

The HRC Religion and Faith Program is working to create a world where nobody is forced to choose between who they are, whom they love and what they believe. Thanks in part to this work, more and more Jews aren't simply engaging in dialogue around LGBTQ equality, they're leading the conversation. They do this work not in spite of their Jewish belief or values, but because of them. To learn more, visit [hrc.org/jewish](http://hrc.org/jewish)

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# COMING HOME TO JUDAISM AND TO SELF



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# Welcome

Dear Friends,



We at the Human Rights Campaign have witnessed firsthand the positive power that religious communities wield in enacting social change. The Jewish community, in particular, has been at the forefront of this work, from the Civil Rights Movement to the ongoing struggle for LGBTQ equality. Despite all our progress, there is still work to be done to ensure every person of faith feels welcomed in their religious community.

I hope the following pages will provide both helpful insights and practical advice to LGBTQ people seeking a home in the synagogue, or hoping to become more fully involved and embraced in Jewish communal life. I hope, too, that we offer constructive advice to rabbis and other leaders who are working to create communities that are more fully inclusive of LGBTQ people.

I want to offer a special thanks to the many scholars, rabbis and non-LGBTQ allies who have lent their voices and their expertise. Even more, I want to thank the LGBTQ Jews who have shared their personal stories in this guide. This is work that I believe in deeply and that I hope will inspire change in countless hearts and minds, and in the larger community that we each share together.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chad Griffin".

**Chad Griffin**

*President, Human Rights Campaign*

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A Special Note: This publication is primarily intended to serve as a general guide for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) Jewish Americans who wish to enrich their faith in Judaism.

## Ancient Faith – New Traditions

In a swiftly changing culture it is sometimes difficult to maintain the religious traditions that shape our understanding of the world and that feel essential to our identity. This can be especially difficult for LGBTQ people who might feel rejected by their faith community or who find that their spiritual identity now seems unrelated to their daily lives.



HRC's *Coming Home* series is designed to help LGBTQ people maintain the different aspects of their identity, live fully in their sexual orientation and gender, and live fully in their religious, spiritual and cultural traditions.

Rabbi Denise Eger, the first openly LGBTQ president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), explains, "Human beings need religious expression in their lives. They need to live the values they grew up with, that they believe in, and that they believe are good for society. Religions across the board might have gotten things wrong about homosexuality but, for the most part, religious practice still helps you organize and live your life with a good set of values. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater."

An inherent commitment to social justice has put the Jewish people at the forefront of the fight for LGBTQ equality. Rachel Laser, former deputy director at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, explains, "*Tikkun olam*, the idea of repairing the world, is very much a part of the Jewish identity. It's in our oral and cultural tradition. It's in the Torah. We're all created in the image of God. The quintessential wandering of a persecuted people also means we identify with people who are vulnerable. That's our experience too. It's our lived tradition."

### A Personal Journey

Rabbi Victor Appell's personal journey reflects Judaism's changing attitude to LGBTQ issues over recent decades. While in college in the 1980s, Appell was offered a position as the leader of a Jewish youth group, but the offer was rescinded before his first day on the job. "They heard rumors I was gay," Appell explains. "All my friends knew they had changed their minds but no one at the synagogue was willing to call and tell me that I wasn't going to get the job."

Longing to enter the rabbinate, Appell chose not to apply to Hebrew Union College – the Reform Movement's seminary – because its application process, at that time, included questions about sexuality. "I wasn't going to pretend not to be gay," he recalls. Instead he went into the apparel business in New York City. "In my family, if you didn't know what you wanted to do, you went into the *schmatte* business," he laughs. In New York, he joined an LGBTQ synagogue. "The congregation didn't yet have a rabbi so I became part of the lay leadership and often led services," he says. "It gave me an outlet for the rabbinic career I wasn't having."

The synagogue also met what Appell calls his "Jewish needs," which included a place for worship, for Shabbat dinners, for community and family. "Most of the men I dated in those years were men I met at the synagogue," he adds. By the early 1990s, he had become involved with a Reform synagogue that, while not specifically LGBTQ, was making enormous strides in building an inclusive congregation.

