
Yaakov Ariel, PhD
University of North Carolina

ABSTRACT. In 2001, the documentary movie, *Trembling Before God*, was played in Jewish and gay film festivals around the world, provoking strong emotional reactions. *Trembling Before God* comprises interviews with Orthodox Jewish gay and lesbian persons who vividly and movingly describe their struggles to live their lives as observant Jewish people, being faithful at the same time to their sexual desires and their religious tradition. Almost all the people interviewed in the movie expressed mixed emotions: love towards their tradition and attachment to their community of faith, coupled with resentment against a community, which in their eyes failed to respond with understanding to their emotional needs, thus adding to their pain.

This article aims to modify the picture portrayed in the movie. The dilemmas and struggles of gays and lesbians who live their lives in Orthodox Jewish communities are indeed real. Orthodox gays and lesbians experience a greater dissonance between their sexuality and the values of their community and therefore face more anxieties and inner turmoils than gays and lesbians who live in more permissive environments. The struggles of gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews, however, are not necessarily greater than those of gays and lesbians who live their lives in other conservative communities. In fact, while it is almost...
impossible to be a sexually active gay or lesbian and a practicing Southern Baptist, Seventh-Day Adventist, Jehovah’s Witness, or Mormon, it is not impossible for gays and lesbians to live their lives in an Orthodox Jewish environment. Amazingly, since the 1970s, thousands of gays and lesbians have given up on liberal environments and joined the ranks of traditionalist Jewish congregations. doi:10.1300/J082v52n03_05 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Jewish, Orthodox, Orthodox Jews, Orthodox community, Ultra-Orthodox, observant, observant Jewish life, Hasidism, Neo-Hasidism, Zionism, Israel, return to tradition, Halacha, conversion therapy, orthodykes

GAY LIBERATION AND ORTHODOX JUDAISM

Orthodox Jewish gays and lesbians, almost needless to say, were not the first to come out of the closet. A visible and influential movement of gay liberation came about in the late 1970s, following in the path of the free speech movement, as well as movements of race and gender liberations.1 Jewish gays and lesbians were influenced by the new spirit of sexual freedom and communal assertiveness that the movement of gay liberation had brought about, establishing their own religious, cultural, and civic groups. Jewish gay and lesbian organizations took different forms in different countries. In the United States, Jewish gays and lesbians tended to congregate on a religious basis, a trend correlating to that of the American Jewish community at large, which has increasingly defined itself, during the 1970s-2000s, in religious terms.2 Jewish gay congregations include some of the largest and most vital gay religious communities in America, and tend to be on the liberal side of the Jewish spectrum.3

In Europe, Jewish gays and lesbians have congregated on an ethnic basis, creating secular gay Jewish environments, while in Israel, gay civic organizations came about, representing gay and lesbian interests vis-à-vis the Israeli state and society at large. Israel is a country with an overwhelming Jewish majority, yet, ironically, gay groups in Israel have not been “Jewish” in character.4 They have assumed the same roles that in America and in Europe civic gay organizations have taken upon themselves, namely to act as gay interest groups and promote gay rights.
Israel of the 1970s-2000s has been a society culturally divided between “religious” and “secular” Jews, that is, Orthodox and liberal Jews. Likewise, the country has been divided between “right” and “left,” those promoting moderate policies versus those favoring a hard line policy vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Israeli gay liberation movement has identified, both culturally and politically, with the secular “left,” often characterized by anti-religious sentiments. An anthology of Israeli lesbian lives points out in striking terms how involved gays in Israel are with left-wing causes, such as struggling against human rights violations in the occupied territories. Allying themselves with the liberal “left” has helped the gay community in Israel to gain acceptance in the liberal and secular circles, which have adopted inclusive attitudes and have come to view the gays and lesbians as part of Israel’s coalition for an open society.

In describing that development, Alisa Solomon writes, “in today’s Israeli culture war, openness—at least the tolerance of openness—has acquired a new rhetorical value for mainstream Zionism: standing against the imposition of fundamentalist religious law, it has come to stand for democratic liberalism.”

While working in favor of the gay movement in Israel as a whole, the anti-Orthodox sentiments of the Israeli left have added to the dilemmas of gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews. Trembling Before God emphasizes the frustration and pain of gay Orthodox Jews over the inability of the Orthodox community to openly accept the homosexuality of its members. The movie only hints at the unwillingness of the gay community, especially in culturally and politically embattled Israel, to show sympathy towards members who embrace an Orthodox way of life.

Gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews are at a disadvantage when they face the gay community; most of their members are far removed from the world of Jewish Orthodoxy and cannot comprehend why gays and lesbians would remain in or join such a culture. Many in the gay community look upon the Orthodox as an alien sector of Israeli or Jewish American society, and view Orthodox Jews with suspicion as enemies of their way of life. Secular and liberal Jews often hold to the stereotype of the modern Orthodox as reactionary advocates of right-wing politics, and of the ultra-Orthodox as useless parasites, a national liability. The Orthodox have become the Jews of Israel, blamed by the secular majority for everything that is perceived as wrong.

In addition to the current cultural wars within the Jewish community, the attitude of gay men and women towards Orthodox Jews touches on sensitive nerves, situated at the core of Jewish gay consciousness. In
European and American culture, and elsewhere too, the image of Jewish men has been that of weak males, circumcised and “castrated,” engaged in “non-manly” occupations, unable to defend themselves and their families, and, in general, effeminate. Likewise, the image of homosexuals was similar to that of Jews, as deformed and dishonest, not “real men.” Many looked upon Jews and homosexuals as perverts and semi-criminal beings. Such stereotypes were adopted not only by confirmed anti-Semites, but by large sections of the population, and have often been internalized by the Jews themselves, as well as homosexuals.

Since the nineteenth century, Jews have worked to change this image and self-perception, and to “strengthen” themselves. At the turn of the twentieth century, Jews, all around the globe, were busy building athletic clubs, training in different sports, and establishing sport teams. One of the aims of Zionism, in the late nineteenth century, and early parts of the twentieth century was to “normalize” the Jews, and turn the Jews into muscular, physically, and mentally fit people. Liberal, secular, and more acculturated, Jews have tried to distance themselves from the allegedly crippled traditionalist “ghetto” Jews. Likewise, the gay community has worked hard, in the latter decades of the twentieth century to change the image of homosexuals from effeminate and weak into virile and athletic, comparable, if not superior, in manhood to heterosexual males.

The growth of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, in Israel and in America, at the turn of the twenty-first century, has therefore aroused resentment among liberal Jews. Here was a community, which, in their view, should have acculturated and dissolved long ago, thriving and undergoing demographic growth. That the Orthodox community has attracted, since the 1970s, thousands of young, previously non-observant Jews, increased the resentment. In the eyes of many liberal Jews, the Orthodox community turned from an anachronistic group into a threat. Ironically, Jews have adapted, in their relation to the Orthodox community, stereotypes similar to those held by anti-Semites towards Jews, as seducers and kidnappers of innocent young men and women. In movies and books of the current generation, liberal Jews, in Israel and America alike, have not refrained from portraying Orthodox Jews as sexual perverts.

Orthodox men and women are therefore at a disadvantage when walking into gay spaces. Their unique garments, hair styles, and head covers single them out immediately. When an Orthodox lesbian, dressed in neo-hasidic garments, appeared in the annual gay pride parade in Tel Aviv in 2003, she was verbally and physically abused.
Trembling Before God documents the frustration of a gay Orthodox man, and a lesbian woman, who visited a gay rally in Tel Aviv in 2000, and heard inflammatory speeches against Orthodox Jewry, as the alleged enemies of gay liberation and of a free, open society in general. “The queer community went totally and righteously secular,” complains Melanie Weiss. “While the experience of coming out as gay in a religious setting is traumatic, I’ve found that being a self-proclaimed shul-going holiday observing out and proud Jew doesn’t make other gay people angry so much as it gets them . . . mighty confused” she adds.15

LOOKING OUT OF THE ORTHODOX CLOSET

While the movement of Jewish gay liberation has not been Orthodox friendly, the atmosphere brought about by the fledgling movement has strongly affected the Orthodox community. Jewish Orthodoxy as a whole went through significant changes since the 1970s, including, paradoxically, the absorption of migrants from the liberal world, known as “returnees to tradition.” Indeed, the same years that saw the rise of the movement of gay liberation, also witnessed the rise of a Jewish movement of return to tradition, which, since the 1970s, had brought tens of thousands of men and women to join the Orthodox ranks.16 More than a few among the newly Orthodox have been gays and lesbians. To many secular or liberal gays and lesbians, such a choice has seemed bizarre. Yet, return to both tradition and gay liberation have been influenced by the same cultural trends, characterized by a greater emphasis on self-realization, and the rights of individuals to be true to themselves and their emotional and spiritual needs, including choosing their own communities. Individuals’ identities have come to be defined less by the community into which they were born and its expectations, and more by people’s own choices.

