

YOUR GUIDE TO
UNDERSTANDING
KEY DISCUSSION
POINTS



BELIEF BRIEF



GAYTHER

LGBTQIA+ FOCUS

Judaism Edition



"The greatest heresy is despair, despair of men's power
for goodness, men's power for love."

RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

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CONTENT WARNING | The Belief Briefs aim to encourage questioning of established ideas, the use of divisive language, and the provision of alternative perspectives. They are not meant to insult or belittle any faith or belief but to challenge assumptions and promote reflection. If questioning your beliefs makes you uncomfortable or you prefer your truths remain unchallenged, approach with caution.

01 ABOUT THE BELIEF BRIEFS



How often have you seen, heard, or had firsthand experience of someone using outdated rhetoric, selective interpretations of religious scripture, or personal opinions to justify how they speak about others and, more importantly, how they treat you?

Too often, these views and opinions are rooted in fear, misinformation, or limited engagement with the communities involved, all of which can lead to racist, homophobic, or transphobic language and actions that clash with modern societal values and with the principles of compassion, dignity, and humanity found across numerous faiths and cultures worldwide.

Even though many of these opinions may come from far-right groups, extremists, bad-faith actors, or simply uninformed individuals, they are still hard to ignore. If we do not challenge them, these false stories and baseless claims can quickly be accepted as truth, shaping public perceptions of people and influencing how they are treated in everyday life, politics, and society.

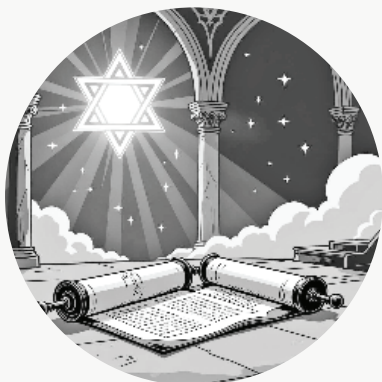
The Belief Briefs are here to support and inspire open conversations. They are a collection of downloadable guides covering a wide range of topics, from Christianity to transgender identities. Created to gently challenge assumptions, long-standing opinions, and misinformation, they do so without attacking anyone's faith or personal beliefs. The hope is to foster understanding, encourage critical thinking, and promote open, evidence-based dialogue where everyone can feel heard and respected.

These briefs examine how misinformation, selective interpretation, and historical narratives are often accepted as fact without question. They also show how some people or groups might use long-standing beliefs to support personal, political, or ideological aims.

By using historical background, factual details, and thoughtful reasoning, the Belief Briefs are here to help you better understand tricky topics, spot and challenge misinformation, and join in more meaningful conversations.

Think of the Belief Briefs as a helpful guide for tackling fact-related challenges, encouraging critical thinking, and sharing well-informed views on common beliefs and social stories.

02 INTRODUCTION



A person's faith and beliefs are deeply personal, shaping their values, identity, and worldview. Unlike common opinions, beliefs are often tied to emotions, culture, family, and community, making discussions about them sensitive and complex. Many religions and denominations are based on stories, teachings, and principles that aim to guide rather than judge, fostering compassion, humility, justice, and a good life.

The main challenge is not faith itself but its interpretation. Over time, religious texts have been translated, reinterpreted, and sometimes selectively used to support personal, political, or ideological goals. While many faith communities seek to evolve and deepen their understanding through experience, others may cling to rigid views that are not always historically, culturally, or contextually accurate.

Many sacred texts were written centuries ago in societies with norms and structures that differ significantly from today's views on gender, sexuality, and identity. Understanding this historical context is vital for interpreting these texts in modern discussions. These Belief Briefs aim to encourage respectful and thoughtful engagement with faith-based claims, whether online, in public, or in personal conversations.

This issue extends beyond religion. Political rhetoric and media often frame LGBTQIA+ identities as political debates rather than human realities, using terms like 'LGBTQIA+ ideology.' Such language relies on fear, oversimplification, and misinformation. It is essential to question and challenge these narratives whenever they arise, in conversations, institutions, politics, or government.

The aim is not to silence belief but to foster understanding, accountability, and respectful dialogue based on facts, empathy, and shared humanity.

03 CORE CLAIMS

In the Core Claims section, we will explore common arguments both supporting and opposing the treatment of the LGBTQIA+ community. While many perspectives seem well-established, rooted in centuries of tradition and belief, closer examination often reveals them to be modern reinterpretations. History indicates that societies and individuals who have shared the same faith for thousands of years did not always view certain beliefs or values as these arguments imply.