Throughout, Appell never lost track of his original calling. "It was in the early '90s that Hebrew Union College changed its policy," he explains. "Being LGBTQ was no longer a disqualifier." He was accepted in 1993, a decade after putting his dreams on hold. Upon graduation, he joined a Reform congregation in Chicago with a strong history of social action. It was the first stop on a career that eventually led to his current position as manager for programming at CCAR. Along the way he married a man he'd met in Jerusalem during his first year in seminary and adopted two children.

Each of Judaism's four major movements has its own policies and responses to LGBTQ people and its unique successes and challenges in creating welcoming, inclusive communities.

## Reform

According to Rabbi Denise Eger, who is a member of HRC's Religion Council, "There are little to no barriers between LGBTQ people and others in the Reform congregation." Reform LGBTQ rabbis are regularly ordained, transgender people are welcomed and many perform marriages for same-sex couples are performed. Experiences may differ based on location, but an inclusive policy is pervasive. Rachel Laser, formerly with the Religious Action Center, says, "Reform Judaism was one of the first to officially open synagogue doors and invite LGBTQ clergy into our ranks. It's true, though, that there's been a struggle for LGBTQ rabbis to be included in the top leadership of the movement."

### FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE, WHAT INCLUSION CAN LOOK LIKE:

In 2015, the Union for Reform Judaism passed an inclusive resolution on the rights of transgender and gender non-conforming people that affirms the full equality, inclusion and acceptance of all gender identities and gender expressions. The resolution encourages Reform institutions to provide:

- 1 Gender-neutral language;
- 2 Trainings on issues of gender for religious school staff
- 3 Advocacy on behalf of the transgender community.

Read more at [www.urj.org](http://www.urj.org)

While the Reform Movement has made enormous strides in becoming inclusive of its LGBTQ members, congregants don't always experience a full sense of welcome. Dr. Joel Kushner, director of the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health at Hebrew Union College, explains, "There's a general sense that everything is fine, which has created some challenges for the work ahead."

In consulting with congregations that wish to become more inclusive, Kushner uses a scale that begins at "hostile" and moves through "indifferent," "tolerant" and "inclusive," to

"It's worked out well for me and my family," Appell says, "but I'll never know which jobs I didn't get because I'm gay." He also wonders about the continuing lack of LGBTQ clergy in top leadership roles. "As there are more and more LGBTQ clergy, you have to wonder if there's a lavender ceiling," he says. "When will there be more openly LGBTQ senior rabbis at our largest or most prominent congregations?"

Appell notes a national trend of migration across all religious traditions. "One of the things we know from recent surveys by the Pew Research Center," he says, "is that religious people are moving. They're not dying in the religion they were born in. That's true within the Jewish community as well. Many people who are brought up in one denomination are moving to another."



end with “embracing.” “Most liberal folks think of themselves as inclusive,” he says, “but they’re actually more in the tolerant area.”

### WHERE TO LOOK FOR RESOURCES?

Keshet’s website offers a variety of resources on all things LGBTQ and Jewish. Learn more at [www.keshetonline.org](http://www.keshetonline.org)

Laser notes that even an inclusive community’s emphasis on family can be disconcerting, and not just for its LGBTQ congregants. “It’s like being a single straight woman of a certain age,” she says. “Synagogues are structured around the traditional family, and people get involved when they have young kids. A married LGBTQ person with kids will probably have an easier time than one who is single – but that’s true of straight people as well. A straight couple who decide not to have children is also going to feel less included.”

Like Kushner, Laser advises leaders and congregants to consider what inclusion really means. “You don’t just want an LGBTQ social committee,” she points out, “you want LGBTQ people working alongside everyone else.” She stresses that inclusive atmospheres are not created by synagogues, but by communities working in genuine relationship. “Create something together,” she says. “Have Shabbat dinners that are intentionally welcoming. Start a project where you recruit straight and gay people to promote equality in your state.”

