

COMING OUT, COMING HOME:

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LESBIAN AND GAY JEWS AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

A Publication of



COMING OUT, COMING HOME: LESBIAN AND GAY JEWS AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Louise is her nieces' and nephews' favorite aunt. Yet even though she has lived with Miriam for 16 years, she feels she must go alone to Seders, weddings, and other family gatherings.

An educator in the Jewish community for more than a decade, Michael has never brought a date to his organization's social events. His co-workers wonder why he is not raising a family, since he is so obviously concerned about the survival of his people and the nurturing of positively-identified young Jews.

Simon and Ruth, a couple active in their synagogue, have a son who is dying of AIDS. Torn between their need to share their grief and their shame about his openly gay life, they seek comfort outside the Jewish community, never revealing the nature of their son's illness to their rabbi or their congregation.

Lesbian and gay Jews are everywhere in the Jewish community. They are our children, our siblings, our parents, our former, perhaps present, spouses. They are the son who says Kaddish for his father; the grandmother who "came out" as a lesbian at 58; the 16-year-old who attends temple youth activities in his wheelchair. They are the middle-aged woman who teaches Yiddish songs to the children at the temple Chanukah party and the father who leaves work early to drop his children

off at Hebrew school. They are among the people who created this brochure.

As Jews, we know how important it is to have our differences respected, not to be forced to hide or asked to change. Our understanding of the concerns of lesbians and gay men is rooted both in our sense of justice and in our history. We know what it means to have to conceal important parts of one's identity in order to hold a job, live where one chooses, obtain a travel visa, or simply exist without daily threats of violence.

Both Jews and lesbian and gay people have a painful history of trying to "pass" in the dominant culture. At the office Christmas party where everybody is assumed to be Christian, a Jew feels erased. At the same party, a lesbian or gay man can feel similarly erased by the unspoken assumption that everyone is heterosexual. Each confronts the question of how—and even whether—to affirm an identity about which the dominant culture is largely ignorant and rife with prejudice.

"Why must she (or he) be so obviously Jewish (or gay)?" people sometimes ask. The joy we feel in embracing our heritage, in expressing our love for who and what we are, is our best answer to their question. "Because I am not ashamed! Because I am proud of who I am and of my people!"

And because it is dangerous to be silent. Our Jewish experience has shown us that trying to "pass" provides, at best, a limited and temporary safety. Jews and lesbians and gay men become highly visible targets when ignorance and prejudice take the form of legal discrimination and physical violence. Nazi Germany was the most extreme example of a society that used both groups as scapegoats; the fact that homosexuals went to the gas chambers along with Jews has only recently received attention from historians.

A look at the activities of the right-wing in the U.S. today highlights the fact that Jews cannot afford anti-lesbian and gay prejudice any more than the lesbian and gay communities can afford anti-Semitism. The same groups that blame the "decline of family values" on lesbians and gay people—and on feminists—blame the depressed rural economy of the Midwest on "Jewish bankers." The very politicians who insist that the U.S. is a "Christian" country would deny full membership in the "American family" to lesbians and gay men. In a political climate increasingly dominated by the rhetoric of intolerance, both communities need each other as allies and friends.

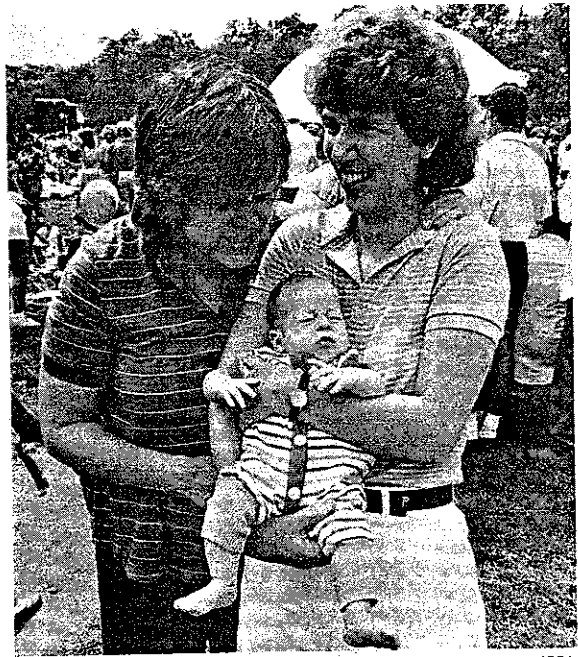
THE HUMAN CONNECTION, THE JEWISH CONNECTION