Judaism has a long tradition of legal interpretation and debate, in which religious law develops through rabbinic reasoning, precedent, and ongoing discussion. Across Jewish history, scholars have engaged with shifting social and economic circumstances while remaining grounded in sacred texts and established legal frameworks. This combination of continuity and interpretive flexibility means that Jewish law is often understood as both rooted in revelation and shaped by sustained interpretation over time. The sections that follow explore key mechanisms, historical examples, and modern applications of this tradition.

For centuries, scholars and theologians have debated the interpretation and meaning of religious texts and scriptures. For every person advocating harsher or more extreme interpretations, others argue that some positions upheld by churches and religious institutions have been misinterpreted, misquoted, or distorted, undermining their true meaning and understanding.

While everyone has the right to their beliefs and opinions, problems occur when these beliefs are enforced on others in ways that cause harm or deny dignity. In such cases, there should be space for challenge, discussion, and correction, allowing those who misuse or misrepresent facts to gain a deeper understanding and reflection.

Let us now examine some of the principal arguments that have been made and continue to be advanced regarding LGBTQIA+ people.

THOU SHALT NOT LIE WITH MANKIND AS WITH WOMANKIND

The most commonly cited Torah prohibition regarding male same-sex relations



- The verse is often presented in Jewish legal and theological discourse as a clear prohibition on male same-sex sexual acts. Traditional Jewish interpretation has long understood it within this framework, reading it as part of the Torah's broader sexual ethics.
- The prohibition appears in the Holiness Code of Leviticus, a section concerned with ritual holiness, covenantal identity, and communal boundaries in ancient Israelite society.
- Commonly cited verse: Leviticus 18:22
- For many observant Jews, this reading is seen as a straightforward

expression of loyalty to the Torah and halakhic tradition rather than as personal hostility towards LGBTQ+ people. Many understand their position as one that preserves divine commandments transmitted through generations of Jewish legal interpretation.

ALTERNATIVE

- The Hebrew phrase **mishkevei isha** ("the lyings of a woman") has been the subject of linguistic and interpretive discussion, in part because it is a relatively rare expression in the Hebrew Bible. Some scholars suggest that its unusual formulation invites debate about its precise legal scope and meaning, while others regard it as a standard idiom within biblical Hebrew sexual language.
- The verse appears within the Holiness Code, a broader section of Leviticus that includes ritual, ethical, and covenantal laws concerning food, purity, sexuality, and communal identity in ancient Israelite society.
- Some scholars argue that the term **toevah** ("abomination") can function in different ways depending on context, sometimes indicating ritual taboo, covenantal boundary-marking, or culturally specific prohibition, rather than a single uniform category of moral evil across all settings.
- The Torah explicitly addresses male same-sex sexual acts, while female same-sex relationships are not directly mentioned in the text. Scholars note that ancient societies did not conceptualise sexuality in terms of modern identity categories such as "sexual orientation" or lifelong LGBTQ+ identity frameworks.
- Some Jewish ethicists also argue that interpretation should be informed by broader Torah values such as human dignity (**kavod habriyot**), compassion, honesty, and mental well-being.
- SUMMARY: The disagreement concerns whether this verse is best understood as a timeless universal prohibition of all same-sex relationships, or as a historically situated legal instruction addressing specific acts within an ancient covenantal system.

The Torah passage prescribing capital punishment for male same-sex acts



- Leviticus 20:13 prescribes the death penalty for male same-sex intercourse, and some traditional interpreters regard this as indicating the seriousness with which the Torah treats prohibited sexual conduct within its legal framework.
- Commonly cited verse: Leviticus 20:13
- For many observant Jews, the presence of a severe penalty is understood in the context of ancient biblical legal systems rather than as a directive for contemporary moral behaviour or modern legal enforcement.

In rabbinic tradition, such punishments were also subject to extremely strict evidentiary standards, and most traditional Jewish authorities today do not advocate their application in modern legal systems.

- Many observant Jews see this passage as reflecting the seriousness of covenantal law in its historical context, rather than as expressing hostility towards LGBTQ+ individuals in contemporary society.

ALTERNATIVE

- The Talmud sets out a series of stringent evidentiary standards that, in practice, made the application of capital punishment exceptionally rare. These include requirements such as multiple qualified witnesses, prior verbal warning, and explicit acknowledgement by the accused.
- The Talmud (Makkot 7a) records the view that a court which executed one person in seventy years would be considered excessively punitive, reflecting a broader rabbinic emphasis on judicial restraint.
- Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon are understood in rabbinic tradition to express the idea that rigorous procedural interpretation would make executions extremely unlikely in practice.
- The same body of law also includes capital penalties for offences such as adultery and cursing parents, although such punishments are not enforced in contemporary Jewish communities.
- The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE brought an end to the Sanhedrin's authority to impose capital punishment, fundamentally altering the practical application of biblical penal law.
- Many Jewish thinkers, therefore, argue that Jewish legal ethics place strong emphasis on mercy, human dignity, judicial caution, and the preservation of life.
- SUMMARY: The disagreement is not about whether the Torah contains severe legal penalties, but about whether those penalties were intended as ongoing, enforceable law or primarily as expressions of moral seriousness within an ancient legal system.