### Reconstructionist

Like Reform synagogues, Reconstructionist communities are welcoming and inclusive. They were the first movement to ordain LGBTQ rabbis and perform same-sex marriage ceremonies. Idit Klein, executive director of Keshet, a nationwide advocate for LGBTQ-inclusive Jewish communities, explains, “On these issues, the Reconstructionist Movement is the most progressive of all.” Klein employs a spectrum of inclusion similar to Kushner’s and places the Reconstructionist movement near the top at what she labels “celebratory inclusion.” “Areas for growth tend to be around gender identity and expression issues,” she says. “There are many Reconstructionist communities that are fully inclusive of trans folks and some that are still early in that process.”

Rabbi Joshua Lesser, founder of SOJOURN (Southern Jewish Resource Network for Gender and Sexual Diversity), notes the Reconstructionist focus on constant evolution.

“Everyone’s given a hard hat at that door,” he says. “It’s your community and you’re going to help build it.” While acknowledging his tradition’s inclusive practices with pride, he also echoes concerns about a family-centric attitude. “If you’re an LGBTQ couple who has been together for 10 years and have two adorable kids, that’s great. We want to dance at your wedding,” he says. “On the other hand, the gay guy in his 20s who has half a dozen tattoos and spends his summers in P-town is certainly treated well but he isn’t going to be embraced in the warmth of community in the same way that a family is.” Lesser stresses that the time is ripe for another push toward inclusion. “This is the moment,” he says. “People are beginning to recognize what is possible.”

### Conservative

There is a wide range of experiences across Conservative synagogues. Most rabbinic seminaries will ordain LGBTQ rabbis and many congregations welcome LGBTQ families. Jewish marriages for same-sex couples are sometimes officiated by Conservative rabbis, with synagogue approval. Idit Klein explains, “There have been a lot of changes, both official and cultural, in the last 10 years. The first classes of openly gay Conservative rabbis have only recently been ordained. And more resources are now being provided for those who want to build inclusive congregations. But you can be a Conservative rabbi and not celebrate same-sex weddings. Local leaders are told that both options are valid. Congregations vary greatly because of that.” Individuals interested in joining a Conservative synagogue should first assess that community’s attitudes and policies.



In 2014, Rabbi Gil Steinlauf, senior rabbi of Adas Israel Congregation in Washington, D.C., came out as gay to his congregation. “Adas Israel is a flagship synagogue in the Conservative Movement,” Steinlauf said. “The most remarkable aspect of my coming out story was that there wasn’t any story! “We have over 1,500 families in our synagogue, and there was essentially no negative backlash against my coming out. This is a testament to how far we have come in recent years in Conservative Judaism. As recently as 10 years ago, I wonder if my story would have been a very different one.”

Adas Israel, a 150-year-old anchor of the Washington, D.C., Jewish community, counts among its worshipers Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Elena Kagan, both of whom cast decisive votes to guarantee the right to marry for same-sex couples in the *Obergefell vs. Hodges* case.

“The fact that my congregation celebrated my coming out speaks volumes – not only about how far the Conservative Movement has come, but about how our evolving movement can support leaders and future generations on the path toward LGBTQ rights and inclusion in our society,” added Rabbi Steinlauf, also a member of the HRC Religion Council.

“The more LGBTQ Conservative Movement clergy and allies proudly stand up for who we are and our rights, the more we can celebrate how our Jewish tradition – our Torah itself – calls us to create a society that cherishes every individual as created in the image of God.”

Attorney Stuart Kurlander, a board member and former board chair of Keshet, grew up deeply involved in the Conservative Movement but didn’t come out as a gay man until he was 30. “I was president of a national Jewish organization,” he explains. “I was active and very visible in the Jewish community. I had learned that if you’re going to do any kind of community work, it has to be about the whole community and not just yourself. But I also learned that communities are composed of distinct individuals, and that all of them must be represented.”

Coming out only deepened Kurlander’s commitment to the Conservative Movement. “I doubled down on the work I was doing.” Serving as an LGBTQ leader, and being a Conservative Jew, gave Kurlander the chance to model the benefits of inclusion. “It’s not lost on anyone that I’m openly gay,” he says. “That’s my message, in fact. I want others to see that we have an open, inclusive community. People accept me for who I am and look at me as a whole, not as any one part.”

