

DOUBLE IDENTITY

THE JERUSALEM
POST

Jerusalem Post

July 17, 1998 | Robby Berman

"Why are rabbis always quoted as if they are talking exclusively about secular gay people?" asks a frustrated 27-year-old Sandi DuBowski, as he sits in a Jerusalem restaurant wearing a black kippa, black pants, and white button-down shirt. "You cannot imagine what is like to be gay and Orthodox."

Nor can many people. For most Jews the term "Orthodox homosexual" is an oxymoron - unless of course, you happen to be an Orthodox homosexual. Alfred Kinsey's still highly debated research once estimated that up to 10 percent of the world's population is homosexual. As of late, Orthodox Jewry is waking up to the fact that they are not impervious to statistics; more than a few of them living in the fringe of two worlds, seemingly colliding.

In the past, many Orthodox Jews who came to terms with their sexual orientation completely abandoned religious practice, and left their original communities to settle in places with openly gay environments, such as New York's Greenwich Village or Tel Aviv's Sheinkin Street. Some compromised by finding a place in the Reform or Reconstructionist movements, in which some rabbis accept openly gay congregants and recognize same-sex marriages.

But what of gays who wish to continue a largely traditional life-style while living in Orthodox society? "Coming out of the closet is not an option," says Moshe, who prefers, like most of the observant homosexuals interviewed for this article, to use a pseudonym. "People like us are so secretive and paranoid we could work for the Mossad.

"I believe God gave the Torah to the Jews at Mount Sinai," says Moshe, "But he's also made me a homosexual. So should I stop keeping all the other commandments?" Over the past decade, a growing number of observant Jewish gays and lesbians are tenaciously clinging to their faith despite internal turmoil, glaring contradictions and their community's disapproval. And, to stretch Moshe's metaphor, as the Mossad slowly sheds its proverbial cloak, so is the homosexual Orthodox community, whose very existence is a revelation to most people.

Orthodox gays cannot openly congregate in their own communal synagogue, as do their Reform counterparts in places like Greenwich Village's Temple Beth Shalom. That means finding more secluded venues to congregate. New York now boasts a homosexual support group of 100 members called "The Gay and Lesbian Yeshiva Day School Association." Other groups, although not as large, have sprung up in Los Angeles, London and Israel, where there are three.

Not a week goes by here without a newspaper advertising religious gay and lesbian meetings, support groups for women who have discovered their husbands are bisexual, and vice versa. Tel Aviv is also home to HOD, a Hebrew acronym for homosexuals and religious. This gay

Orthodox social group meets once a month and draws a few dozen kippa-wearing men.

Last December, an advertisement for a gay Hanukka party in The Jerusalem Post's local advertising supplement attracted some 50 men, who gathered to light candles and listen to a dvar Torah on the holiday.

Set to open in the capital next month is the Jerusalem Open House, a non-profit institution supported in part by the New Israel Fund that will provide a permanent venue to observant gays. "It will be a pluralistic place where the secular and the religious can meet," says Jerry Levinson, a psychologist who is gay. "But basically it will be a friendly home for gays and lesbians, and specifically religious Jews." The Orthodox gay synagogue that will be located in the Jerusalem Open House will be the first one of its kind in the world. "We are afraid of violence by fanatics," says Levinson, "but we're ready to take the risk."

Also meeting regularly is a Jerusalem-based study group called Moach Gavra - a play on Hebrew words mocking male hegemony - that is led by a highly intelligent, gay Orthodox-ordained rabbi, who uses the forum to tackle biblical and rabbinical literary sources concerning homosexuality. "The Rabbi," as he is called among this shadow community, is as confident about the divinity of the Torah as he is about his homosexuality. Although he remains "in the closet," dozens of people in Jerusalem and New York know who he is.

"Holding fast to the covenant means that being gay does not free one from fulfillment of commandments," says the Rabbi. "Now given that I am gay, the question is: What is it that the God of Israel wants of me?" he says, deferential to the very entity that condemns his life-style.

DuBowski, one of the few people interviewed willing to give his real name, met the Rabbi while in Jerusalem, where he has been trying to find religious gays and lesbians to appear in the documentary Trembling before God he is making. DuBowski, who is gay, has found that fellow homosexuals trust him and have provided him with contacts for his film, allowing him to reach people who a heterosexual filmmaker would have been unable to reach.

"I've met and interviewed hassidic homosexuals from the Litvak, Satmar, Habad, Belz, Bobov and Vishnitz sects," he says. "But my film is just the tip of the iceberg. Many people are married and won't talk to anyone. "I've been filming for three years, in cities around the world, and out of the hundreds I've interviewed only 20 have agreed to be filmed, and most demanded I blur their face."

