

[Archive](#)**The Gay Orthodox Underground**

With support groups proliferating and a new film documenting their hardships, observant homosexuals are sending a simple message: It's OK to be Orthodox and gay.

Naomi Grossman

"Jonathan" and "David" are observant Jews. They belong to the same Orthodox synagogue in New York City. From time to time, other synagogue members invite them to Shabbat lunch. Periodically, Jonathan and David host a family for Shabbat in the Manhattan apartment they share. Occasionally, someone who doesn't know them well will try to interest one or the other in a nice Orthodox girl. After all, Jonathan and David are single professionals in their early 40s—ripe material for a *shiddach* (match). But both men always respond, politely, that they are not interested.

That's because Jonathan and David are already committed. To each other.

Jonathan is a social worker. But that does not define him in the Orthodox Jewish world nearly as emphatically as his sexuality. That is why he is not openly gay in his Orthodox community (and why he, and several other gay men interviewed for this article, asked that their real names not be used).

"I am not keeping [it] a secret," says Jonathan, "but I also don't feel I have to make a statement. People don't need to know everything about me—especially something that is so personal."

More and more, gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews seem to be taking Jonathan's approach: acknowledging they are gay, even if they don't advertise it. And in response, a growing number of underground support groups geared specifically to Orthodox Jews are cropping up both online and in Jewish centers in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Miami. Their purpose, as one of the groups notes on its Web site, "is to provide a safe place for people to integrate their Jewish and gay identities in a self-affirming, positive manner." The groups hold monthly meetings and special events; some even offer a 24-hour help hotline.

For gay Orthodox Jews, the rise in support groups is a promising development—even though these groups are not officially sanctioned. The Orthodox community has largely overlooked or ignored gays in the past, while Reform and Conservative Jewish leaders have formally and publicly grappled with homosexuality. But the issue is getting harder to ignore. Later this year with the release of the documentary film *Trembling Before G-d*, the painful lives of gay Orthodox Jews will play out unflinchingly on movie screens nationwide. The film, which is slated to open in New York this month, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah in January. It "stirred much emotion in the audience and immediate interest from buyers," according to a report in the *Washington Post*, putting the

gay Orthodox community in an unfamiliar position: the limelight.

And with this exposure comes the growing realization by gay Orthodox Jews that there are others like them out there. Five years ago, when three gay Orthodox friends founded a support group called the Gay and Lesbian Yeshiva Day School Alumni Association (GLYDSA), Orthodox homosexuals were much more isolated. "Gay Orthodox people didn't exist in the eyes of the Orthodox world then," says "Chaim," a New York area professional who was at the group's first meeting. "If you didn't know any other gay Orthodox Jews, you carried around this really dark secret."

Today, says Chaim, all of that is changing. The underground community is growing, allowing gay Orthodox Jews to associate with each other.

"We come from all kinds of families and all kinds of backgrounds," Chaim says. "We are everywhere."

The Official Orthodox Take

It is hard to imagine two more divergent realities than homosexuality and Orthodoxy. The Torah strictly forbids homosexual sex, and rabbis have consistently upheld that prohibition through the ages. "The Orthodox gay movement is organizing ... around something that is unacceptable," says Rabbi Barry Freundel of Keshet Israel, a modern Orthodox synagogue in Washington, DC. "It's like saying we're a group of Orthodox Sabbath violators or Orthodox ham eaters."

The prohibition against homosexual sex comes from Leviticus: "Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence" (18:22). In biblical times, the punishment for violating that code was clear. "If a man lies with a male as one lies with a woman, the two of them have done an abhorrent thing; they shall be put to death—their bloodguilt is upon them" (Leviticus 20:13). The Talmud extends the prohibition to lesbian sex (*Sifrei* 98). And the Shulchan Aruch, the standard code of Jewish law, reinforced the ban in the 16th century. "In these generations," the citation begins, "when sexual licentiousness is rampant, a man should distance himself from lying together with another man." Indeed, throughout the ages, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, "The Orthodox have continued to denounce homosexual sex while accepting the homosexual as a full, but sinning, Jew."

Today most Orthodox rabbis would concur with that view. Rabbi Avi Shafran, spokesperson for Agudath Israel of America, is among them. "The whole approach to demanding to be accommodated is profoundly non-Orthodox," says Shafran, whose New York-based organization promotes the Orthodox world view. "I have a hard time dealing with someone who says, 'I'm gay and I want to be accepted.' Adulterers are not demanding adulterers' minyan. We can't elevate sinning to a lifestyle. The more it's mainstream ... the more people will choose it and accept it as an option."