Increasing awareness of the concerns of lesbians and gay men is a natural outgrowth of the profound influence of the women's liberation movement on Jewish life. For nearly 20 years, feminists have been challenging traditional assumptions about sexual inequality and sex roles. Jewish feminists, including many lesbians, have brought to the women's movement a greater awareness of Jewish history, culture, and concerns. They have developed feminist *haggadot* and alternative rituals. They have been visibly active in grassroots organizing, often in coalition with groups from other communities. Working to incorporate an analysis of sexism in Jewish communal life, Jewish feminists have supported greater participation and leadership by women. They have encouraged a rethinking and reinterpretation of law and tradition as they apply to both women's and men's roles in every facet of Jewish life.

In the midst of burgeoning feminist activity, lesbians and gay men have been increasingly visible. The gay liberation movement and the strong presence of lesbians in the feminist movement have challenged many people to re-examine what they have learned about sexual identity. At the same time, the lesbian and gay liberation movements have released enormous energy and creativity among lesbians and gay men, generating a wide range of contributions to society—including the Jewish community.

Meanwhile, the Jewish community has been experiencing other kinds of reappraisal and reaffirmation. Many once-assimilated Jews are re-identifying or coming to terms for the first time with their Jewishness. Many Jews are looking afresh at Jewish history, law, and tradition and their meanings for our time, and for the Jewish future. The question "Who is a Jew?" has many answers as we experience ourselves as a tiny minority in the post-Holocaust world.

Concerned as we are with Jewish survival and continuity, how do we strengthen and enrich ourselves as a people? Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist congregations, along with individual Orthodox voices, are responding creatively to the challenges of Jewish life today: re-examining *halacha* (Jewish law), developing egalitarian rituals, and recognizing the diversity within the Jewish community. The alienation of a substantial



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portion of the community robs us of quality as well as numbers. An approach that is inclusive rather than exclusive allows us to welcome our entire Jewish family and to enjoy and benefit from what each of us may bring.

THE JEWISH FAMILY

Since the Holocaust, we as Jews feel an intensified responsibility to raise Jewish children and transmit Jewish culture. Meanwhile, our community, along with the rest of society, has experienced a shift away from the assumption that there is one prescribed family pattern into which all must fit. Increasingly, the realities of single parenting, of second marriages, and of women and men who choose not to parent are changing the texture of Jewish life. Many Jews whose family lives do not conform to traditional expectations are affirming their Jewishness and expressing their need for Jewish community.

Jewish leaders sometimes use the pretext that "lesbians and gay men don't have children" to exclude them from communal life. This simply is not true. Many lesbians and gay men *are* parents, whether from former marriages or through adop-

tion or new fertility measures. And many more Jewish lesbians and gay men are actively nurturing future generations of Jews—as teachers, as aunts and uncles, as youth group leaders, and in many other capacities. We need many hearts to “parent” our younger generations, and to pass on Jewish values.

Whether or not lesbian and gay Jews have children of their own, welcoming them into the Jewish community can only enrich its texture. We as a community must attend to issues of quality of Jewish life, not merely quantity. At the same time, we must take care not to exclude Jews even as we express concern about our numbers.