The discretion is understandable. For observant Jews, homosexuality is a biblical sin. And in Israel in particular, where religion is intertwined with state, and where the haredi "modesty patrol" is known to turn violent occasionally, life is extremely difficult for Orthodox homosexuals.

Religious politicians do not hesitate to condemn the idea in the strongest terms. "Homosexuality is an abomination and disgusting," says Shas MK Shlomo Benizri, who is also the deputy health

minister. "It's not a legitimate life-style. It's an illness that must be treated. There are no Orthodox homosexuals. If they are homosexual, then by definition they are not Orthodox."

But religious gays say there are also contradictions in the traditional Orthodox attitude to homosexuality. "Benizri says it's an illness that must be treated," says Levinson, "and in the same breath he mentions the verse that says it's an abomination deservable of stoning."

A challenge may also come from scientific research that suggests that homosexuality may derive from physiological reasons, perhaps even from what's been dubbed a "gay gene." If someone like Benizri were to accept that certain people were created by nature - not by nurture - as homosexuals, it might lead to an irreconcilable rift between him and the divine creator.

"The Orthodox world unfairly recasts homosexuals as heterosexuals with perverse desires," says the Rabbi. "The spiritual leader of Orthodox Jewry in this century, the deceased Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, wrote in one of his responsa: "...all craving (for homosexuality) is just because it is a prohibited thing and the evil inclination seduces man to rebel against the will of the Holy One, blessed be he."

The torch-bearers of traditional Judaism teach in yeshivot that homosexuality is strictly a question of choice, and regardless of one's inclination one may choose not to be homosexual. As a result, say some of the homosexual Orthodox men interviewed for this article, gay yeshiva students who live in dormitories until they get married and find themselves attracted to their roommate, have no alternative understanding of homosexuality, and are faced with incredible pressure and guilt. They charge that the rabbis' attitude is naive; asking them to be attracted to and sleep with a woman is as difficult as asking a heterosexual man to be attracted to, and sleep with, another man.

"Women, as sexual partners, repulse me," says Yitzhak, an immigrant from the former Soviet Union. "I would love to be able to touch a woman. but I can't. I went to rabbis here in Jerusalem for help. They told me not to look at men for a year, not to masturbate, and to read psalms... then God will perform a miracle and change me. I did all of that for a full two years. It was torture. Now I'm at peace with who I am. Lonely, but at peace."

A gay Orthodox man who appeared in DuBowski's film told how his rabbi had a more behavioral approach. "He told me to wear a rubber band around my hand and snap it every time I was aroused by a man. I stopped when I really started doing damage to my wrist." "I totally understand why the rabbis instituted the mechiza (partition between sexes) in the synagogue." says Moshe. "I find it very difficult to focus on prayer when I'm sitting in the men's section."

But how do these men reconcile their life-style with Leviticus 18:22, which declares unequivocally: "Thou shalt not lie with men as with women; it is an abomination." "We try to avoid anal intercourse," says Moshe. "It's not simple, but who wants to violate the word of Hashem (God)?" "In fact," says the Rabbi, "in halachic Judaism there is no such thing as a 'gay identity.' The Torah is simply addressing the sexual act. But homosexuality can as little about

sex, or as much about sex, as heterosexual relations. It can also be about intimacy, love and partnership."

The Rabbi is writing a book that offers alternative interpretations to the problematic verses in Leviticus. One argument asserts that the prohibition was stated in the context of non-monogamous relationships, possibly not applying to committed homosexual relationships. But it is unlikely that point will bring about any radical change in the Orthodox community regarding its attitudes toward homosexuality. And most observant gay Jews, as a result, will continue to live torn lives.

"Living an un-integrated identity is hard," says Nomi Raz, a Jerusalem psychotherapist whose clientele, mainly English-speaking immigrants, includes Orthodox gays. "They can't be true to themselves. On the other hand if they wanted to remain connected to that society it would be crazy for them to come out of the closet.

"Besides paranoia, most of my Orthodox homosexual patients struggle with [the question]: 'How long can I put off getting married and having kids?' A lot of them want me to 'cure them' so they can get married. There are other therapists out there who claim they can do that. I don't." Raz believes that "these Orthodox gay groups that are popping up are very important. They give a feeling that there can be some kind of integration between Judaism's [approach to sexuality] and their homosexuality."