The biblical narrative that is most commonly associated with homosexuality



- Some traditional interpretations read the destruction of Sodom in Genesis as linked to same-sex sexual behaviour, often citing the attempted assault on Lot's visitors as evidence of moral transgression and sexual violence.
- Commonly cited passage: Genesis 19
- Many religious Jews have inherited this interpretation through centuries of biblical commentary and regard it as part of maintaining fidelity to scripture and tradition. For many believers, the issue is understood in terms of obedience to divine moral instruction rather than personal hostility towards LGBTQIA+ individuals.

ALTERNATIVE

- The Torah narrative does not explicitly identify homosexuality as Sodom's sin, and the text has been interpreted in different ways within Jewish tradition.
- Ezekiel 16:49 offers a prophetic interpretation of Sodom's sins as pride, excess wealth, neglect of the poor and needy, and social arrogance. It is often cited as part of a broader interpretive tradition emphasising social injustice.
- Rabbinic literature in the Babylonian Talmud expands on Sodom's character in varied ways, often emphasising cruelty, greed, and hostility towards outsiders, alongside sexual violence and other moral transgressions.
- The Genesis narrative depicts attempted sexual violence and the public humiliation of guests, rather than consensual same-sex relationships.
- Some scholars, therefore, argue that the story is primarily concerned with abuse of power, coercion, violence, humiliation, and broader social corruption rather than sexuality as such.
- Ancient Near Eastern contexts often framed sexual violence in terms of domination, humiliation, and social power rather than categories resembling modern concepts of sexual orientation or identity.
- SUMMARY: The disagreement is not over whether Sodom is condemned, but over the narrative's interpretive focus: whether it is primarily concerned with same-sex relations in general, or with violence, coercion, humiliation, and broader social injustice.

The argument that procreation is central to God's design for humanity



- Some traditional Jewish interpretations read Genesis 1:28 as a divine mandate to “be fruitful and multiply,” placing procreation and family continuity at the centre of religious life. Within this interpretive framework, heterosexual marriage is often understood as the normative context for childbearing, and same-sex relationships are sometimes seen as being in tension with this mandate.
- Commonly cited verse: Genesis 1:28
- For many Jews, especially in light of centuries of persecution and demographic loss, family continuity and raising children are closely tied to Jewish survival. In this context, emphasis on procreation is often experienced as affirming family life and communal continuity, rather than as a direct statement about or condemnation of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

ALTERNATIVE

- Some Talmudic interpretations understand the commandment to “be fruitful and multiply” as primarily incumbent on men rather than universally binding on all individuals.
- This line of reasoning raises interpretive questions regarding celibacy, infertile couples, and heterosexual marriages without children.
- Some rabbinic authorities and later Jewish thinkers suggest that commandments relating to reproduction may be understood as fulfilled at a communal level, rather than requiring every individual to have biological children.
- Judaism traditionally values companionship, emotional support, stability, caregiving, and family life alongside biological reproduction.
- In contemporary Jewish communities, many LGBT Jews raise children through adoption, surrogacy, co-parenting, fostering, and other family structures.
- Some Jewish thinkers argue that reducing lifelong relationships entirely to biological reproduction overlooks broader ethical dimensions of love, partnership, and communal responsibility.
- SUMMARY: The disagreement is not over whether family and children matter, but over whether the commandment to reproduce excludes or invalidates same-sex relationships as legitimate family structures.

THE PROHIBITION APPLIES REGARDLESS OF EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT

The argument that loving same-sex relationships remains prohibited by halacha



- Some traditional Jewish authorities argue that halacha prohibits certain sexual acts, regardless of whether they occur within loving, committed, or monogamous relationships. Under this interpretation, the presence of love and commitment does not alter the halakhic classification of prohibited sexual conduct.
- At the same time, many within observant Jewish communities emphasise that this position is grounded in a commitment to divine commandment and legal continuity rather than in rejection of individuals. Some traditional believers acknowledge the emotional difficulty and lived experience involved, while maintaining that halakhic boundaries must nonetheless be upheld.
- Within modern halakhic discourse, this distinction between prohibited acts and personal identity is itself a subject of ongoing discussion.