Official Orthodoxy makes no distinction between the sex act, which the Torah flatly prohibits, and homosexuality as a sexual identity. "Homosexuality is not a state of being in traditional Judaism; it's an act," Freundel says. "Desires are ... not relevant."

Individual rabbis have counseled gay men and women on how to cope with their desires—mainly by advising them to suppress their homosexual tendencies or to get help. There is an informal "don't ask, don't tell" policy operating in the more liberal Orthodox synagogues, allowing gays to receive *aliyot* and to daven from the pulpit. "If someone comes to my shul, I don't ask those kinds of questions," says Freundel. "If someone told me in confidence [that they were gay], it wouldn't have an impact on their standing in the shul."

But few Orthodox rabbis have ever stood up and publicly addressed the issue or provided any halachic (Jewish legal) parameters beyond the standard "It is an abomination." No rabbi wants to be seen as possibly condoning an act that has been outlawed by God in the Torah.

The marginalization of gays exists to a much lesser degree in Judaism's other denominations. As far back as 1977, Reform rabbis passed a resolution "encourag[ing] legislation which decriminalizes homosexual acts between consenting adults and prohibits discrimination against them as persons." Fourteen years later, the Conservative movement followed suit with similar resolutions. Reform rabbis endorsed same-sex civil marriages in 1996, and the movement recently voted to allow rabbis to conduct same-sex marriages and to permit ordination for gay men and women. Reconstructionists admit homosexuals into their rabbinic and cantorial schools as well. While the Conservative movement does not condone same-sex marriages or ordain gay men or women as rabbis, "Congregations are encouraged to welcome and reach out to gay members," according to Marianna Matt Newirth, assistant director of media relations at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Conversion to Heterosexuality

Freundel, in an article entitled "Judaism and Homosexuality" (*Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*) writes that the traditional Jewish community should motivate homosexuals to change their orientation. But he stresses that gay individuals should be kept within the Torah community. Freundel advocates *kiruv* (outreach) for homosexual Jews, much as some might advocate outreach to an intermarried couple. "We must create a situation which offers a positive alternative to the gay synagogue and to the even worse choices of complete abandonment and assimilation," he writes.

Some go beyond outreach to outright conversion. Nefesh: The International Association of Orthodox Mental Health Professionals, a Brooklyn-based organization, advocates conversion therapy for Orthodox homosexuals. Nefesh members argue that gay men can be treated for homosexuality and converted back to heterosexuality. The New Jersey-based Jews Offering New Alternatives to Homosexuality, founded a year ago, also advocates reaching out to Orthodox homosexuals to help them become heterosexuals. This Jewish push toward conversion mirrors a national push: The National Association for Research and Treatment of Homosexuality says three out of every ten homosexuals are successfully converted.

But those who advocate this approach do so in spite of a 1997 American Psychological Association finding that reparative therapy to convert homosexuals is scientifically ineffective—and possibly harmful. The gay Orthodox individuals interviewed for this article

attested to that finding.

Consider "Shalom," a gay Jewish physician in his early 40s who was in conversion therapy for 11 years. Shalom was raised in an Orthodox home and realized he was attracted to men in his high school yeshiva. A rabbi told him to get therapy to help him change—to purge the gayness from his system. He tried behavioral therapy, wearing a rubber band around his wrist and flicking it every time he felt attracted to a man. He went to Israel, where a rabbi told him to eat dates and recite a psalm every day. When that failed, he entered Aesthetic Realism, a New York-based group that works with gay people to change their sexual orientation.

At the same time, Shalom dated women. The right one, he believed, could help him change. On one of those dates, Shalom flew to New York from the West Coast. After the date, he broke down in the cab and began crying. "I felt emotionally raped," he says. "I couldn't keep acting. I decided to accept it. At 31, I came out to myself."

Conversion therapy, Shalom says, is emotionally destructive. He says a friend of his who was "cured" of gayness later tried to take his own life. "You don't change," he says. "You only end up hating yourself even more."

