Silence is not OK when Torah is painful
By Rabbi Steven Greenberg

Rabbi Steven Greenberg is an American rabbi with a rabbinic ordination from the Orthodox rabbinical seminary of Yeshiva University. He is described as the first openly gay Orthodox Jewish rabbi. Last year he wrote a powerful and important commentary on this morning's Torah Portion Achrie Mot. I clipped it and said one day I am going to share this with my congregation. Today is that day.

As we skip over the uncomfortable parts in this morning's torah portion about the prohibition against homosexuality, it's worth noting that if we skipped all the uncomfortable parts of torah, we'd have very little to read and even less to discuss.

But I want to share with you Rabbi Greenberg's drash on this week's parasha – he does not skip over the words, but confronts them head on. So the following are his words, though they are my thoughts as well.

I received a call this week. The *baal koreh* who chants the Torah portion at the shul that I attend wanted to know what he should do when he arrives at Leviticus 18:22 in the reading. He felt uncomfortable simply reading the verse this year since I, my partner and child are full members of his community. It was a very moving question for me.

"And with a male you shall not lie the lyings of a woman, it is an abomination." As well, in chapter 20 of Leviticus the punishment of death is prescribed for violators. These two verses were a gauntlet of pain for me in my early twenties. Today, young people are coming to understand their feelings much earlier and must manage the experience with a good deal less maturity. While the verse speaks about males, the larger cultural message seems clear. Same-sex desire is hateful, especially to God.

What is it like for a 14-year-old to hear these two verses baldly read? Does he interpret the silence to mean that no one

imagines it remotely possible that there is a gay person in the congregation? Would they really read this portion so blythly if they knew that sitting next to them in the shul is a gay person whom they know? Or worse, perhaps they know well that we are here and are intending our humilation.

The ordinariness of the reading about a sexual perversity worthy of death, for a young person going through puberty is nothing short of suffocating. While we know that people are no longer put to death for such things, when the verse is read with no attempt to condition, explain or contain the content it leads inevitably to anxiety, debilitating self-hatred, overwhelming fears of rejection and the portent of communal shame.

Moreover, what of the mother and father of the child who has just braved the challenge of coming out to his parents? What do these verses mean to them, now in their own closet, guilt-ridden, confused and burdened with fears. Can the siblings who know the truth remain trusting of the Torah and comfortable in

a community that so characterizes their loved sister or brother? While the verse cannot and should not be excised, it also cannot be passed over unmentioned.

The only remedy is speech. Whether in the form of an introduction to the parasha or a sermon, we must begin to hear these verses as if standing in the shoes of a15 year old who knows exactly what his crush on the cute boy in his class means. He is abominable. We can say publicly that the verse only speaks of actions and not feelings, but even a teenager knows that such dodging will not save him from disgrace if he ever shares his feelings.

While it is not OK to be silent, it must be admitted that different communities will be able and ready to say different things. It may not matter exactly what is said, as long as compassion for the child in the pews trying to make sense of her feelings is the purpose. It must justify hope, and not the

vain hope of therapeutic or spiritual transformation, but the hope that somehow, just as she is, her life will work out.

Rabbis can make a huge difference. They can stand in the way of a downward spiral by fully identifying with the subjective reality of a teenager listening well to these two verses in their shul. Orthodox Rabbis may not now or ever have a fully embracing stance, but they can adopt the existential crisis of the teens struggling to square their religious world with their emerging self awareness. It is a process of empathy that has already begun.

Eight years ago I interviewed 20 Orthodox rabbis on their practice of counsel when gay people come out to them. I discovered then that my colleagues were eager to do no harm, but were not sure how to balance that concern with their role as defender of the tradition. They each insisted that celibacy was required by the tradition. I said that I understood their position theoretically. I then situated the issues.

A teenager shares with you, frightened and confused, “Rabbi, I’m in trouble. I know that I’m gay. I’ve known it for years. Can you tell me what you believe God wants of me?”