ALTERNATIVE

- Ancient Jewish texts predate modern concepts of sexual orientation, lifelong same-sex partnership, and LGBTQIA+ identity in its contemporary form.
- Some scholars and interpreters argue that biblical prohibitions primarily address specific sexual acts rather than enduring romantic relationships or modern identity categories.
- Some Jewish ethicists argue that values such as love, fidelity, mutual care, honesty, and human dignity should inform interpretation.
- Some progressive Jewish movements distinguish between exploitative sexual conduct and consensual, committed same-sex relationships.
- Others argue that reducing relationships to sexual acts alone ignores the broader ethical dimensions of companionship, partnership, caregiving, and family life.
- Some contemporary Jewish thinkers also raise concerns about the psychological and social consequences of exclusion, including shame, isolation, and mental health impacts.
- SUMMARY: The disagreement is not whether love and commitment matter, but whether traditional prohibitions were intended to apply equally to modern understandings of same-sex relationships grounded in mutual love, dignity, and consent.

THE TORAH'S RULING IS ETERNAL AND CANNOT CHANGE

The argument that divine commandments are permanently binding



- Many traditional Jewish authorities hold that Torah prohibitions are eternal divine commandments that cannot be overridden by changing social norms. Under this view, human beings may reinterpret and apply the law, but do not have the authority to nullify explicit prohibitions in the Torah.
- For many observant Jews, empathetic understanding of individuals is seen as compatible with, and sometimes important for, maintaining commitment to the permanence of Torah law, which is understood to sustain Jewish continuity, identity, and covenantal obligation. Within this framework, concerns are sometimes raised that abandoning fixed halakhic standards could undermine the authority and coherence of Jewish law more broadly.
- At the same time, there is significant diversity within traditional Jewish thought about how strictly prohibitions, pastoral care, and communal inclusion should be balanced in practice.

ALTERNATIVE

- The idea of Torah law as fully fixed in all its applications developed in tension with a long history of rabbinic interpretation and legal development.
- For example, Hillel's Prozbul is often cited as a rabbinic legal mechanism that altered the practical application of biblical debt-release laws within halakhic logic.
- The Talmud contains passages that emphasise rabbinic interpretive authority, including the principle that halakhic interpretation is entrusted to human reasoning within a divinely given legal framework.
- Modern movements such as Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Judaism explicitly reject the view that all Torah laws must remain permanently fixed in identical form across history.
- Jewish legal history more broadly demonstrates ongoing reinterpretation and adaptation in response to changing social, political, and historical circumstances.
- Some Jewish thinkers, therefore, argue that fidelity to Judaism does not necessarily require preserving every historical interpretation unchanged across generations.
- SUMMARY: The disagreement is not over whether the Torah is binding, but over how continuity and change should be balanced—specifically, whether faithfulness to Judaism requires preserving historical interpretations unchanged over time.

The passage commonly cited regarding transgender identity and gender expression.



- Some traditional Jewish interpretations understand Deuteronomy 22:5 as prohibiting the crossing of established male-female distinctions in clothing and outward gender presentation. It is sometimes cited in discussions about transgender expression or gender transition. Within this interpretive framework, the verse is understood as reflecting divinely ordained distinctions in gender presentation and social roles.
- Commonly cited verse: Deuteronomy 22:5
- For many observant Jews, this interpretation is grounded in a desire to preserve what is understood as divine order and traditional categories of gender, rather than in personal hostility towards transgender individuals. Within this framework, emphasis is often placed on legal and theological boundaries alongside pastoral sensitivity towards individuals.
- Within halakhic literature, discussion of this verse has historically focused on clothing and presentation, and modern applications to gender identity are a subject of contemporary legal and ethical debate.

ALTERNATIVE

- Historically, some Jewish commentators interpreted this verse in contexts involving deception, idolatrous practices, or inappropriate social disguise, rather than in relation to modern concepts of gender identity.
- Ancient Jewish societies did not operate within contemporary psychological or medical frameworks of gender identity. Rabbinic literature instead developed legal categories such as the androgynous and tumtum to address cases of ambiguous or indeterminate sex characteristics within halakhic law.
- Some Jewish thinkers argue that principles of human dignity, mental well-being, and compassion should inform the application of such texts in modern contexts.
- Others maintain that the verse is concerned primarily with clothing and gendered social norms rather than with questions of innate identity.
- Some contemporary rabbis distinguish between preserving traditional modesty or gendered dress norms and making broader claims about transgender identity itself.
- SUMMARY: The disagreement is not over whether the verse is authoritative, but over how it should be applied—specifically, whether it addresses modern transgender identity or is limited to ancient concerns about gendered presentation and social conduct.

The creation narrative is commonly invoked to support gender-binary arguments.



- Some traditional Jewish interpretations understand Genesis 1:27 as reflecting a divinely intended male–female structure within humanity and human relationships. Within this interpretive framework, the verse is sometimes cited to support heterosexual complementarity and distinct gender roles.
- Commonly cited verse: Genesis 1:27
- For many religious Jews, this interpretation affirms sacred patterns of creation and maintains theological continuity. From this perspective,

the concern is not primarily about individual identity but about preserving what is perceived as the divinely established structure of creation.