The new atmosphere of increased room for individual preferences and the search for spirituality and meaning has brought about the reality of gays and lesbians who have joined observant Jewish communities. A sizeable number of returnees to tradition, as well as men and women born and raised within the Orthodox community, have attempted to amalgamate homosexuality and observant Jewish life. Such efforts should be compared with those of Jews who have attempted, during the same period, to amalgamate other “improbable” identities and ways of life, such as Judaism and Buddhism. Another example within the new realities of Jewish Orthodoxy is that of the hippy Orthodox, who have
embraced tradition while retaining some elements of the counterculture, such as premarital relationships or the use of drugs.

For some gays, a traditionalist Jewish society has been attractive, not in spite of, but because of the cultural association between Jews and homosexuality. They have joined a community that has suited their self-image, internalizing the stereotype of “homosexuals are like Jews,” physically, emotionally, and socially disadvantaged.\(^\text{17}\) At the turn of the twenty-first century, both gays and Jews have become increasingly aware of a shared history of vulnerability and humiliation as weak minorities. Interestingly, the reaction of a number of non-observant Jewish gays, as well as non-Jewish gays, to the screening of *Trembling Before God*, a movie which highlights the difficulties of the Orthodox gays, was not an aversion towards Orthodoxy, but rather an attraction to the world of observant Judaism, and a decision to join in.\(^\text{18}\) The director and producer of the film, Sandi Dubowsky, became a returnee to tradition while working on the film and hearing about the, not always easy, experiences of Orthodox gay Jews.\(^\text{19}\)

At the same time, gay and lesbian spiritual seekers who have encountered Jewish Orthodoxy, have sensed that such a choice might be problematic, and wondered if they could find their home within an observant Jewish community. Outreach emissaries who wished to bring liberal and unaffiliated Jews to take interest in and join an observant Jewish life had to respond to questions regarding the compatibility of same-sex relationships with the demands and restrictions of Orthodox life. In responding to inquiries from gays and lesbians, outreach emissaries such as Zalman Schachter and Shlomo Carlebach, asserted during the 1960s and 1970s that gays and lesbians should assume an observant Jewish life, even if they could not bring themselves to follow all the commandments.\(^\text{20}\) Schachter and Carlebach were particularly tolerant. Orthodox rabbis and thinkers demonstrated varying degrees of sympathy or rejection towards gays. In an essay published in the 1970s on Judaism and homosexuality, Norman Lamm, the president of Yeshiva University in New York, stated his opinion that homosexual acts were uncontrollable and advocated that homosexuals should not be punished, persecuted, or excommunicated.\(^\text{21}\)

Gays and lesbians in Israel approached the Jewish Orthodox philosopher, Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903–1994), asking him how they could reconcile their sexuality with a life of *Torah* and *Mitzvot*, the observance of the commandments. Leibowitz stated that he could not change the *halacha*, the Jewish law, and make homosexual behavior *halachically* acceptable. However, homosexuals were members of the Jewish com-
munity like all other Jews, and should strive to follow the commandments, even if there were some that they could not abide by. Leibowitz, himself a non-Hasid, relied on Rabbi Zadok HaCohen of Lublin (1823-1900), a nineteenth century hasidic master, who viewed homosexual desires as uncontrollable, comparable with being raped, which therefore absolved the persons involved, who could not be made accountable for their deeds, from punishment.22

During the 1970s and 1980s, something of a compromise developed in the Orthodox community in regard to gay and lesbian members, based on “don’t ask, don’t tell.” Gays and lesbians joined Orthodox communities, living as observant Jews, and, at the same time, retained their sexuality, albeit in a discreet manner. They did not declare their orientation publicly, did not create organizations, and did not make public demands on their community. Staying in the closet, the atmosphere among Orthodox homosexuals resembled, until the late 1990s, the realities of gay life in America before the Stonewall revolt and the rise of gay assertiveness.23 While gay and lesbian returnees to tradition stayed unmarried, many of those born and raised in the community felt pressure to conform and build families.24 Trembling Before God features an interview with a married lesbian woman, as well as a lesbian woman who had been married for a while and later divorced. The inability of gays and lesbians to marry, or remain married, and build or bring up a family, has been a major source of pain for members of a community that puts a high value on matrimony and procreation.25

The cultural wars in Jewish society have been helpful in giving gays and lesbians some space. Orthodox Jewry has struggled, in the past generation, to keep its sons and daughters in the community. Likewise, Orthodox groups launched a campaign to bring secular or unaffiliated Jews to “return to tradition” and join an Orthodox way of life. An anti-homosexual witch hunt would have compromised such efforts. The centrality of the family for Orthodox Jewish life has also worked in favor of gays and lesbians. Whatever their orientation, they are welcome guests, if not drafted participants, in family gatherings and holiday celebrations, which characterize the Orthodox way of life.

