

The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Video testimony – experience of conversion practices – viewed by Committee Members in private

23 November 2021

Participant: S

I'm S and I'm a survivor of gay conversion therapy. I grew up in a Jewish family in north London

My story begins [in 2011] when I started uni, studying biosciences. During this time I realised I wasn't straight. I'd known it all along, but because everyone in my community followed this path of dating someone at uni, getting married, having kids etc. I believed maybe I was a late developer and maybe I would find my person at uni. When I arrived I very quickly realised that I was gay and there was no hope in my case.

As I had this realisation, I thought well ok, I believe in God and the Bible, I must follow the biblical rules otherwise I throw it all away. I became ultra-orthodox. So I thought, Leviticus says "a man may not lie with a man like he lies with a woman", so being gay is not an option.

I got involved in religious life at uni and went on a trip to Israel with an outreach organisation. During this trip I got very close to a rabbi. There was an evening when we all went out and I sat next to the rabbi. We had a very private conversation.

He said I didn't look happy and asked me what was wrong. I said I wasn't happy in my relationship. I was dating a guy at the time. The rabbi said "is it the guy himself, or guys in general?"

I paused and said it was guys in general. The rabbi suggested we talk about it in the morning. The next day we talked, Slowly, over time, the rabbi became my confidante. I trusted him and assumed he had some sort of qualification that would enable him to support me. We would talk back and forth, but the danger of this was that where he was coming from was strict by the Bible. I could see I was loved and supported but only if I kept on the 'set path'.

I told the rabbi I didn't want to be gay and asked what I should do. He said he knew people in Israel, and would come back to me. A few months later he introduced me to a very religious person in Jerusalem, and so began my conversion therapy.

I dropped out of uni for a year and began the therapy. It was talking therapy, so involved meditations, reflecting on childhood. It was a scattergun approach. We began by looking at my family background. The therapist looked at my parents – my dad's a lawyer, my mum's an occupational therapist – and he said "clearly you don't have a strong relationship with your parents because they both work, so that's a key

area where you need nurturing and are looking to women for that". In my mind, I knew that wasn't right.

The therapist said I lacked confidence and was scared of talking to boys. But I knew that was wrong too. Most of my friends are guys. But I was willing to do these meditations and build my confidence. I figured "what could be wrong in that?"

But slowly the talking became more insidious and it was apparent there was something wrong with me. We needed to change something internally to get to what was right. We started with rapid eye movement therapy, used for people with PTSD. In order to kiss a guy, the therapist was trying to neutralise any negative thoughts or feelings I had towards kissing guys.

Then he took it from being a talking therapy to more like a self-reflection therapy. This is when it got dangerous for me. He was trying to lead me away from trusting my own instincts. For example, if I got butterflies for women he was trying to find other reasons for those butterflies. Maybe I was anxious about something. He was trying to make a dissonance between my brain and my body in a way, so I had to rely on trusting him.

After breaking these things down he moved on to religion. He said "a woman needs to be with a man; a man needs to be with a woman. You can only fulfil your life purpose and achieve your optimum if you're in a marital relationship".

People talk about coercion. This is a form of long-term coercion. Eventually the therapist asked if I'd been abused. I said no, nothing ever happened. So he suggested regression, to a past life where I had potentially sinned. So I sat with the therapist and another guy where they were expecting me to come up with some story. So I created a story. It was very traumatising and left me very depressed. My parents said it was not good for me.

I told the therapist he had to show me someone the therapy had worked on. He introduced me to H, six months later. I asked if she could kiss a guy. She said no. I asked if she could sleep with a guy. She said no.

At that moment I got prickles up my arms and I knew. H had been in therapy for six years and this was the outcome. It devastated me. I went back to England and uni. I had to start a life with no guidance, no support, nothing. It was empty. I wanted so much to be a part of this religious Jewish community, but at the same time I was being rejected from it. The idea was that I was rejecting it, but it wasn't that way.

Moving forward, I've researched and spoken to various rabbis. We can ban conversion therapy. The problem is religious institutions are too scared to look at the text. It doesn't say a woman can't lie with a woman. It's a shade of grey for women. For men, there are various loopholes.

We need to turn the question round. It's not on us. It's not on the victims to have to stand our ground. So when we talk about free will and freedom to pray, there are limits anyway. If you ask someone to pray for someone's partner to be dead, no religious leader would pray for that. If you talk to change another minority's skin

colour, no religious leader would tolerate that. We know in our gut this is wrong. So I don't understand how this can be perpetuated. There's room in the book for both. But we need to be clear who the victim is.