ALTERNATIVE

- Some biblical scholars argue that the passage describes the general creation of humanity rather than establishing exhaustive legal or metaphysical categories for all future human experience.
- Rabbinic literature itself recognises additional sex and gender categories beyond male and female within halakhic classification, indicating that later Jewish legal thought did not always operate with a strict binary in practice.
- On this basis, some interpreters argue that descriptive creation language does not necessarily function as a direct legal or normative prescription.
- Modern Jewish thinkers often distinguish between biological sex categories and lived experiences of gender identity and sexual orientation when interpreting biblical texts.
- Some Jewish theologians further argue that human diversity may be understood as part of creation rather than a deviation from it.
- Others maintain that binary frameworks remain foundational to traditional Jewish theology and halakhic structure, even where secondary categories exist.
- SUMMARY: The disagreement is not about whether creation language is authoritative, but about whether Genesis is intended to establish an exclusive binary framework governing all aspects of human identity, classification, and relationships.

MARRIAGE AS KIDDUSHIN BETWEEN MAN AND WOMAN

The argument that Jewish marriage is inherently heterosexual



- Classical halakhic definitions of kiddushin describe marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman. On this basis, many Orthodox authorities argue that same-sex marriage cannot be constituted within traditional Jewish legal categories of marriage.
- For many observant Jews, this position is understood as preserving continuity with centuries of halakhic definition and legal structure rather than as a statement of exclusion regarding LGBT individuals within communal or social life.

ALTERNATIVE

- Jewish law has evolved and adapted to changing social realities across many areas of life and communal practice. However, the degree and mechanisms of change are understood differently across Jewish traditions.
- Some Jewish movements argue that the ethical values underpinning marriage—such as love, fidelity, mutual care, responsibility, and family—apply equally to same-sex couples.
- Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Judaism have developed religious ceremonies affirming same-sex marriage and broader LGBT inclusion within their respective frameworks.
- Others distinguish between civil and halakhic marriage, maintaining that only heterosexual unions fit within classical legal definitions of kiddushin.
- Some scholars and theologians argue that covenantal partnership can be understood more broadly than classical legal formulations alone, even when halakhic status remains unchanged.
- Many LGBT Jews seek stable family life, religious belonging, and covenantal commitment within Jewish communal and spiritual life.
- SUMMARY: The disagreement is not over whether marriage is a sacred institution, but over whether the halakhic definition of Jewish marriage can be extended or reinterpreted to include same-sex couples.

The argument that Judaism depends on preserving inherited teachings



- Many traditional Jews argue that Jewish continuity depends on preserving mesorah, the inherited chain of teaching passed down through generations. Because same-sex sexual conduct is understood in mainstream classical halakhic sources as prohibited, some hold that accepting it within religious practice would constitute a break with that inherited legal tradition.
- Commonly cited verse: Leviticus 18:3
- For many Jews, preserving tradition is essential to Jewish survival and

identity, especially in light of centuries of persecution, exile, and assimilation pressures. Within this framework, commitment to inherited practice is often understood as fidelity to ancestors and covenantal continuity rather than as personal hostility towards individuals or communities.

ALTERNATIVE

- Jewish history includes many instances of reinterpretation and legal adaptation in response to shifting historical and communal realities.
- Rabbinic debate and disagreement, or machloket, is a central feature of the Jewish intellectual tradition, reflecting ongoing engagement with textual authority.
- Some scholars argue that preserving Judaism need not entail freezing every historical interpretation, but can include evolving applications of inherited principles.
- Others emphasise that justice, compassion, human dignity, and communal responsibility are enduring Jewish values that also shape the interpretation of law and tradition.
- Modern Jewish movements differ significantly in their understandings of authority, halakhic flexibility, and the status of traditional prohibitions.
- Many Jewish thinkers argue that continuity through ethical reflection and reinterpretation has historically been part of Judaism's survival rather than a departure from it.
- SUMMARY: The disagreement is not over whether tradition matters, but over whether fidelity to tradition requires preserving historical prohibitions in their original form without substantive change.

DO NOT FOLLOW THE PRACTICES OF THE NATIONS

The argument that LGBT acceptance reflects external cultural influence



- Some traditional Jewish perspectives argue that growing LGBT acceptance reflects secular cultural influence rather than authentic Jewish teaching. In this context, some cite biblical warnings against adopting the practices of surrounding nations in contemporary debates about sexuality and gender.
- For reference, this idea is often associated with passages such as Leviticus 18:3, which some traditional readings interpret as a broader injunction against assimilation into surrounding cultural norms.
- For many observant Jews, concerns about assimilation are tied to preserving distinct religious and moral boundaries in the face of changing social norms. Within this framework, such concerns are often understood as reflecting anxieties about cultural survival, continuity, and religious identity rather than hostility towards LGBT individuals.