In addition, and contrary to a common perception, the Orthodox community is not monolithic, and comprises many subgroups. While all Orthodox Jews are committed, in principle, to observing the Jewish tradition and studying its sacred texts, they differ, at times enormously, in their willingness to cut a compromise between tradition and contemporary culture and in their strictness of observance. Even the more stringent and uncompromising ultra-Orthodox are divided into numerous
groups, and Orthodox neighborhoods are marked by an Orthodox plurality, with sub-communities that vary, at least partially, in styles of living and modes of observance. Orthodox diversity offers individuals some amount of autonomy.26

Many gays and lesbians have found Jewish rituals and spirituality fulfilling and comforting. Likewise, they have found the Orthodox community, with its ethos of caring for its members, and not leaving the more lonely ones unattended to or uninvited to Sabbath and holiday gatherings, attractive. The feeling that they have found a warm and caring community serves as an additional bonus to their satisfactory spiritual quest.

The sense of finding a home for the soul has differed from one person to the next, and, at times, from one gender to another. From an egalitarian point of view, Orthodox synagogue life tends to work in favor of men. Men and women are separated during prayer, and men alone conduct the services, read from the Torah and perform the cantorial work. Many other rituals, such as the opening and closing of the Ark, and the carrying of the Torah scrolls in processions, are also entrusted to men only. Synagogue life offers Orthodox men a sense of purpose and importance as well as a space of their own, which men find comforting. Within the synagogue environment, they are preferred, privileged citizens. Women, on the other hand, have not enjoyed the same privileges in traditionalist synagogues and consequently some women, who initially found the Jewish observant community attractive, have had second thoughts over Orthodox synagogue life. A number of lesbian women returnees to tradition have moved to more egalitarian Jewish congregations.27 To others, the Orthodox option has remained attractive in spite of the non-egalitarian nature of the community. Some women find the benefits of a traditionalist community to outweigh the limitations. Trembling Before God depicts such lesbian women who enjoy the rituals that are available to females in a traditionalist Jewish home setting and find them rewarding. Some women find merit in the separation between the sexes. In many Orthodox groups, the women gather on their own for social events, study groups, charitable work, and even recreational activities. Some lesbian returnees to tradition find the women-only environment relaxing, as it allows women more space of their own in which they can be assertive and independent of men’s imposing presence.28

That thousands of gays and lesbians have found a spiritual and communal home in Jewish Orthodoxy does not come to say that Orthodoxy and homosexuality are compatible and mesh easily together. Orthodox Jewish gay writings reveal uneasiness and pain.29 Such sentiments do not result necessarily from an inability of Orthodox gays and lesbians to
give expression to their sexual desires, or because of persecution by their communities, but from the unique situation of holding on to two cultural worlds at the same time, homosexuality and Orthodoxy. Gay culture and Jewish tradition emphasize different sets of values, one of self-fulfillment and the autonomy of the individual, and the other of partial, self-denial and the submission of individuals to a higher authority and to communal norms. Many gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews have internalized the values of the Orthodox community, including the traditional Jewish understanding of homosexual acts as *toeva*, an abomination. Steve Greenberg, an Orthodox gay rabbi and a returnee to tradition, describes the very powerful impact of the yearly readings, in the midst of the Day of Atonement, the most sacred day of the Jewish year, of the passages in Leviticus in which the prohibition against men sleeping with other men are included. “I felt guilt and contrition, . . . at other times I would sob in my seat in the synagogue,” he confessed.

In a telling moment in the movie *Trembling Before God*, a group of men gathers in a Sephardic synagogue in Jerusalem for a *taanit*, prayer and fasting, to repent for their sexual sins, including same-sex relationships. Such men feel that they have indeed committed serious transgressions and need to repent, and they seem to be doing so in great earnest too.