The Support Groups

It is impossible to get an accurate number of gay Orthodox Jews. There is no official membership, and only a handful of people are willing to put their names on support-group lists. Shlomo Ashkinazy, a gay-rights activist and Orthodox Jew who lives in New York City, says he has spoken with over 200 gay Orthodox Jews over the past few years. Filmmaker Sandi DuBowski, who produced and directed *Trembling Before G-d*, interviewed hundreds of gay *frum* (observant) Jews over the past few years for his movie. And those involved in gay community outreach say there are many more out there.

In the New York area, home to the largest concentration of gay Orthodox Jews, at least four support groups have sprung up to meet their needs. There are also a number of informal groups that meet on a monthly basis for Shabbat meals or Talmud study. Some of these informal groups, many of which operate in secret, have been around for years.

"It's almost a cliché," says Ashkinazy, who helped found one of the support groups. "Every gay *frum* Jew who finds out about [the support networks] says, 'I thought I was the only one.'"

The three founders of the Gay and Lesbian Yeshiva Day School Alumni Association chose that name specifically to attract a gay group with an Orthodox background. The group was publicized solely through word-of-mouth.

Sixty people showed up at the first meeting. For Chaim, then 28, walking into a room and meeting people like himself for the first time was a powerful experience. "I had told one person I was [gay]," he says. "All these people were going through the same thing. To see that you're not alone gives you inner strength."

"I am a different person today than I was five years ago," he adds. "I [now] know who I am."

GLYDSA has a confidentiality agreement that extends to all its members. Between 30 to 60 people show up at the group's monthly meetings in New York City, organizers say. Chaim estimates that about 2,000 people have come to meetings over the past five years. "The people who come are a total cross-section from the Jewish community," he says. "People with black hats, colored yarmulkes, girls who wear skirts, pants. *Hasidische* people. And they come from all over. We've had people from Boston, Washington, Florida, California, Israel, England, France, Canada. They come to see that there is something out there for them."

Similar groups exist in Israel, England, and California. The first West Coast support group was founded in Los Angeles by "Jacob," a 54-year-old Orthodox gay Jew who had been married and living in a New York suburb until ten years ago, when he confessed to his wife that he was gay. Jacob hasn't seen his children since. He tried attending Reform synagogues, but because of his level of observance, he was not comfortable. He started attending an Orthodox synagogue, but was treated as a second-class member (he did not receive *aliyot*, for example) because he was gay.

GLYDSA does very little advertising, but its presence on the Internet (www.glydsa.com) has helped people to find out about it. The anonymity provided by the Internet has been a godsend to Orthodox gays. Suddenly, questions can be asked without fear of exposure.

Another Web site, Orthogays (www.orthogays.com), provides resources and answers to the most frequently asked questions. Is it possible to be Orthodox and gay or lesbian? What does the Torah say about homosexuality? What can I do about sex as an Orthodox gay Jew? Can I still be Orthodox if I have gay sex? Why did God make me gay? What about the mitzvah of *pru urvu* (procreation)? How can I contribute to the continuity of the Jewish people?

Chat rooms enable people to safely meet and talk about topics that would normally be viewed as taboo. The topics in those chat rooms vary widely. They have recently included: What constitutes kosher sex for an Orthodox gay couple? Should Orthodox gays come out? What should be said when gay bashing is heard at a Shabbat meal?

"Miryam's" interest in starting OrthoDykes, a group for Orthodox Jewish lesbians, had its start in Israel about ten years ago. The issues for Orthodox lesbians are different than for Orthodox gay men, in part because the Torah does not specifically prohibit lesbian sex. Still, these women are often married and have children, and coming out would mean isolation. "[Orthodoxy] is all they know," says Miryam. "They love the rituals, the Sabbath, the davening. But then religion becomes the thing that means they have to reject a part of themselves. Your spiritual side is as powerful as your sexual side. You can't ignore [one] at the expense of the other."

Ashkinazy, meanwhile, says the groups are transforming the community. For a long time, he says, "people couldn't conceive that it was possible to be gay and frum, so they were leaving [Orthodoxy] in droves." Now, he says, "More and more people are staying frum—because of the support system and the role models."

Many gay Orthodox Jews attempt to ignore their sexual impulses, perhaps even marrying and raising families. Others act on their impulses to a point—avoiding intercourse because of the biblical

prohibition. And then there are those who lead fully gay lives, ignoring the halachic ban on gay sex.