ALTERNATIVE

- Jewish communities throughout history have interacted with surrounding cultures while maintaining Jewish identity, law, and communal distinctiveness.
- Some interpret biblical injunctions against adopting the practices of surrounding nations as primarily addressing specific pagan and idolatrous practices, rather than all forms of cultural or social development originating outside Jewish communities.
- At the same time, Jewish life has historically incorporated and adapted elements of surrounding societies, including forms of governance, education, and communal organisation, while preserving distinct religious law and identity.
- Some Jewish thinkers argue that moral insight and ethical development can emerge across cultures and that engagement with broader societies need not undermine covenantal distinctiveness.
- Others contend that LGBT inclusion may arise from internal Jewish ethical reflection on values such as dignity, justice, compassion, and mental well-being, rather than simply reflecting external cultural influence.
- Jewish history therefore demonstrates ongoing adaptation alongside continuity, with core covenantal identity maintained across centuries of exile, migration, and cultural exchange.
- SUMMARY: The disagreement is not over whether Judaism should remain a distinct tradition, but over whether LGBT inclusion represents external assimilation or an internal ethical development within Jewish thought.

The concern that changing LGBT teachings could undermine Jewish law more broadly



- Some traditional authorities argue that reinterpreting prohibitions related to homosexuality could weaken confidence in halacha more broadly. They fear that revising or reinterpreting explicit Torah-based prohibitions may create precedents that could be extended to other areas of law, potentially affecting perceptions of religious authority and legal continuity.
- For many observant Jews, this concern is understood as reflecting a desire to preserve the coherence, integrity, and stability of Jewish law rather than targeting LGBT individuals. Within this framework, maintaining trust in the halakhic process is viewed as essential to Jewish communal continuity and religious authority.

ALTERNATIVE

- Jewish legal history encompasses extensive reinterpretation, minority opinions, legal disagreement, and evolving applications across many areas of life.
- Some scholars argue that reassessing interpretation is not equivalent to abandoning the Torah or rejecting Judaism, but is part of the ongoing interpretive process within halacha.
- Throughout history, halacha has developed in response to changing circumstances, including economic regulation, slavery, women's roles, and post-Temple religious practice, while maintaining fidelity to inherited texts and principles.
- Progressive Jewish thinkers argue that moral reflection, historical awareness, and legal development can coexist within Judaism without eliminating religious commitment.
- Others contend that Judaism has historically survived precisely because of its interpretive flexibility and its ability to engage changing human realities while maintaining continuity.
- Some Jewish ethicists also argue that maintaining halakhic credibility requires addressing pastoral realities, including mental health, exclusion, family rejection, and human dignity.
- At the same time, many traditional authorities maintain that preserving legal consistency is necessary to prevent fragmentation of Jewish religious authority.
- SUMMARY: The disagreement is not over whether halacha is central, but over whether reinterpretation of LGBT-related passages represents a continuation of Judaism's interpretive tradition or a break that risks undermining legal continuity.

04 SELECTIVE SCRIPTURES

The Selective Scriptures section examines religious texts, or, depending on interpretation, rules that guide ethical and social life. Many of these teachings were highly relevant in their original historical and cultural contexts but are no longer strictly observed by many practitioners, who recognise that some aspects do not translate easily into modern life. At the same time, patterns of selective emphasis raise an important question: why are some teachings reinterpreted or set aside, while others are treated as fixed and universally binding?

Scriptural references are often invoked to support firm or unquestionable positions on contemporary issues, with statements such as “the Torah is clear on this” or “religion has always taught this.” Such claims are often presented as definitive, shaping moral views and social attitudes.

Religious belief is deeply meaningful for many people, offering moral guidance, identity, and community. However, religious texts and traditions have always been interpreted in diverse ways across cultures, denominations, and historical periods. Across history, many religious institutions have also adapted their interpretations in response to broader social and cultural change.

This discussion is not about whether religious traditions should evolve, since change is a consistent feature of both religious history and human society. Rather, it focuses on selective interpretation: the tendency for some teachings to be reinterpreted, contextualised, or no longer observed, while others, particularly those relating to sexuality, identity, or relationships, are sometimes treated as uniquely absolute.

Within most theological traditions, multiple interpretations and historical perspectives coexist. The aim of this section is not to critique personal faith, but to explore how selective emphasis within interpretation can shape moral reasoning and attitudes towards others.