“Do you really tell him ,” I asked, “that what God wants of him is lifelong celibacy?” I began to unpack the simple statement. Do you say to a frightened kid, “What God wants is that you should never touch or be touched, never kiss, never embrace and never share intimate love with anyone. When you are sick no partner will care for your body and when you are joyous no one will dance with you — and all this because something is terribly wrong with you.” Most of the rabbis paused at this point. Some tried to dodge the quandary.

I did not judge their responses. I just wanted them to grasp the vulnerability of the young person before them and the emotional havoc they could cause by simply sharing, with no reservations, their halakhic convictions. In a few of these

encounters, the rabbis, recognizing the puzzle I had put before them wanted to see how I would navigate. One senior rabbi, a one-time head of the RCA (Rabbinical Council of America) did just that. “I really don’t know what I would say, Steve,” he said. “What would you say?”

I offered him the following response: “To be honest, I share your question. I too don’t know why a good and loving God would make people gay and then deprive them of a decent life. I honestly don’t know what I would do were I in your shoes and your struggle humbles me. However, as a rabbi I am stuck. I can’t permit what is prohibited but I also can’t condemn you for wanting a full human life. God knows you and loves you just as you are and can only ask you to do the doable. If you cannot be celibate without doing yourself great harm, then it will be best for you to find a partner, join a shul and seek a way to make a family. Living a full and religiously alive life as a self-accepting gay person is better than your walking away from the community forever. Someday you will go to heaven and have to

account for yourself. I feel that you have a very good argument. So, do the best you can and trust in God's love and understanding."

I don't know how many Orthodox rabbis might be comfortable responding in this way to a vulnerable teenager, but among those whom I interviewed, even some of the more conservative of the group, this approach seemed acceptable.

At the end of my research, one young rabbi upped the ante. He added the following. "Steve, not only can I say that…but I want to add this too. "If by chance I am hanging around up there in heaven when you are called to judgment, I promise you now that when you make that argument I'll be there right behind you cheering you on."

Perhaps this is enough — to voice a simple question before the reading. To adopt the existential crisis of the teen struggling with his love of God and his hope for life with love, intimacy

and companionship like everyone else….not a rejection of the Torah but an honest and heartfelt identification with the thousands of people who hear the verses and despair.

I have written a short prayer. It will not be right for every shul. It may not go far enough for some and will be too bold for others, but perhaps it is a way to start a conversation with the kid in the back row, that for the first time feels in the recognition, a glimmer of hope If this prayer is too explicit or not in line with the vibe of the shul, don't read it. Do what is appropriate…but do something. Because it's not OK to be silent when people are hurting.

Prayer to be Recited Before the Reading of Aharei Mot
Master of the Universe, to Whom all secrets are known,
Before You we stand both confused and undaunted,
In parashat Aharei Mot, Abomination! Is spoken
and one out of ten, women and men,
Hear the words "V'et Zachar" and weep
In the farthermost pews,
Outcast and broken.

As we read these words now, God remember in truth
The myriad souls, who from their youth,
Found in their hearts a fierce connection,
A mighty love, toward members of their own sex

Remember O Lord their paralyzing fear,
The terrifying longing, the shaming embrace.

Accusing themselves with the full force of Law
Of perversions that could only be remedied by death.

Remember the thousands consumed by shame,
Cast out in outrage, or suffering unseen.
Not one dared imagine that rather than cursed
They were blessed by the One, Who varies His creatures.

Master of the universe, Why? And have
the tears of the oppressed made it through to Your heart?
Can it be that the Torah demands we cast out
Beloved daughters, beloved sons?

If they have no power and no redress,
Then be Thou their comfort, their strength and fortress.
Bless us with peace, and our sages with tenderness.
Grant us strength from on high to uphold them in love,

Be generous with the gift of hope from above,
For life and wholeness your salvation is at hand.