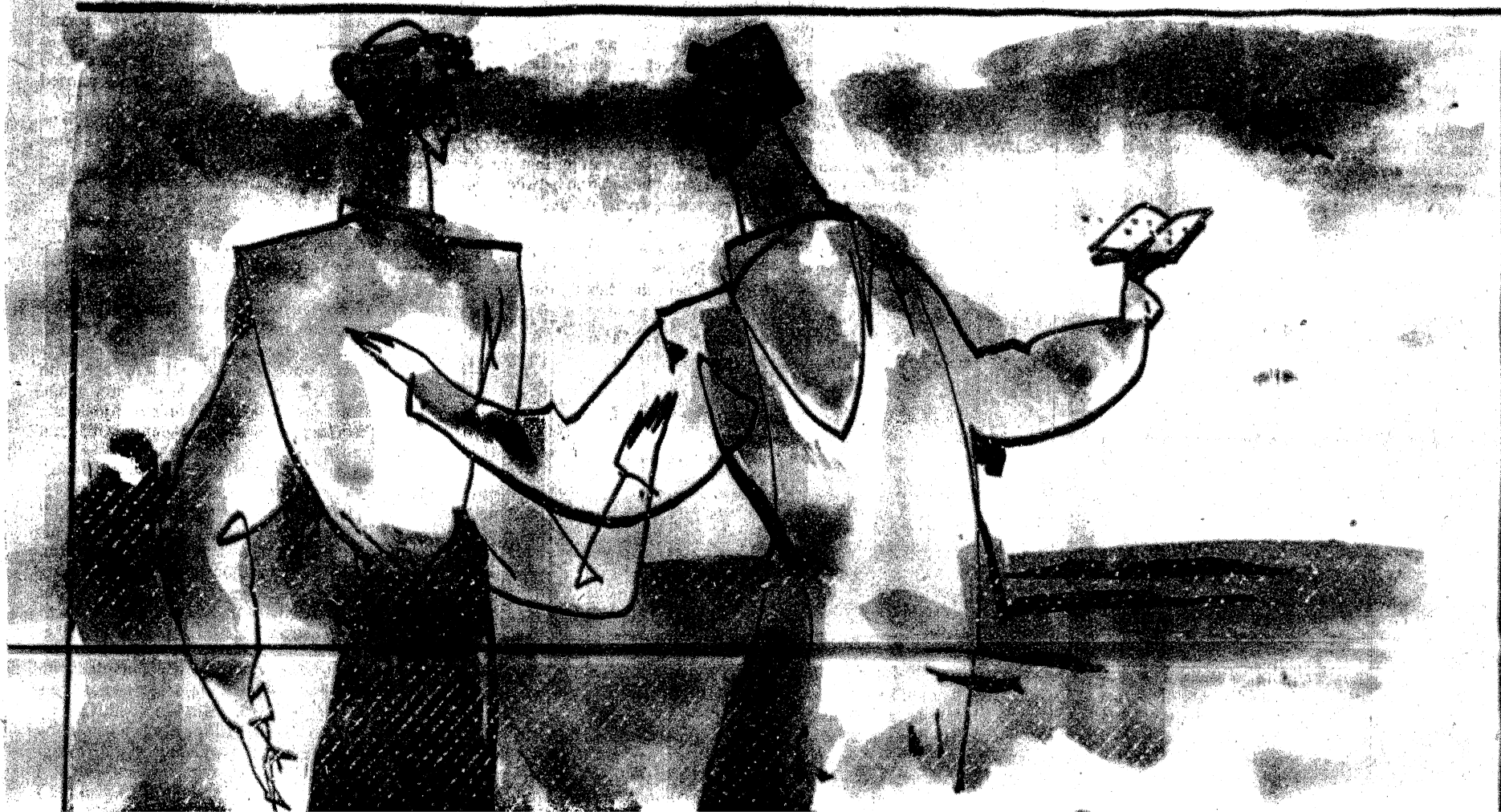



DOUBLE IDENTITY.





Gay Orthodox Jews are trying to find ways to reconcile their sexual orientation with their religious beliefs.

By 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 oxy-

moron – 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 compro-

mised 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 les-

"and in the same breath he mentions the verse that says it's an abomination deserving 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' atti-

text 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

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



The OrthoDykes Home Page



Welcome to the OrthoDykes home page.

The purpose of this site is to provide a home on the Internet for Orthodox Jewish lesbians. At the moment, there are OrthoDykes groups in New York, in Israel and on the Internet.

There may be others, but these are the ones I'm aware of.

If you have any questions, you can e-mail them to ortho@orthodykes.com, and we will get in touch with you. Or you can [visit our web site](http://www.orthodykes.com) and find out more about us.

The Orthodykes Web site: Building a community via the Internet.

tude 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

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.

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

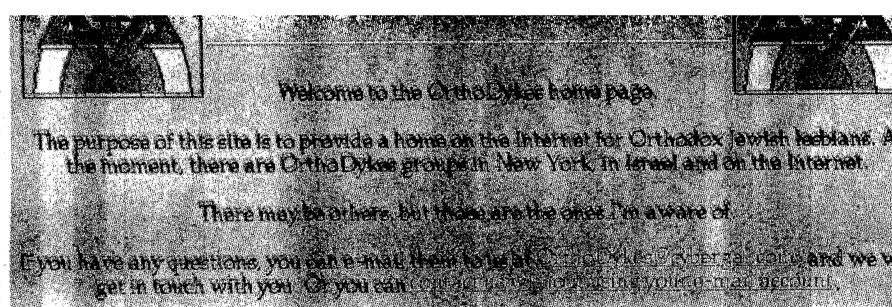
"I've met and interviewed hassidic homo-
sexuals from the Litvak, Satmar, Habad,
Belz, Bobov and Vishnitz sects," he says.
"But my film is just the tip of the iceberg.
Many people are married and won't talk to
anyone.

"I've been filming for three years, in
cities around the world, and out of the hun-
dreds 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 reli-
gion is intertwined with state, and where the
haredi "modesty patrol" is known to turn
violent occasionally, life is extremely diffi-
cult for Orthodox homosexuals.

Religious politicians do not hesitate to
condemn the idea in the strongest terms.
"Homosexuality is an abomination and dis-
gusting," 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 con-
tradictions in the traditional Orthodox atti-
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"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 dam-
age to my wrist."

"I totally understand why the rabbis insti-
tuted 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 abomi-
nation."

"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 lit-
tle about sex, or as much about sex, as het-
erosexual relations. It can also be about inti-
macy, love and partnership."

The Rabbi is writing a book that offers
alternative interpretations to the problemat-
ic verses in Leviticus. One argument asserts
that the prohibition was stated in the con-

people, given no other choice, often marry
straight partners and ruin both their lives.
Second, there are health issues involved. I
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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 lesbian-
ism. But that doesn't mean this form of sexu-
ality 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 reli-
gious 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, call-
ing 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 les-
bian love making with bestiality or adul-
tery," 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

Then I realized that I didn't feel jealous...
it's other men he's spending time with – not
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one... 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 dictat-
ed 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 process-
es, that ruling was reversed. This case, cou-
pled with new medical evidence suggesting a
genetic cause of homosexuality, might be the
fulcrum needed to enact a halachic reevalua-
tion 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 exis-
tence," he adds. "It takes immense forti-
tude, 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." ■