They may also help in practical ways. "Ignoring the issue is dangerous on three levels," says the Rabbi. "First, these young people, given no other choice, often marry straight partners and ruin both their lives. Second, there are health issues involved. I know of cases where yeshiva boys weren't taught basic prophylactic measures, and as a result contracted AIDS from homosexual activity.

"And third, research has shown that gay teenagers who have no world to live in, are more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers." Unlike male homosexuality, there is no clear biblical condemnation of lesbianism. But that doesn't mean this form of sexuality is accepted in the Orthodox community."

"Our life-style is not acceptable to our Orthodox friends," says Debby, a religious lesbian who lives in the Jerusalem area. "Most, though, think that my partner and I are just roommates." Her partner is in the process of getting artificially inseminated. "When she gets to be noticeably pregnant, she will cover her hair and we will move into another religious community and pretend that she's recently divorced," says Debby.

Like their male counterparts, Orthodox lesbian groups are also springing up. One group recently opened a Web site at <http://members.tripod.com/~orthodykes> and held its own Purim party. Another, calling itself the Orthodox Women Struggling to Reconcile Inner and Outer Truths, sent a letter to hundreds of Orthodox rabbis across the country asking for more sensitivity from the pulpit.

"We asked them not to equate gay or lesbian love making with bestiality or adultery," says Shani, an observant lesbian. "The same part of us that knows the Torah is true knows that we are lesbians." The letter reads: "We're not talking about a fetish or an occasional attraction to an inappropriate partner... we are talking about the deep psychological mystery of love. Celibacy is not an option. Living alone, growing old alone, dying alone, never feeling the deep abiding joy of sharing the most beautiful, intimate parts of ourselves with another is not a part of living Judaism. So we reject celibacy, and accept the contradiction of an Orthodox but lesbian life."

And what of the issue of same-sex marriage, already accepted by some individual rabbis in the more liberal streams of Judaism? "Orthodox gay people don't want to marry their partner halachically," says DuBowski. "They don't believe in that. It's against Jewish law. That's the Conservative and Reform [movements'] issue. "But Israel is different than America; there is incredible pressure to marry," he adds.

As a result, religious homosexuals and bisexuals living in Israel are more likely to marry someone of the opposite sex. One who did is Abraham, who is still married with several children. "I knew I was different in yeshiva," he recalls, "and I suffered terribly for it. Now that I know there are so many others out there like me, I'm less neurotic about my sexuality. "Whenever I tell people," he says, "they always ask me the same two questions: 'Does your wife know?' and 'What about Torah?'"

Today, his wife knows the truth. "I found out accidentally," she says, "after the second baby was born. I thought about a divorce, but I wasn't sure if at my age, with two kids, I would be able to marry again. Then I realized that I didn't feel jealous... it's other men he's spending time with - not women."

"I sincerely and deeply love my wife," says Abraham. "Everyone should be as happy with their spouse as I am. But even if she tried with all her soul, she can't give me what I need, what I was programmed for. About the Torah question - homosexuality is not just about sex. Out of concern for Jewish law I try to abstain from 'the act.' My partner and I kiss, caress and do other things."

Ya'acov isn't so lucky. He's married with many kids and his wife doesn't know he's gay. "Some guy I had a fling with secretly videotaped us in bed together and stole my telephone book, threatening to call everyone... my parents, wife, friends, rabbi. I would have caved in to the blackmail but I didn't have the \$300,000 he wanted. I threw up every day for one month straight." Ya'acov eventually went to the police, his blackmailer is behind bars, and although the story appeared in the Hebrew press (without identifying him), his wife still doesn't know.

While most Orthodox rabbis refuse to deal halachically with homosexuality other than to condemn it outright, there are exceptions. "For thousands of years the oral law dictated that a deaf person does not possess enough mental capacity to bear responsibility for his actions," says a heterosexual Orthodox rabbi who prefers to remain anonymous. "But at the turn of the century, due to medical advances in understanding cognitive processes, that ruling was reversed. This case, coupled with new medical evidence suggesting a genetic cause of homosexuality, might be

the fulcrum needed to enact a halachic reevaluation of homosexuality."

That outlook sounds unduly optimistic. The original ruling concerning the deaf was recorded in a rabbinical - not a biblical - source. It is improbable that many Orthodox rabbis are going to accept that God didn't know there was a gene for homosexuality.

Still, says DuBowski, "Regardless of how it may look on the surface, there is private support - not condoning our life-style - but offering compassion for us. "We are struggling with our own existence," he adds. "It takes immense fortitude, will and courage. The problem is that most of the rabbis are not struggling with the issue. There needs to be some kind of reckoning."

Copyright 1998 Jerusalem Post. All Rights Reserved
Robby Berman