"Ovadia" is in the first group. Ovadia lives in a right-wing Orthodox community in New York. He confessed to his wife that he was gay when she was pregnant with their fourth child. She stayed with him, and they now have six children. Ovadia attends Ashkinazy's support group for gay Orthodox men, and says he enjoys the camaraderie. But he would never tell anyone at his shul that he goes to these meetings. He says he and his family have too much to lose.

Richard Isay, a gay New York-based psychoanalyst, estimates that 15 to 20 percent of gay men marry women—because they want to deny or "cure" their gayness, or want children, or to please their parents. After a few years, Isay says, many have episodes of unfaithfulness. After 20 years of marriage, most of these couples were divorced or stuck in loveless marriages. He adds that in the Orthodox community, the number of gay men marrying in pursuit of traditional lives is much higher than in the secular world.

"In the Orthodox world the pressure to conform is enormous," says Naomi Mark, a psychotherapist in private practice in Manhattan with a large Orthodox clientele. "Throughout life you are learning about the values of family, Torah, and how the mitzvah of pru urvu is incumbent upon men. The barriers to accepting one's impulses are that much harder because the cost is so great."

GLYDSA tackles questions about sexual intimacy directly on its Web site. In a section headlined "Questions About Being Gay and Frum," the organization cites the relevant Leviticus chapters, but goes on to say: "The Torah does not say anything about being gay—about having a homosexual orientation. What the Torah addresses is certain specific homosexual conduct.

"Some [Orthodox gay men] decide not to act on their sexual feelings and choose to be celibate," the site explains. "Others feel that they need intimate sexual contact with another person; so they kiss, hug and caress; they may touch in ways that lead to orgasm (such as mutual masturbation); and may also have oral sex. Many men, though, decide not to have anal sex."

"Ira," a 34-year-old father who has been married for 12 years, is one of those men. He has never told his wife that he is gay, although he says they have had sexual problems throughout their marriage. He has his sexual urges but says he would never cheat on his wife. Ira views his homosexuality as a test from God. "Just as there are people born with disabilities and disadvantages, and these are all ordained by God to deal with and overcome, homosexuality is no different," Ira says. "Orthodox Jews who want to create an Orthodox gay community are making a terrible mistake ... living a gay lifestyle is not in accordance with Jewish law and tradition."

Even GLYDSA views anal sex as a transgression—a "limit that G-d put on what two men can do." But the organization is quick to point out that God has other limits as well: "what we eat (*kashrut*, the Jewish dietary laws) and when straight couples can have sex (*niddah*, the marital purity laws).

"Every Jew is rewarded for each mitzvah he does and is responsible for each ... transgression," the site concludes. "Homosexual activity

has no bearing on one's Jewishness. And while the Torah says that men should not have anal sex, all humans, by their very nature, are imperfect. This is why *teshuva* (repentance) was given to us."

Most of the Orthodox gay men interviewed for this article said they do, in fact, refrain from anal intercourse. And despite what GLYDSA says, many say that oral sex and masturbation among men are generally understood to be prohibited because a man is not allowed to "spill his seed."

"Ben" is one of those who strives for celibacy. It is unclear to him exactly what is allowed and what is not allowed. "The rabbis leave you on your own," he says. "They don't tell you what's okay and what's not okay. I try to live my life as a halachically oriented Jew, but the rabbis don't tell me how to live as a halachically oriented gay Jew."

For that reason, Ben has resigned himself to a life alone, even though, he says he'd like nothing more than to come home to a partner on a Friday night or curl up on a couch and watch a movie with someone. He says that the temptation to violate halachah would be too great.

"I can't be non-Orthodox any more than I can be non-gay," he says. "Gayness is not a contradiction to being Orthodox. It just makes life more challenging."

And then there are those who are more forceful about coming out. Rabbi Steven Greenberg, an Orthodox rabbi who works at CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, is among them. Greenberg, who became Orthodox at 15, spent 20 years fighting his gayness, trying desperately to hide it, and eventually became part of the underground community of Orthodox gay Jews. "I wasted 20 years of my life on self-hatred, guilt, and fear," Greenberg said in a recent interview.

Greenberg eventually came out in the Israeli daily *Maariv* in March, 1999. He says coming out was a liberating experience that carries a huge responsibility. "Ideally, one should get married and have children," says Greenberg. "But in the event that one can't, the punishment of celibacy is unthinkable. It's just not realistic and not human."