THE LESBIAN AND GAY COMMUNITY

Lesbians and gay men, like the Jewish people, have developed strong and vibrant cultural institutions to satisfy their needs for support, collective expression, and political strength. Many lesbian and gay Jews have formed their own support networks and institutions. They have formed civil rights organizations, community choruses, theater groups, health clinics, and crisis centers. They have founded archives and produced documentary and feature films on lesbian and gay life and history. Some have established synagogues, *havurot* (communally led prayer, study, or action groups), and other groups which are exploring new forms of spirituality and ways of strengthening each others' nontraditional families. The World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations has brought together synagogues and groups in North America, Europe, and Israel and includes affiliated groups in other parts of the Jewish world.

At the same time, Jewish lesbians and gay men have been instrumental in bringing Jewish concerns, history, and culture to the lesbian and gay community. Jewish lesbians have created study groups, publishing houses, and performing arts groups, as well as organizing conferences and forums which have helped many Jewish women “come home” to their Jewish identity and articulate Jewish concerns in the larger women's movement.

WHAT IS HOMOPHOBIA?

“Homophobia” is the fear of same sex closeness and sexual intimacy. Homophobic attitudes rest

on the assumption that there is something fundamentally abnormal, immoral, or even dangerous about people's physical and emotional attraction to their own sex. At home and in school, through books and films and television, by medical authorities and religious leaders, we have all been taught homophobia. It isn't easy to rethink such pervasive attitudes; yet it is in the interest of each of us to do just that.

Homophobia affects all of us in some way. It separates us from each other, forcing many women and men to avoid demonstrative affection and to limit close relationships with people of the same sex. It keeps heterosexual people from really getting to know lesbians and gay men, and vice versa. And, like every form of ignorance or prejudice, it diminishes the humanity both of its targets and of those who allow it to guide their feelings and actions.

Homophobia is closely related to sexism. Anyone whose behavior does not fit what society considers acceptable for members of each sex can become a target for homophobia, whether or not they are lesbian or gay. Young people learn that certain types of behavior (“tomboy” or “sissy”) mean that they are not “fully” female or “real” men. Gentle boys are forced to act “tough”; athletic girls are forced to act “feminine.” From playgrounds to offices to kitchen tables, name calling, ignorant comments, and icy silences reinforce the fear of being called “lesbian” or “gay.”

In this society, sexuality is a heavily-charged issue, surrounded by anxiety and confusion. Our sexuality exists along a spectrum including homosexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality. Some people believe that their sexual identity was fixed at an early age; others that they chose or realized it as an adult. Most lesbians and gay men have engaged in heterosexual activity, some because of the strong societal pressure to do so, others because of their own attraction to the other sex. And, by the same token, at some time in their lives, many heterosexuals have felt attracted to—and had sexual relations with—people of their own sex.

Sexual identity is only one facet of any human being. Unfortunately, lesbians and gay men are frequently defined only by their sexuality. As a result, they are often scapegoated for the troubles of a largely heterosexual society. A persistent myth depicts lesbians and gay men as child molesters, despite the reality that heterosexuals commit the overwhelming majority of child sexual abuse and that nearly all of the perpetrators are male. Like



Rikki Rosen

other myths and stereotypes, this one can be used as justification for physical violence against lesbians and gay men by people who claim they are protecting society.

INSTITUTIONALIZED HOMOPHOBIA: HETEROSEXISM

Basic social institutions reflect the belief that heterosexuality is the only healthy, acceptable form of love and desire. This institutionalized homophobia is called "heterosexism." Although the American Psychiatric Association officially acknowledged in 1973 that homosexuality is not an illness, lesbian or gay sexuality is still often treated as pathology in schools of social work, psychiatric training institutes, and medical schools. In 1986, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed a state's right to discriminate against homosexuals by prohibiting certain private sexual acts between consenting adults. This decision has led to more attempts to pass state legislation criminalizing lesbian and gay

sexual activity and to selective and discriminatory enforcement of archaic laws regarding sexuality.