Many Orthodox community leaders believe in “conversion therapy,” a controversial method of therapy, which attempts to turn homosexuals into heterosexuals. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, Orthodox Jewish community leaders and therapists have promoted such programs, viewing them as ideal solutions to “the problem” of gay Orthodox people. One group that advertises such therapy are the Chabad Lubavitch hasids. The late Lubavitch Rebbe advised his followers to show compassion towards homosexuals and “educate those afflicted with this problem” since “despite the misguided way of the past, everyone has the capacity to change.” The Lubavitchers are a hasidic group dedicated to Jewish outreach work and “conversion therapy” allows them to approach gays and lesbians, and to be loyal at the same time to strict halachic standards.

In supporting “conversion therapy,” Orthodox Jews are not alone. Based on an attitude of “love the sinner but denounce the sin,” directing homosexuals to conversion therapy is popular with other conservative religious groups in America, who believe that same-sex attraction is a matter of choice, a pattern of behavior that can be overcome. While many gay and lesbian members of conservative groups have joined such programs, attempting to change their sexual orientation, the gay community as a whole has developed strong exception to such therapies.
Gay ideologues, as well as many gay, and non-gay, psychotherapists, regard such attempts as carrying no real therapeutical value, insisting that homosexuality is an irreversible predisposition, perhaps even genetically determined. Moreover, many gays and lesbians see no reason to undergo such therapies. In their view, there is no sin involved in same-sex intimacy. Gay and lesbian thinkers have rejected the idea that their sexual orientation is a disease that needs to be overcome, and have promoted, instead, an ideology that sees same-sex love as legitimate and fulfilling as love between men and women. They contend that if homosexuality is more socially tolerated, gays and lesbians will live in greater peace of mind.

DEMANDS FOR CHANGE

The new ideological atmosphere of the gay culture has had a strong influence on gay Orthodox Jews, who have become increasingly torn by the conflicting messages of the gay and Orthodox cultures. A common reaction, at the turn of the twenty-first century, to the dissonance between Orthodoxy and gay culture is a request on the part of gay members of the Orthodox community to ease the tension and bring the two sets of values closer. They would like the rabbis, who serve as the custodians of the tradition, and are entrusted with interpreting and modifying the halacha, the Jewish Law, to come up with halachic solutions, that would allow observant Jews to look upon homosexual and lesbian acts in more acceptable terms. The rabbinical tradition succeeded in modifying many harsh biblical rulings, making, for example, biblical punishments consisting of bodily mutilation obsolete. Why cannot the rabbis do the same regarding the biblical prohibition on same-sex activity?

In a manner similar to gay Christian thinkers, Orthodox gay intellectuals have worked in recent years to reinterpret the Jewish tradition, so as to create an Orthodoxy that accepts homosexuality. “Texts that had seemed at first to shut down possibilities, on further inquiry actually opened them up,” wrote Rabbi Steven Greenberg, about the work of Moah Gavra, a gay men study group, and its research. Such attempts had begun earlier among liberal lesbian Jews, as an extension of feminist Jewish theology, as well as among non-Jewish gay theologians. Most Orthodox rabbis, as well as many Orthodox laypersons, have not been persuaded by gay appeals. Some have cited the biblical prohibition, which speaks about “men sleeping with other men as if they were women,” as particularly explicit. Others note that, while Leviticus
relates only to “men sleeping with men,” Talmudic commentaries—which the Orthodox community views as abiding—state that other forms of sexual encounters between men and men or women and women are wrong (albeit they are not considered grave transgressions and carry lesser penalties).

Gays and lesbians sense, however, that the real block against redefining the halachic ruling on same-sex encounters has not been the decisive language of the Torah, the Talmud, and medieval rabbinical commentaries against same-sex intimacy. Historians have pointed out that Jewish communal authorities have not always showed a harsh attitude towards homosexuals. The reasons for contemporary negative rulings are rather the cultural biases of a conservative community that promotes “family values,” wants to see its sons and daughters married and producing children, has little appreciation for “alternative lifestyles,” and views tolerance towards homosexuality as a practice of “the enemy,” the permissive liberals. Twentieth century halachic figures, such as Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, have indeed relied, in their negative approach to homosexual activity, on the unfavorable attitudes of mainstream American society to such modes of sexuality.43 While Feinstein’s psika antedated Orthodox gay liberation, it clearly pointed to the cultural biases of the rabbi who wrote it. He viewed same-sex attraction as toeva, not merely on account of the biblical verses, but because that was the manner in which society had seen such behavior in the mid-twentieth century. Cultural arguments continue to color much of the Orthodox discourse on gay behavior. In 2000, Tradition, a major Orthodox journal, published an article by a liberal Jewish psychiatrist, in an attempt to show that the Orthodox unacceptance of homosexuality reflected scholarly opinions in the larger society.44 Nathaniel Lehrman denounced homosexuality on alleged medical, psychological, and social grounds, claiming, for example, that homosexuality worked against longevity.