In the sections that follow, we will consider examples of teachings that many believers no longer apply literally today, and use these as a starting point for examining how and why certain values are reinterpreted while others remain strongly upheld.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND ROLES



Many religious texts were written within deeply patriarchal societies, and their teachings on the role of women often reflected the cultural and legal norms of their time. While many believers today interpret these passages symbolically or within historical context, others continue to treat them as authoritative guidance on gender roles, leadership, family structure, and social expectations.

PASSAGE	RULE
Classical Talmudic law	Women are exempt from time-bound positive commandments (mitzvot)
Classical law	Women cannot serve as witnesses in a rabbinical court.
Classical law	Only men can initiate divorce (get) - a wife cannot divorce her husband unilaterally.
Classical law	Women cannot be rabbis or cantors.
Leviticus 15:19-30	Menstruating women are ritually impure (niddah) and must not be touched.
Classical law	Men and women must be separated in the synagogue (mechitza)

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY



Scriptural teachings on marriage and family life have historically shaped expectations around gender, authority, divorce, inheritance, and parenting. Over time, many religious communities have adapted or reinterpreted these teachings in response to changing social values, while debates continue over which principles should remain fixed and which should evolve.

PASSAGE	RULE
Deuteronomy 25:5-10	Levirate marriage - a man must marry his dead brother's widow (yibbum)
Classical law	Jews must only marry other Jews (endogamy)

Classical law	A mamzer (child of a forbidden union) is barred from marrying a Jewish person for 10 generations.
Classical law	Marriages must be conducted under a chuppah with specific legal formulae.
Classical law	A Cohen (priestly descendant) may not marry a divorced woman or convert.

CRIMINAL AND CIVIL LAW



Many religious traditions contain legal codes governing punishment, justice, property, and public behaviour. While few modern societies apply these laws in their original form, they remain historically significant and continue to influence moral and legal discussions in some cultures and communities.

PASSAGE	RULE
Exodus 21:24	"An eye for an eye" (lex talionis)
Leviticus 20:10	Adultery = death for both parties
Leviticus 20:13	Male same-sex acts = death penalty
Deuteronomy 21:18-21	A rebellious son can be stoned.
Classical law	A Sanhedrin (religious court of 71 judges) is required for capital cases.
Numbers 5:11-31	The sotah ritual - a wife suspected of adultery drinks "bitter water"

FAITH RULES AND PRACTICES



Religious scriptures frequently set out rules relating to worship, ritual purity, prayer, observance, and daily conduct. Over time, many of these practices have been adapted, relaxed, or reinterpreted in different ways by various denominations and communities.

PASSAGE	RULE
Exodus 20:8-11	No work on Saturday from sundown on Friday
Exodus 35:3	No lighting of fire on the Sabbath - extended to electricity.
Classical law	No writing, tearing, building, or carrying objects in public on Shabbat
Classical law	An eruv (symbolic boundary wire) must be constructed to permit carrying in public.
Classical law	Medical treatment on Shabbat is restricted (though saving life always overrides)
Leviticus 1-7	Animal sacrifice is the primary means of atonement.
Leviticus 25:44-46	Non-Jewish enslaved people can be owned permanently and passed to children.
Classical law	Men must cover their heads (kippah) at all times.
Leviticus 19:27	Men must not shave the corners of their beards.
Classical law	Jewish prayer must be conducted in Hebrew.

FOOD AND DIET



Dietary laws and food restrictions have played an important role in many religious traditions, often serving spiritual, cultural, or communal purposes. While some believers continue to observe these rules closely, others follow them more selectively or symbolically in contemporary life.

PASSAGE	RULE
Leviticus 11 / Deuteronomy 14	No pork, shellfish, or non-kosher animals
Exodus 23:19	Don't boil a kid in its mother's milk - extended to full separation of meat and dairy.
Leviticus 11:9-12	Only fish with fins and scales are permitted - no shellfish.
Classical law	Meat must be slaughtered by a trained shochet (ritual slaughterer) and salted to remove blood.
Classical law	Wine handled by non-Jews (yayin nesech) is forbidden.
Leviticus 19:23-25	Fruit from a tree's first three years (orlah) cannot be eaten.

FINANCE AND ECONOMICS



Religious teachings on wealth, trade, debt, charity, and economic behaviour often reflected the realities of ancient societies and attempts to promote fairness or social stability. Some principles continue to influence ethical discussions today, while others are rarely observed literally in modern economic systems.

PASSAGE	RULE
Exodus 22:25	No charging interest to fellow Jews (ribbit)
Deuteronomy 15:1-2	All debts are cancelled every 7 years (shemitah)
Leviticus 25	The Jubilee year - all land returns to original owners every 50 years
Classical law	Jews may not handle money on the Sabbath.