At present, only a handful of municipalities in the U.S. protect even the most basic civil rights of lesbians and gay men: freedom from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in housing, employment, and public accommodations. For open lesbians and gay men, child custody, adoption, and foster parenting are legal "privileges" for which they must struggle, regardless of their ability to provide a loving home for children.

The heterosexual couple who met a week ago and have been married less than an hour possess legal rights inaccessible to the loving same-sex couple of 20 years' duration. Same-sex partners cannot be included under medical or pension plans and can be excluded from their lover's hospital bedside. Through heterosexist laws, at the death of one partner, custody of the child raised by both can be denied the survivor, property owned in common can be taken away; and the surviving partner may be treated by the biological family as an intruder or even as a thief trying to "steal" the

deceased's belongings.

Within the Jewish community, heterosexism remains a potent force. The Jewish religious tradition has taught that heterosexuality is the only route to complete fulfillment of covenantal responsibilities. This tradition has not recognized the possibility of loving and fulfilling relationships between people of the same sex. Unfortunately, these teachings are still used as an excuse to keep lesbian and gay Jews from full participation in Jewish communal life. But just as our changing understanding of human sexual identity has led many Jews to look critically at our laws and traditions as they apply to men's and women's roles, so we must reevaluate the historical teachings about homosexuality.

Throughout the life cycle, lesbians and gay men face tremendous barriers to acceptance in the Jewish community. Lesbian and gay Jewish teenagers, under religious, peer, and parental pressure to deny their sexuality, find themselves isolated and in great emotional turmoil. Openly identified lesbian and gay adults who want to participate in Jewish communal life are excluded from ritual observance and social life and face discrimination in communal employment. However, if they remain "in the closet," they must lead painful double lives, concealing some of their deepest joys and aspirations. Forced to deny their friends and lovers, they exist publicly alone, urged on all sides to "marry and have children." A family and a community's prejudice can exclude a surviving lesbian or gay partner, or such a person's nontraditional family of friends, from participation in the funeral and communal grieving rituals. And, should an openly lesbian or gay Jew make *aliyah* (settle in Israel), she or he will not be granted citizenship under the Law of Return.

AIDS

It is essential that we as Jews respond with wisdom, compassion, and communal resources to AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), the major public health issue of our time. Our traditional commitment to *bikkur cholim*, ensuring that anyone who is sick or disabled is not isolated from the community, calls on us to respond to the many Jews and non-Jews infected with the AIDS virus, as well as to their families and friends. Our understanding of the need to combat ignorance calls on us to educate ourselves and others. Our

historical experience of being scapegoated for epidemics and other social crises moves us to oppose attempts to blame the gay community for the existence of a virus.

AIDS is caused by HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) which can render the immune system incapable of fending off rare and often fatal infections and cancers. The virus can be transmitted only through the exchange of blood, certain kinds of intimate sexual contact, and from an infected woman to her fetus. Medical research continues to confirm that, contrary to popular myth and hysteria, the virus *cannot* be transmitted by casual contact.

AIDS is not a "gay disease." The virus is transmitted heterosexually as well as homosexually, and is prevalent among women and men, adults and children, in many countries, and among people of all races and religious groups.