Aware of the less than full acceptance of their sexuality in Orthodox circles, many Orthodox gays and lesbians have continued to be discreet about their sexual orientations. By the 1990s however, some have begun to “come out of the closet,” voicing their opinions and expressing demands for a change of attitude.45 At the turn of the twenty-first century, a number of Orthodox gays and lesbians have given open expression to their experiences and struggles and have begun establishing networks of communal support.46 Such groups include OrthoDykes, a support group for Orthodox lesbians, and the Gay and Lesbian Yeshiva University Alumni Association.47
One instrument that has helped gay Orthodox Jews to come out of the closet, at least partially, has been the internet. Many Orthodox Jews would not feel comfortable entering gay bars or other gay meeting places. The internet, on the other hand, offers a discreet and effective means of communication. Corresponding on the internet allows Orthodox gay and lesbian Jews to find friends and lovers, discovering, ahead of time, if their potential friends are of their own kind, persons whose values they share and with whom they can find a common language, or, alternatively, persons tolerant of their faith and observant lifestyle. Moreover, the internet has offered Orthodox gays and lesbians an opportunity to create a virtual community. It has been much easier for Orthodox gays and lesbians, many of whom have been uneasy about their sexual orientation, to open up and connect, semi-anonymously, in the privacy of their own homes or offices, to a larger group, with similar concerns.

**THE BEGINNING OF A NEW ATTITUDE?**

Creating their own support groups, Orthodox gays and lesbians have begun connecting to the larger gay Jewish community. Establishing a good rapport with secular Jewish gays and lesbians has not been an easy task, considering the prejudices and animosities between the Orthodox and secular communities. Attempts at creating an atmosphere of tolerance and cooperation have only begun in the early 2000s. A gay Jewish center, in which Orthodox and secular Jews have come together, is the Open House in Jerusalem, where Orthodox and liberal Jews, as well as Palestinian Arabs, congregate and socialize under one roof. One could have envisioned a different, more Tel Avivian, type of gay organization in Jerusalem: secular, anti-clerical, and irreverent, but such a choice would have resulted in a “club” that would have excluded the majority of gays and lesbians in the city. The Open House experiment takes place in a city which has an unusual demographic relationship between secular and traditionalist Jews, as it is the only major city in Israel in which liberal European Jews are a small minority of the population. In Jerusalem, too, much of the initiative for organizing a gay community has come from secular or liberal Jews of European descent, but Orthodox and traditional Jews have taken part in the experiment, the building of an organization that serves the entire gay community, and has special programs for Orthodox gays and lesbians, as well as for Arab-Speaking Palestinians. The Open House has created a Judaism-Friendly atmosphere, as it celebrates the Jewish Sabbath and holidays, Jewish prayer
books are available on the premises, and the gay paraphernalia shop sells rainbow yarmulkes.49

Gay Pride parades in Jerusalem have had a very different character than those in Haifa or Tel Aviv. Amazingly, thousands of Jerusalemite gays and lesbians have paraded in a city where conservative Jews, Moslems, and Christians make the overwhelming majority of the population. While many of those who have taken part in the parade have been liberal members of the gay community, the Jerusalem gay pride parades started at the municipal plaza with birkat haderech, a prayer for the safety of the journey, and ended at the Open House with Sabbath prayers and celebrations. The Jerusalemite parades have been devoid of the more irreverent and provocative elements of the parades in the coastal cities, such as nudity. Some local Orthodox political leaders have opposed, or pretended to oppose, the parades, but the Orthodox community as a whole did not seem to be very bothered by them.50 The pride parades have not been anti-Orthodox events.51 Orthodox leaders launched a more determined opposition towards plans to launch an international gay parade in Jerusalem in 2006. However, the Israeli war in Lebanon caused the organizers to cancel the parade.

One of the reasons for the moderate inclusive atmosphere of the Open House in Jerusalem has been the substantial number of mesoratim affiliated with it: semi-observant Jews, members of Conservative or Reform congregations, or people who have grown up in what has been considered in Israel to be a no-man’s land of semi-observant, neither Orthodox nor secular, homes. Most of the people who participate in Sabbath and holiday celebrations in the Open House do not define themselves as Orthodox, and the existence of a large in-between group of non-secular, non-Orthodox, which is unique to Jerusalem, has made the Open House experiment possible.

