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Homophobia, as I'll Explain It to My Daughter

How will I tell my infant daughter about society's hatred of the two women who are raising her?



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I'm a lesbian. My partner and I have a 5-month-old daughter. She's sweet. When she's older I'll want to explain homophobia to her. I imagine her at 10, like Tahar Ben Jelloun's daughter in his book "Racism Explained to My Daughter," who asks naive questions such as "Daddy, what is racism?" or "Do you think I myself could become a racist?" When our daughter asks about homophobia, I intend to be prepared with answers. In the wake of everything that has been said about the murders at the Israeli Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Association center this week, it became clear to me that this is no simple task.

Homophobia is a strange psychological and social phenomenon, I'll tell my daughter, but like racism, it is widespread. When one says "homophobia," one means "an irrational fear and loathing of homosexuality, and of gay men and lesbians." Homophobia exists everywhere: in the government, in business, at universities and in journalism, among the right and the left, Jews and Muslims, in ultra-Orthodox society and in secular Tel Aviv.

Generally, I'll explain to her, homophobia does not motivate people to murder. But even routine homophobia is cruel and creates a lot of suffering. Parents turn their backs on their children because of it (and if their children are injured in a

terror attack aimed at gays, it was reported this week, they are so terrified that they don't visit them in the hospital). Teens harass other teens. Children are ashamed and afraid. Adults feel guilty and lie to themselves and others. People withhold liberty, affection and love from themselves and others, because of this strange anxiety.

"Why?" my daughter will ask. That's a good question, I'll say. For men, the possibility of desiring someone of their own sex threatens the very definition of masculinity, which contains an element of conquering women. Expressions of sexuality that are not directed at women undermine the foundations of men's gender identity. All right, this explanation isn't age-appropriate for a 10-year-old. I'll have to work on the wording.

I try again. Men and women are afraid of desire that is not heterosexual, because they have been taught that only one kind of sex is okay and all other desires are forbidden. They are supposed to replicate their parents' imagined sex life and marriage, no matter what these were actually like. It all comes from a primitive fear that homosexuality means giving in to a sexual pleasure that will not perpetuate the species. Apparently some of this anachronistic anxiety is still common, in an age of birth control, sperm banks and a plethora of new parenting arrangements. I too was once a homophobe, I'll admit to my daughter. For years I was afraid to be lesbian. I preferred loneliness. Then I'll try to smile at her, to lighten the heavy subject.

And how can homophobia be countered, she asks, in my imagination. Then things get complicated. Homophobia is hard to counter because it is a mental disorder that is normative. It's part of the accepted definition of "normal"; it is considered normality itself. In Israel, actually, homophobia isn't considered a mental disorder. A

homophobic society is one in which, strangely, gays and lesbians women are the ones who are thought to be disturbed.

It is worth noting that the term homophobia was first coined in the U.S., in 1972, by the psychologist George Weinberg, one year before the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. Yet today, in broad sections of Israeli society, homophobia is still considered normal and homosexuality deviant. Remarks in this vein were voiced even at the demonstration of solidarity and anger in central Tel Aviv the day after the murders, by gay advocates and their supporters. They demanded tolerance for society's exceptions.

That is the normative - liberal - underpinning of homophobia: the concept that there is such a thing as normal society, and that it must consider whether to accept the exceptions within it. To non-homophobe eyes, there is no such thing as normal majority society that accepts the different. Society is composed of a variety of different individuals with a range of different social and sexual preferences that may change at any time.

"Tel Aviv residents are in no danger," the newspapers reported in the name of the police the day after the murders - with the murderer still free. "It was a pinpoint incident (pinpointing the gay and lesbian community)." Another innocent expression suffused with homophobia. Difficult to explain. A strange phenomenon. Lucky for me that my daughter is still an infant. I have a few more years to prepare myself.