

Nov eNews: LGBT issues in the Jewish Community

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Dear Friends,

These past months have seen a great deal of public and Jewish discussion on LGBT issues. There have been political struggles around **'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'** and **Proposition 8**, controversy over the publication of a gay wedding announcement in the **New Jersey Jewish Standard**, and, tragically, a recent spate of **suicides by young men**. With the help of some fantastic content-sharing with organizations such as **Keshet**, **the Union for Reform Judaism**, **TransTorah**, and the **Institute for Judaism and Sexual Orientation at HUC-JIR**, BJPA now contains over **130 documents** on LGBT Issues in the Jewish community.

The issue of acceptance and marginalization of Lesbians and Gays has been on the American Jewish agenda for decades. The language of the Reform movement's **National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods**, the predecessor of **Women of Reform Judaism**, in their **1965 resolution on Homosexuality** is both familiar - strongly resembling the recent Orthodox **"Statement of Principles on the Place of Jews With a Homosexual Orientation in Our Community"** - and jarring : "...homosexuality may be a symptom of psychiatric disturbance which requires sympathetic understanding and psychiatric evaluation...We, therefore, deplore the tendency on the part of community authorities to harass homosexuals." Twenty years later, the **Journal of Jewish Communal Service** **noted** that 43% of straight Jews were disturbed by the "rise in visibility of gay Jews," while 49% were not.

In the 1970s and 1980s, communities began to address the religious responses to issues arising from social changes. For example, the Reform movement came down against the formation of **Gay and Lesbian congregations** (1973) and **religious marriage for homosexuals** (1985), but in favor of the acceptance of **homosexual converts** (1982) and in favor of an end to **legal discrimination** against homosexuals (1977). Our earliest reference to Gay and Lesbian families is a 1986 Reform responsum about the issue of **lesbian parents** at their child's bar mitzvah.

Starting in the late 70s, more Jewish organizations openly addressed and confronted the challenges brought about by changing social norms. As early as 1976, Chicago's Jewish Family and Community Service took proactive steps to adapt their professional skills and knowledge in response to **"changing lifestyles"** including an increase in the number of homosexuals seeking counseling. **Gerald Bubis** included "homophiles" in the category of "experimental families" to be considered in thinking about **The Jewish Community Center's Responsibility for the Needs of the Jewish Family** (1975). In **Resolving Ethical Dilemmas in the Jewish Community Center**, **Norman Linzer** recounts how the Centers came to the conclusion of offering programs "to the families of gays but not for the gays themselves." In 1997, the **Journal of Jewish Communal Service** explored the **Ethics of Gay and Lesbian Adoptions** and specifically the question of Jewish children being adopted into gay and lesbian homes. Just last week, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach explored the same question on **The Huffington Post**.

Several movements and organizations have moved toward greater recognition and acceptance. In 1989, the **Union for Reform Judaism's** resolution on **Gay and Lesbian Jews** stated: "Our union of congregations must be a place where loneliness and suffering and exile end." Since then, a growing collection of literature has emerged on how to create inclusive Jewish spaces, from the **Jewish Reconstructionist Federation's "Becoming a "Kehillah Mekabelet"** (a "welcoming congregation") (1998), to **Rabbi Steven Greenberg's Inclusion and Welcoming Criteria for Orthodox Synagogues** (2004), **TransTorah's Making Your Jewish Congregation or Community More Transgender Friendly** and the Union for Reform Judaism's **18 Ways to Make Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Members Feel Welcome in Your Congregation**.

Jewish organizations have also joined in on the political battles around LGBT issues, such as discrimination in the **military** (1991) and the **Boy Scouts** (2001). The Jewish community has been a particularly strong voice on the legislation of same-sex civil marriage. The **Conservative** (2006), **Reform** (1996), **Reconstructionist** (2004), and **Humanistic** (2004) movements have published resolutions in support while the **Orthodox Union** has consistently expressed **concern** (1999) and **opposition** (2006).

In recent years, the community has begun the serious study of Gay and Lesbian Jews as a

demographic, a topic I have had the opportunity to explore in my own work, including **Gay, Jewish, or Both? Sexual Orientation and Jewish Engagement** (2009) and **Gays, Lesbians, and the Conservative Movement: The JTS Survey of Conservative Clergy, Students, Professionals, and Lay Leaders** (2007). Other key publications on this subject include **LGBT Alliance Study: Needs Assessment of the San Francisco Bay Area LGBT Jewish Community** (2010) and **We Are You: An Exploration of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Colorado's Jewish Community** (2006).

Our communities have been and continue to be diverse in composition and in values, but I think that we share a commitment to the sacredness of life. The Berman Jewish Policy Archive @ NYU Wagner has endorsed **Keshet's** grassroots campaign, "**Do Not Stand Idly By: A Jewish Community Pledge to Save Lives**," launched in response to the suicides of Raymond Chase (age 19), Tyler Clementi (age 18), Justin Aaberg (age 15), Asher Brown (age 13), and Seth Walsh (age 13). The campaign calls on individuals and organizations to commit to "ending homophobic bullying or harassment of any kind in our synagogues, schools, organizations, and communities."

With best wishes,
Steven

Prof. Steven M. Cohen
Director, **Berman Jewish Policy Archive @ NYU Wagner**