The House helps its Orthodox members, among other services, by providing a sense of proportion to the dilemmas and plight of the gay Orthodox. In the Open House, Orthodox members encounter Palestinian homosexuals, and hear about their lives as gay Arab men or women. For the most part, Palestinian women have a hard time giving expression to sexual desires outside of marriage. Unliberated, and under patriarchal supervision, they can ill-afford to become engaged in “illicit” love. While gay men are freer than women, and do give expression to their sexuality, they, too, live in fear.52 Living in a close-knit, clan-centered society, their own family members are often the perpetrators of physical and emotional abuse. That much of the sexual life of Palestinian gay men has taken place in Israel, and often with Jewish partners, has also not helped their cause.
At times, Open House activists have had to arrange shelters for physically abused Palestinian members. When comparing their fate with that of their Palestinian friends, Orthodox Jews thank their God, realizing that their plight is mostly cultural and psychological, struggling with a double identity, and not a matter of survival.

The Open House points to a move towards a rapprochement between Orthodox gay and lesbians and the general gay community. One can also detect, at the same time, the beginning of a move in the Orthodox community, at least in its liberal and centrist circles, towards building a more sympathetic and tolerant attitude towards gays and lesbians. At the turn of the twenty-first century, a number of Orthodox scholars and thinkers have begun responding favorably to gay demands for reevaluation of the Jewish traditional approach to homosexuality. In 2000, Jacob Milgrom, an Orthodox scholar, and author of a monumental, three-volume study of Leviticus, offered a new interpretation of the passages that prohibit homosexual activity. While committed to high scholarly standards, Milgrom does not disguise his gay-friendly sentiments.53 Milgrom claims that Leviticus sets standards for an ideal society in the land of Israel, rather than rules for Jewish behavior worldwide.54 "If my basic thesis is correct that the common denominator of the entire list of sexual prohibition, including homosexuality, is procreation without a stable family, then a consolatory and compensatory remedy is at hand for Jewish gays (non-Jews, unless they live within the boundaries of biblical Israel, are not subject to these laws)."

When the movie Trembling Before God played in film festivals in 2001, a number of Orthodox community leaders were moved and initiated the screening of the movie at their congregations, as well as organized discussions in the Orthodox community on the movie and its message.55 Such attempts point to the beginning of a change of heart and a growing awareness, in some Orthodox circles, of the plight of its gay and lesbian sons and daughters.

Orthodox homosexual thinkers, such as Rabbi Steve Greenberg have pursued theological and scriptural reinterpretations with a cultural agenda in mind, to propose a new understanding of the relationship between the Jewish tradition and homosexuality.56 Developments in the research on the history of the gay community have influenced the Orthodox relations with gays and lesbians. In the 1990s, both gays and Jews have become aware of the suffering of homosexuals under the Nazi regime in Germany when tens of thousands of homosexuals were imprisoned in concentration camps, together with Jews.57 As information on that aspect of Nazi-era history became more available, it has become part of
gay collective memory, as well as that of Jews, who have become aware of the shared suffering and vulnerability of both groups. The Nazi persecution of homosexuals has given homosexuality a cleaner bill of health among the Jews. In 2000, in an international conference on the Holocaust, Jonathan Sachs, chief rabbi of Britain, said that “he could never forget as a Jew that homosexuals were sent to Auschwitz just as Jews were.” While Sachs has not approved same-sex sexual encounters, rabbis such as him ceased stigmatizing gays and lesbians and called for a compassionate and accommodating attitude toward them. In response to an enquiry by gay students, Aviezer Ravitsky, an Orthodox scholar at the Hebrew University, remarked that both Jews and homosexuals were rejected by the devil, and as such became “chosen.” The Nazi p Jews. Such changes in attitude are making their way slowly into Orthodox gay consciousness. Most Orthodox gays and lesbians, however, are still more familiar with the biblical and talmudic bans, which they have read and studied repeatedly, than with such thinkers as Rabbi Zadok HaKohen and Aviezer Ravitsky, who have offered halachic loopholes for gay men and women to live in peace with themselves.