05 QUICK REFERENCE

In the Quick Reference section, we provide a concise sheet summarising the main points and counterarguments. It's a handy guide for quickly checking facts or preparing a reasoned response, whether online or in person

#	POINT	CLAIM	COUNTERARGUMENT
1	THOU SHALT NOT LIE WITH MANKIND	Leviticus 18:22 clearly prohibits male same-sex relations as a divine command within Torah law.	The Hebrew wording is debated; the verse appears within broader ritual purity laws; and some scholars argue it addresses specific ancient acts rather than modern LGBT identities or loving relationships.
2	THE DEATH PENALTY	Leviticus 20:13 shows the seriousness of the prohibition by prescribing capital punishment.	Rabbinic Judaism made executions nearly impossible through strict evidentiary rules, later rejected practical enforcement, and many view the penalty as reflecting ancient legal seriousness rather than its modern application.
3	THE STORY OF SODOM	Sodom's destruction is often interpreted as divine condemnation of homosexual behaviour.	The text itself emphasises violence, attempted rape, arrogance, and injustice; Ezekiel and rabbinic tradition focus more on cruelty and inhospitality than on consensual same-sex relationships.
4	BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY	Judaism prioritises heterosexual marriage and reproduction as part of God's design.	The commandment has traditionally been interpreted narrowly, and Judaism also values companionship, stability, and family life beyond biological reproduction.
5	PROHIBITION REGARDLESS OF LOVE	Even loving same-sex relationships remains prohibited because halacha focuses on acts, not emotional intention.	Ancient texts lacked modern concepts of orientation and committed LGBT partnerships; many modern Jewish thinkers emphasise dignity, fidelity, and mutual care alongside legal interpretation.
6	TORAH LAW IS ETERNAL	Divine commandments cannot be changed by shifting social attitudes.	Jewish history is marked by extensive reinterpretation and adaptation, and many Jewish movements argue that faithfulness can include evolving understandings of the Torah and ethics.

#	POINT	CLAIM	COUNTERARGUMENT
7	GENDER DISTINCTION	Deuteronomy 22:5 is interpreted as prohibiting transgender identity or crossing gender boundaries.	Many scholars argue that the verse addresses deception or pagan customs, while rabbinic literature itself recognises categories beyond a strict binary.
8	MALE AND FEMALE, HE CREATED THEM	Genesis establishes a divinely intended gender binary and heterosexual structure.	Some interpret the passage descriptively rather than legally, and Jewish tradition recognises human diversity beyond rigid binary categories.
9	MARRIAGE AS KIDDUSHIN	Traditional Jewish marriage is inherently between a man and a woman.	Progressive Jewish movements argue that covenantal values, such as love, commitment, and responsibility, can apply equally to same-sex couples.
10	PRESERVING MESORAH	Accepting same-sex relationships would break continuity with inherited Jewish tradition.	Jewish tradition has always involved reinterpretation, debate, and adaptation, and many argue that continuity does not require preserving every historical interpretation unchanged.
11	DO NOT FOLLOW THE NATIONS	Some view LGBT inclusion as assimilation to secular culture rather than authentic Judaism.	Judaism has historically interacted with surrounding cultures while retaining its identity, and many argue that LGBT inclusion can emerge from internal Jewish ethical reflection.
12	FEAR OF WEAKENING HALACHA	Reinterpreting LGBT-related prohibitions could undermine confidence in Jewish law generally.	The Jewish legal tradition has continually evolved, and many scholars argue that reinterpretation can strengthen rather than undermine Judaism's legal and ethical framework.

06 FURTHER READING

The Belief Briefs are intended to encourage critical thinking and informed discussion by examining assumptions, long-held views, and common misconceptions. Their purpose is not to challenge or undermine faith or personal belief systems, but to promote a deeper understanding of the topics explored.

If you would like to continue learning about this subject, we recommend the following resources for further reading.

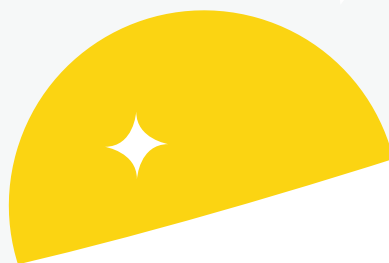
SUGGESTED READING

Explore a selection of articles, publications, and educational materials designed to help you deepen your knowledge and engage with a range of perspectives on the subject.

- Jacob Milgrom - Leviticus
- Daniel Boyarin - Carnal Israel
- Steven Greenberg - Wrestling with God and Men
- Judith Plaskow - Standing Again at Sinai
- Babylonian Talmud - Makkot 7a
- Mishnah Sanhedrin
- Rabbi Elliot Kukla - LGBTQ+ Jewish theology

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