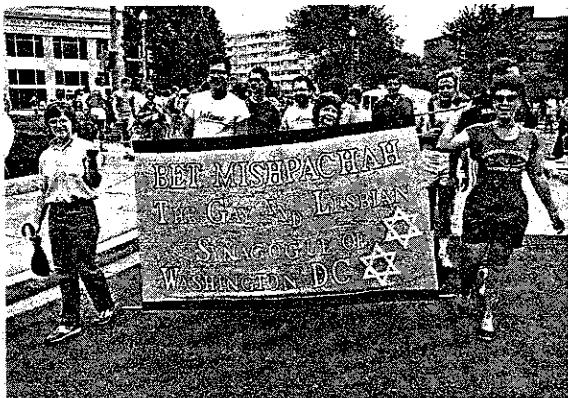
CHANGING ATTITUDES IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Many Jewish institutions and individuals have already responded positively to lesbian and gay concerns, welcoming people into a strengthened and more inclusive community. In April, 1986, over 400 people attended a conference in New York City on lesbian and gay Jews, sponsored by 18 synagogues and Jewish organizations, including local chapters of the American Jewish Committee, the National Council of Jewish Women, and the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) includes four lesbian and gay outreach synagogues, which participate actively in the Reform movement and within their local Jewish communities. UAHC has launched an ambitious plan to make AIDS education and counseling available throughout the Reform movement. In several cities, Jewish social service and educational agencies have begun to respond to the AIDS crisis in earnest, with San Francisco's Jewish Community Federation funding a full-time position to carry out this work.

Across the country, Jewish community spokespeople and community relations agencies have actively supported lesbian and gay civil rights. Lyndon LaRouche's 1986 California attempt to institute quarantine measures for people even *suspected* of carrying the AIDS virus met solid opposition from Boards of Rabbis and Jewish Community Relations

Councils and congregations across the state. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College accepts openly lesbian and gay students. Panel discussions and workshops on lesbian and gay issues have been held at national meetings of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation Directors, the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, and the UAHC. Periodicals such as *Genesis 2*, *Jewish Currents*, the *Reconstructionist*, *Reform Judaism*, and *Response* have begun to give space to the concerns and creativity of Jewish lesbians and gay men. These beginning steps and affirmations challenge the historical bias against lesbians and gay men within the Jewish community.

Jewish lesbians and gay men and their friends are working toward a day when all people can fully claim and celebrate their lives. The Jewish community will be richer and stronger when it welcomes its own. Until that day, it cannot be whole.



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WHAT YOU CAN DO

Many Jewish organizations and individuals are already involved in fighting sexism and supporting a broader range of opportunities and choices for both women and men. Such activity is an essential aspect of combatting homophobia and heterosexism. In addition, it is necessary to focus more specifically on the concerns of lesbians and gay men. Here are some steps individuals and communities can take.

1. **First Steps.** Try to listen to statements made by or about lesbians and gay men from their point of view. Listen to yourself. Challenge people on

their homophobic "jokes" and stereotypes. Don't leave it to lesbians or gay men to raise the issue of homophobia. Talk with friends about what you are feeling and learning.

2. **Education.** Educate yourself by reading some of the many books published in the past decade by and about lesbians and gay men. Help educate others about homophobia and heterosexism. For example, set up workshops on homophobia for your organization; request an openly lesbian or gay speaker for your group; write a letter to your temple newsletter or local Jewish paper.

3. **Jewish Communal Life.** Create strategies to make Jewish institutions, rituals, and communal observances more open, inclusive, and welcoming to lesbian and gay Jews, their parents, lovers, friends, and children. Sensitize Jewish communal workers to homophobia, and ensure that social services for adolescents, parents, the elderly, the sick, and disabled people meet the needs of lesbian and gay people in each of these categories. Set up ongoing support groups for parents and friends of lesbians and gay men.

4. **Civil Rights.** Urge Jewish institutions to adopt resolutions and action plans supporting civil rights for lesbians and gay men. Oppose all discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Include this in any list of discriminations your organization is committed to fighting.

5. **Coalitions.** Make working alliances with lesbian and gay groups on issues of common concern, such as combatting the ultra-right. Lend endorsements, speakers, and resources to the lesbian and gay community on issues such as lesbian and gay civil rights legislation. Seek endorsements and active support from lesbian and gay groups on concerns specific to the Jewish community, e.g., local anti-Jewish vandalism.

6. **AIDS.** Educate Jewish organizations about the facts. Support increased funding for AIDS research and quality medical care; make this a Jewish community project. Develop a concerted Jewish community response to the AIDS hysteria and to the needs of persons with AIDS and their families. Oppose discrimination against persons with AIDS.

