as ‘male’ or ‘female’ in the ways that society/culture defines them.”*

*“Coming out: A person telling someone/others about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Coming out is a process of disclosure over which people maintain some choice and control, as opposed to having others reveal their gender identity or sexuality without their consent.”*

*“Gender fluid refers to someone whose gender identity is a dynamic mix of male and female, which can vary over time. Being gender fluid has nothing to do with genitalia or sexual orientation.”*

*“Use the language they use: If a young person describes themselves as ‘trans’, use that language too. Hearing you say the word ‘trans’ comfortably and without judgement could mean the world to a young person who is fearful of being rejected for who they are. If they don’t use that language, you can offer it to them for example, ‘Have you heard of the term ‘transgender’ before?’”*

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<sup>6</sup> Heterosexual is the technical term for someone who is physically attracted to people of the opposite sex. Homosexual is the term used for someone who is attracted to people of the same sex. Bisexual is the term used for someone attracted to people of either sex.

*“It’s important that the young person is allowed to define themselves.... Be aware that using words like ‘choice’ or ‘lifestyle’ when discussing sexuality and gender identity can be hurtful to LGBT+ young people as LGBT+ people generally don’t experience their sexuality or gender identity as a choice.”*

*“If the young person or parent seeking support would benefit from therapeutic intervention, be sure to signpost them to a registered and appropriate professional. You should be aware that certain practices that state they can change a person’s sexuality or gender – sometimes called ‘conversion’, ‘cure’ or ‘reparative’ therapy – have been strongly condemned by all the major organisations representing doctors and psychotherapists in the UK...“conversion therapy in relation to gender identity and sexual orientation is unethical..”*

In conclusion, although it is obviously true that young people’s struggles must be handled with great sensitivity and wisdom, we can see from these excerpts that the approach suggested by the booklet is modelled on the modern secular world-view which accepts and validates LGBT relationships.

## NEGATIVE PORTRAYAL OF ORTHODOX JEWISH SCHOOLS

Another problematic aspect of the booklet is that it includes many statements from LGBT students about their experiences in Orthodox Jewish schools. These quotations tend to represent traditional Orthodox education as insensitive and narrow in its approach.<sup>7</sup> Since the booklet was made available to the secular press, this has caused damage to the image of Orthodox schools in the eyes of the world. I will now give some examples of these type of statements from the booklet.

*“If only teachers had noticed that I was hurting and being bullied for who I was.” “When I was at school, I wasn’t sure of my sexuality, and there were girls bullying me about it. I was worried that if I told a teacher I would be expelled for not being straight, as I thought the school would support the girls bullying me, because they were just saying what I’d been taught Judaism says.” **Former Jewish day school pupil.***

*“I remember teachers making homophobic remarks, and wish there was a discipline process for teachers who make those kinds of comments.” “One of my teachers, not knowing I am gay, made a throwaway remark that stayed with me, and hurt a lot. He said: I’d sit shiva for my son if he came out.” **Former Jewish day school pupil***

*“If only things had been different... I didn’t come out at school. I was painfully scared of standing out. **As soon as you start school you’re categorised** – boy, or girl, and everything else follows from that. On the first day of secondary school, I noticed that all students were sealed with a set identity. We were categorized as boy or girl, religious or secular, set 1 or set 2, and we were then treated according to the label we were given. As a girl, my curriculum was fitted around my identity. The purpose being to guide me through the life stages of reaching womanhood. Had I been straight, this process would have been a huge advantage to my development, however, because I was not straight, the result was a feeling of total isolation and a lack of guidance that I desperately needed for my future. In Religious Studies I was taught about visiting the mikveh, my soul meeting my future husband’s soul, and the process of marrying a man. **I was guided on heterosexual relationships and intercourse, in Biology I studied heterosexual contraception and the process of making a baby, in English I read literature on straight couple’s love stories and in Drama we acted out straight relationships. Yet this one dimensional education** perpetuated the idea that I was on my own, the only gay person in the school. I had no path to follow, and no guidance. I could not envision my own future. The future I desperately wanted, could not be mine...The detrimental impact of this remains with me today. I am still playing catch-up with romantic relationships, still feeling a sense of injustice that I can’t have the future that was drawn out for me...” **Shulli [former Jewish day school pupil]***

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, if any student feels negatively about their school experiences, this should be taken seriously and dealt with according to Torah principles. The point here is that by publicising the negative experiences of these individuals in the wider world (with their implicit criticism of our educational system), and claiming that they are widespread and commonplace (see quote below) has caused a tremendous *chillul Hashem*. This is particularly so when we bear in mind that many secular forces in our society desire to eliminate genuine faith schools altogether and are looking for any excuse to condemn them.