CONCLUSION

Producing the movie Trembling Before God was a bold attempt to bring to the attention of the gay and Jewish communities the conflict in which gay Orthodox men and women live, and to document the growing attempts on the part of Orthodox gays and lesbians to bring their community of faith, as well as the non-Orthodox gay community, to relate to their dilemmas with more sympathy and understanding. The movie gives testimony to the anguish of Orthodox gays and lesbians, as they attempt to give expression to their sexuality within a traditionalist community of faith. Unable, and often unwilling, to change their sexual orientation, they are also reluctant to give up on an Orthodox Jewish lifestyle. While they are aware of the existence of friendly environments for gays, thousands of Orthodox lesbians and gays have not walked away from the traditionalist communities with which they are affiliated and where they live their lives. While they are aware of the fact that liberal and secular gays are less ridden by guilt and doubt, they also see the secular permissive culture as hedonistic and shallow. In a similar manner to liberal gays who share the secular image of the Orthodox community, gay Orthodox Jews share the view, very common among the Orthodox, that their community is morally and spiritually...
superior to that of the liberals. “Whenever I open TV and see the lack of purpose, lack of commitment, and lack of community that the programs radiate, I know that quitting Orthodoxy is not an option for me,” remarked a gay Orthodox. Paradoxically, it is the attachment to their faith and to their community that serves as a source of pain to gay Orthodox men and women. Remarkably, in spite of the inner torment, Orthodox gays hold on to their tradition, deriving strength and comfort from it, and hoping for an eventual rapprochement between their sexuality and their community of faith.

The timing of the movie is significant. The creation of such a movie would have been impossible just a few years earlier. The turn of the twenty-first century has seen the gradual move of homosexuality in the Orthodox community from the closet into the light of day, and while the community has not always encouraged the new openness, Orthodox gays have been able in the 2000s to give expression to their experiences and concerns and to organize communally in a manner they had not done before. The production of Trembling Before God demonstrated a beginning of a change in the relationship between the Jewish Orthodox community and its gay and lesbian members, and also between the Orthodox gays and the general gay community.

Jewish Orthodox gays and lesbians have begun forming a subculture of their own, which includes elements of the gay culture at large, yet carries its own unique components, derived from the observance of the Jewish tradition, and the centrality of faith and a community of faithful, in their lives. The movie reflects a recent reality in which “coming out of the closet,” Orthodox gays and lesbians are demanding that their two communities accept them for what they are. While the movie mostly explores the lack of understanding and support on the part of the Orthodox community towards same-sex relations, it also points to a surprising amount of tolerance in Orthodox Jewish circles that allows gay men and women to tell their life stories without the fear of hate crimes. And while gays and lesbians interviewed in the movie complain about the inability of rabbis to comprehend their dilemmas, let alone find halachic solutions to them, they approach rabbis and discuss their problems with them openly. Likewise, Trembling Before God points to an attempt on the part of Orthodox gays and lesbians to build a cordial relationship with the general gay community. The movie appeals to the compassion of the audience, successfully building sympathy for the plight of the gay and Orthodox. It paves the way to a more inclusive and tolerant view of gay and lesbian Orthodox. The movie helps turn the gay Orthodox Jews from “them” into “us.”
NOTES


7. Cf. Alisa Solomon, “Viva La Diva.”


14. The scene was broadcast on national American evening news programs.


16. On the movement of return to tradition, see Herbert M. Danziger, Returning to Tradition: The Contemporary Revival of Orthodox Judaism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Lynn Davidman, Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991);


23. For an excellent portrayal of the gay scene in the 1940s, please read Gore Vidal, *The City and the Pillar* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1948).


27. Cf. for example, Ariel, “Neohasidism in the Age of Aquarius.”


30. The authors of Leviticus chose “disgusting” or “revolting,” to relate to such acts.


32. I am indebted to the producer and director Sandi DuBowski for sharing this with me.

33. Cf. the Website.


35. Cf. Axel Munte, a Swedish neurologist, has made such a claim in his 1920s book *The Story of San Mikele*.


42. Leviticus 18: 22; 20:13; See reader’s exchange in *Moment* magazine.


49. I am thankful to the director of the Open House in Jerusalem, Mr. Hagai Elad, as well as to other members of the Open House for their openness and hospitality.

50. I owe thanks to Hagai Elad for sharing with me documents, information, and impressions on the Orthodox politicians’ reaction to the parade.


52. I owe thanks to members of the Open House for their hospitality and for their openness in sharing their personal life stories with me.


57. In his 1950s memoirs, Primo Levi, A heterosexual Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, remarks that the story of homosexual imprisonment by the Nazis had not been told.


60. In a telephone conversation with Yaakov Ariel, November 2003, name withheld.

61. This development took place while the movie, *Trembling Before God*, was in production. Talk with the director and producer, November 2003.