TO LEARN MORE

We recommend the following publications. An expanded and annotated bibliography can be ordered from Agenda.

- *Keeping Posted*, "Homosexuality," Vol 32, No. 2. Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1986.
- *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, edited by Evelyn Torton Beck. Distributed by The Crossing Press, 1982.
- *Now That You Know: What Every Parent Should Know About Homosexuality*, by Betty Fairchild and Nancy Hayward. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.
- *Pink Triangles: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals*, by Richard Plant. Henry Holt and Co., 1986.
- *The Rights of Gay People: The Revised Edition of the Basic ACLU Guide to Gay People's Rights*, by Thomas B. Stoddard et al. Bantam, 1983.
- *A Way of Life, A Way of Love: A Young Person's Introduction to What It Means to Be Gay*, by Frances Hanckel and John Cunningham. William Morrow, 1979.
- *Epidemic of Courage: Facing AIDS in America*, by Lon G. Nungesser. St. Martin's Press, 1986.

New Jewish Agenda can provide resources for supporting the concerns of lesbians and gay men in the Jewish community. Our Combatting Homophobia Workshop Project can help you set up a workshop on fighting homophobia and heterosexism in your community. A four-page bibliography on issues important to Jewish lesbians and gay men and additional copies of this brochure are available from our office.

NEW JEWISH AGENDA

New Jewish Agenda was founded in December, 1980 and now has chapters in more than 40 North American cities. Agenda's 4,500 members work to foster traditional Jewish values of peace and social justice and to promote Jewish participation in progressive coalitions.

Drawing on the Talmudic teaching of *Tikkun Olam*, the just reordering of society, Agenda works for peace and social justice by applying Jewish religious and secular history and values to current domestic and international concerns. Priority issues include feminism, Central America, the Middle East, disarmament, and economic and social justice.


New Jewish Agenda is committed to building an inclusive Jewish community free of sexism and heterosexism. Among our projects are ongoing educational work to combat homophobia; the Jewish Family Work Group which is developing programs and resources on the Jewish family based on a feminist perspective; *New Jewish Rituals*, a compendium of rituals for landmark events in people's lives, and a network of Jewish men looking at what it means to be Jewish and male in this society.

Agenda chapters throughout the U.S. have been a strong voice in the battle for reproductive rights, joining local coalitions and offering forums on the issue to the Jewish community. Many chapters have developed study groups on Jewish feminism. Agenda chapters in various localities have formed groups that are exploring ways to educate Jewish children in a progressive, non-sexist spirit. Agenda was a strong presence at the UN decade for Women Forum '85 in Nairobi, sponsoring a Jewish-Arab dialogue that attracted more than 500 women. *Gesher.Bridge*, the newsletter of Agenda's National Feminist Task Force, reports on the ideas and activities of NJA feminists around the country.

Individual memberships, donations, and foundation grants provide financial support for Agenda, a not-for-profit organization. All contributions are tax deductible.

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- Please send me more information about New Jewish Agenda.
- I am interested in participating in New Jewish Agenda's work on gay/lesbian and feminist issues. Please tell me how I can become involved.
- I would like to join New Jewish Agenda. Enclosed are my dues for one year:

- \$36 Regular \$540 Life Member
- \$72 Sustaining \$108 Donor
- \$18 Student, Limited/Fixed, Unemployed

Enclosed is my tax deductible contribution of \$ _____

Please send me copies of the following resources. A check for the total amount is enclosed.

- Coming Out, Coming Home. Lesbian and Gay Jews and the Jewish Community*
50¢ ea., \$25/100
- "Lesbian and Gay Liberation: A Bibliography for the Jewish Community." 30¢ ea., \$15/100
- Geshet: Bridge, New Jewish Agenda feminist newsletter; \$4/year

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Local Chapter/Contact: _____