In addition, the booklet states clearly that the bullying of LGBT pupils in Orthodox Jewish schools is a serious problem which up till now has not been dealt with properly. Here are some examples of this:

*“Most importantly, within our schools there are students whose lives are in danger, both spiritually and physically .. **Homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying is a serious and widespread issue.**”*

*“While many such [LGBT] students are thriving in Jewish schools, there are many others who endure deep unhappiness and distress due to **the mistreatment and hurt they experience.**”*

## **DAMAGING PRESS REPORTS**

All this had led to some very damaging reports in the secular press<sup>8</sup>:

Guardian (7 September 2018)

**Chief Rabbi calls on Jewish schools to tackle homophobia.** Ephraim Mervis says many LGBT pupils in Orthodox schools endure deep distress.

The Telegraph (6 September 2018)

**Be more tolerant of gay people says Chief Rabbi in first LGBT guidance for Orthodox Jewish schools.** The Chief Rabbi has told Orthodox Jewish schools to tell children to be more tolerant of gay people, as he warns homophobia is leading to suicide attempts.

The general tenor of the booklet has even led one schools’ website to headline:

Schools Improvement Website (6 September 2018)

**“Don’t tell children being gay is a sin” says Chief Rabbi in first LGBT guidance for Orthodox schools.**

Understandably the LGBT lobby is extremely pleased with the Chief Rabbi’s booklet with headlines such as:

PinkNews (6 September 2018)

**Chief Rabbi supports LGBT rights in unprecedented move**

GCN (6 September 2018)

**Rabbi Mervis’ actions can only be described as a milestone for promoting LGBT rights.**

The secular Jewish press headlined:

Jewish News (6 September 2018)

**Gay pride at Chief Rabbi’s landmark new LGBT tolerance guide.** In historic step, Rabbi Mervis and LGBT umbrella group KeshetUK produce a 33-page document urging tolerance towards young Jews discovering their sexuality.

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<sup>8</sup> See also the BBC report on the following link: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-45435583> All the press reports mentioned below can be found by ‘Googling’ — “Chief Rabbi LGBT”.

## THE PROBLEMATIC COLLABORATION WITH KeshetUK

The Chief Rabbi himself sees no problem with collaborating with KeshetUK despite their declared agenda of bringing total acceptance of homosexuality into the mainstream Jewish community. He writes in the booklet:

*This work has only been possible because of the commitment, energy and leadership of the KeshetUK team ... who have ....devoted hundreds of hours of their time to help bring this Guide from inception to publication. They have, at all stages of our collaboration with them, been totally respectful of Torah values, never seeking to undermine or contradict any issurim (prohibitions) or important areas of hashkafa. **They have not sought acclaim or praise – their only motivation has been the well-being of young Jews.***

To understand how KeshetUK's agenda differs from that of Orthodox Judaism let us quote from their statement on the Gay Pride weekend and parade that took place this year in London:<sup>9</sup>

*KeshetUK co-ordinated a strong presence at the [Gay] Pride in London parade 2018 with over 150 LGBT+ people, their families and allies taking part. This was organised in partnership with.. Jewish LGBT+ Group, Gay Jews In London .. and Parents of Jewish Gays and Lesbians.*

*There was a wonderful atmosphere of singing and dancing – helped by a large presence of Jewish youth movements!*

*The celebratory tone of the occasion was dampened afterwards when we found out that a single transphobic group hijacked the start of the Pride Parade, seeking to create division and fear instead of unity and love. At KeshetUK we offer solidarity and support through our work to ensure a trans inclusive world...*

*KeshetUK Executive Director Dalia Fleming said, "Singing 'Kol Ha'Olam Kulo' through the streets of London was a message for all. This Hebrew song emphasises how we must not live in fear. The Jewish contingency in the parade showed the diverse and inclusive nature of our community and how together – we can create a world free from fear of having to choose between one's LGBT+ and Jewish identity."*

Given that KeshetUK's aims and ideals are so different to those of Orthodox Judaism, it is very difficult to understand how they could collaborate successfully with the Chief Rabbi to produce a definitive guide for Orthodox Jewish schools on these delicate matters. It is my opinion that it is this collaboration that has caused the Chief Rabbi to produce a booklet which on the surface seems to represent a religious approach but in actual fact promotes an overtly secular and liberal viewpoint and worldview.