Greenberg's status as an Orthodox rabbi—and the fact that he came out in such a public way—has caused quite a stir in the Orthodox community. Many Orthodox rabbis have publicly denounced Greenberg, questioning his Orthodox credentials. "He wants to have his cake and eat it too," says Shafran. "He is lying to the public by saying, 'I have an Orthodox mindset.'"

Greenberg, for his part, intends to capitalize on the furor he has caused by publishing a book, *Wrestling with G-d and Man* (due out next year), analyzing the biblical prohibition against homosexuality and providing a framework for the inclusion of gays in the Orthodox community. Greenberg says he wants to "raise consciousness about the gay Orthodox community." He says gays are walking a path in Orthodoxy that feminists have already trod. "At one time women who were feminist and Orthodox left the Orthodox community, but now they are staying," Greenberg says. "We're staying, too."

Searching for Compassion

The silence of the Orthodox community can be devastating to its gay constituents, who struggle with their sexual identities daily. "The leaders of the Orthodox community want to pretend you don't exist," says "Baruch," a 20-year-old Yeshiva University student. "That kind of antagonism is very scary."

And, he says, there is a flip side to the silent treatment. "How could you have respect for leaders who don't accept you and wish part of you wasn't here?"

Baruch grew up in an Orthodox home, attending all-male yeshivas until college. He had realized he was attracted to men at age 11 and considered himself a freak. "Prejudice in the Orthodox community is not only allowed, it's taught," Baruch says. "We're never told about the existence of gays ... 'Gay' [and] 'faggot' are words yeshiva boys use to insult each other."

Baruch says his goals are startlingly conventional. "I would like to get married and have an Orthodox family," he says. "That may be impossible for me because I would have to tell my partner about my attraction to men. That may be too much for a woman to handle."

It's not clear where that leaves someone like Baruch, who has one foot in the Orthodox community and one foot dangling dangerously close to the prohibited gay world. But for his part, he knows what would make life a whole lot better: "I'm not asking for a *hetter* [a special halachic dispensation], just recognition. Rabbis can *poskin* [rule] that most [homosexual acts] are *assur* [forbidden], but say, 'These people exist.' Be compassionate and make it easy for us to be part of this community and live with our trials."

And trials they are. While there are no statistics available on the community's suicide rate, every gay Orthodox person interviewed for this article told me she or he knew of at least one Orthodox homosexual who had attempted or committed suicide. Experts say the suicide rate among gay Orthodox Jews is likely to be even higher than for the gay community at large, owing to the more restrictive and tight-knit atmosphere of Orthodox communities.

And that isolation can have other repercussions as well. About four years ago, for example, a young Orthodox man quietly died of AIDS. Before his death, his family did not discuss his condition: They were ashamed. To this day, the family has not come forward to publicly discuss the story. But a group of the man's friends was moved to found the Tzvi Aryeh Foundation—named for their friend—in New York City.

The foundation is a confidential resource for Jews who want to find out about HIV/AIDS; it also underwrites educational outreach programs. Yael Hameiri, a staff member, estimates that the foundation hotline receives between ten and twenty calls a month from gay Orthodox Jews.

"Many rabbis tell these men to satisfy themselves on the side" says Mark. "But in the age of AIDS, this is life-threatening." And, notes Mark, a look-the-other-way approach to adultery can have obvious implications for women as well. "The pain and the rage ruins these women's lives," she says. "There are a lot of victims here."

Freundel seems to search for a middle ground between acceptance and rejection. "We cannot close our eyes and pretend that a problem of this magnitude will go away," he writes. "It is our task to present a legitimate Jewish response, balancing our opposition to homosexual activity with our concern for the human beings involved."

Greenberg agrees the Orthodox community must address the issue. "Gay people are not going to go away because some rabbi doesn't like the idea," Greenberg says. "Gays are demonstrating to each other that it is possible to live with these seeming contradictions—and they are witnessing each other's struggles to remain true to Torah while also remaining true to themselves."

Baruch says education is the key to change. "My hopes are that if the next generation is exposed [to homosexuality] and people are willing and ready to talk about it, we will have a more compassionate ... Jewish society."

Ultimately, says Shalom, showing compassion for gay Orthodox Jews goes to the core of what it means to be a Jew. "This is not something I chose ... this is what I am," he says. "[And] it is not a Jewish concept to be alone."