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<sup>9</sup> See the following link: <https://www.keshetuk.org/presstatements> See also there for KeshetUK's own coverage of the Chief Rabbi's booklet.

## HARM CAUSED BY THE BOOKLET

I would like to conclude by outlining how the booklet is likely to harm the Orthodox and wider Jewish community. **Firstly**, we all know that we are involved in difficult negotiations with Ofsted and the Department for Education who are making ever increasing demands on our schools to teach children about homosexuality and presenting it as a valid alternative lifestyle. We have claimed that we cannot teach these matters because they are against our religion. We have claimed that we do not have significant problems of bullying in our schools. Now Ofsted and the DfE can come with the Chief Rabbi's booklet in their hand saying, "your own Chief Rabbi states clearly that there is a significant problem of LGBT bullying in Orthodox schools and insists that such matters must be taught<sup>10</sup> and such lifestyles must be accepted." Mrs. Spielman, the head of Ofsted, has constantly claimed that those opposing the requirements to teach LGBT in schools do not represent the mainstream religious view. They are religious extremists.<sup>11</sup> That is her justification for ignoring the rights protecting religious freedom and imposing these requirements on our schools against our will. Now she has the perfect proof for her claims. She can say, "the Chief Rabbi of England, who represents mainstream Jewish Orthodoxy, agrees with me."

**Secondly**, it may lead to an increase in homosexuality in traditional Jewish schools. Many young people are confused about their sexual identity especially with the onset of puberty and its powerful emotions. Experts say that it is relatively common for such young people to have passing feelings of attraction to people of the same sex especially in single-sex environments.<sup>12</sup> In the past due to the general negative attitude of society and of course of the Torah, such feelings would not be acted upon. They would pass and the individuals would later enter into successful heterosexual marriages. But with the more permissive approach promoted by the Chief Rabbi's booklet, these young people are more likely to act on these transient, relatively normal feelings.<sup>13</sup> First-hand reports of this phenomenon already having taken place have recently been brought to my attention. The new openness and acceptance of the alternative lifestyles promoted by the booklet is also likely to have repercussions on the wider traditional Jewish community, leading to an increase in the frequency of LGBT type relationships. As such it will just reflect the contemporary norms of the wider secular society we find ourselves in.

**Thirdly**, it misrepresents the true Torah approach to this complex issue and causes widespread confusion in the wider Jewish public.<sup>14</sup> It has also been used by the secular

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<sup>10</sup> The booklet states "schools are expected to ensure at a minimum that *children are aware of the existence of LGBT+ people and that LGBT+ people should be accorded dignity and respect.*" It also states, "[Schools should have a policy] promoting respect across all protected characteristics, including sexuality and gender identity, in preparing pupils for life in 21st century Britain The policy should commit to challenging discrimination and aim to provide information about different groups of people, **including LGBT+ people, which is non-stereotyping.**"

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/02/01/religious-extremists-use-schools-isolate-segregate-children/> See also <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/amanda-spielman-on-the-launch-of-ofsted-annual-report-201617> where Mrs. Spielman states "In very many cases, we find exemplary teaching of British values in faith schools... It is a small core of institutions about which we have real concerns."

<sup>12</sup> See the book "Judaism and Homosexuality – An authentic Orthodox View" by Rabbi Chaim Rappaport pages 18-19.

<sup>13</sup> It goes without saying that the only type of relationship the Torah permits us is between a man and a woman through the sanctification of marriage and according to all the laws of family purity.

<sup>14</sup> The fact that the Chief Rabbi's booklet misrepresents the Torah view has been confirmed by my discussions with all the major Torah authorities in this country. For an authentic Orthodox view, see the book mentioned

world to back up their viewpoint that opposition to LGBT relationships is a backward and antiquated belief held only by religious extremists.<sup>15</sup>

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in the previous note. Although, it is possible that one may not agree with all of Rabbi Rappaport's conclusions there (see preface by Dayan Berel Berkovits zt"l), it without doubt represents an authentic, extremely well-researched and thorough treatment of the subject by a true Torah Scholar.

<sup>15</sup> For example, the PinkNews article quoted above concludes by contrasting the Chief Rabbi's approach with the 'ultra-orthodox' approach. It concludes *"In March, it was revealed that staff at Yesodey Hatorah Senior Girls' school had blacked out the word "homosexual" in a history book's account of Nazi persecution. Last year, North London Jewish community centre JW3 faced a boycott from strictly Orthodox rabbis because it was running gay-inclusive sessions."*