Kurlander remains deeply committed to the values of the Conservative Movement. “I grew up with it,” he points out. “I grew up in Conservative youth groups, with the Conservative liturgy and with the overall embrace of things that are important to Jews, including the state of Israel. I grew up going to service on Friday nights and keeping kosher at home. To this day I have Shabbat every week, with the original Conservative liturgy.”

The benefits run deep. “It means that I am part of a people, part of a religion, part of a community that has lasted thousands of years,” Kurlander says. “I look at my life and the greatest satisfaction I have comes from being Jewish, and from being both Jewish and openly gay.”

## Orthodox

Greater challenges remain facing LGBTQ Jews who wish to be involved in an Orthodox community.

Rabbi Steven Greenberg, an openly gay Orthodox rabbi, is executive director at Eshel, an organization that counsels Orthodox congregations on inclusivity and that works with parents and LGBTQ children to maintain safe and caring homes. He describes the Orthodox community as “very warm, engaging” and as “intellectually gripping,” adding that “it’s a community that creates its own routines of sweetness that you just don’t want to miss.” For LGBTQ Orthodox Jews, however, that sweetness can be hard to attain or is reached only after overcoming the many obstacles placed in their path.

There are occasional congregations that take a welcoming stance, and individual rabbis who may prove supportive, but they will not condone or perform a same-sex marriage

### ARE YOUR PARENTS STRUGGLING WITH YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY?

Here are top 3 suggested resources for Orthodox Jewish parents of LGBTQ children:

- 1 Eshel’s Annual Parent Retreat**  
Brings Orthodox parents for a shabbat of community, learning and support. More at [www.eshelonline.org](http://www.eshelonline.org)
- 2 Call-in Support**  
Eshel also offers support by phone. E-mail [miryam@eshelonline.org](mailto:miryam@eshelonline.org) for a brief intake and the call-in number.
- 3 Online Support**  
Temicha’s e-mail list is a safe space for parents to engage in dialogue. More at [www.temicha.org](http://www.temicha.org)



or bless children of same-sex couples. The experience for transgender people can be especially complicated since many Orthodox traditions are built upon strict gender divides.

In decades of service, Greenberg has heard stories that range from the Orthodox youth who came out at his yeshiva to rousing acclaim to that of a youth rejected by his rabbi but supported by his parents, who moved the family to a state with a welcoming Orthodox synagogue. While acknowledging the many challenges ahead, Greenberg also says that “there are a growing number of places in the country where you can actually live as openly gay and Orthodox.”

Greenberg stresses that each individual’s experience is shaped by multiple factors, including location and the experiences of the community members outside the synagogue. Urban centers, for example, offer a greater variety of communities and personal perspectives. Yet, an aura of secrecy often remains. “Many Orthodox rabbis are open to being in conversation with the LGBTQ person,” Greenberg says, “and to serving their spiritual needs. However, they may choose to do so in secret, for fear of the disruption it would cause in the larger community.”

Greenberg’s own story – from coming out to an Orthodox rabbi in Jerusalem while still in his early 20s to being married to a man in an Orthodox synagogue and becoming a parent through surrogacy decades later – is a sign of the changing times. “The tide has turned,” he says. Key to that evolution is the work of organizations like Eshel. “Our aim is to multiply the 8 to 12 welcoming congregations across the country by 10,” he says.

College student Isabel Singer began to live in accordance with Orthodox Judaism after being raised in a Conservative home. Among other accomplishments at Yale, she was instrumental in bringing Greenberg to campus as a guest speaker. “I think there’s a lot of space in Orthodoxy to create social acceptance,” she says. But Singer also speaks to the tension between social acceptance and Jewish law. “I don’t just want to be socially accepted. I want a place in the community of [Jewish] law as well, because law is so important to Judaism.”

Singer is clear about the challenges, and personal harm, that many LGBTQ Orthodox Jews are facing. “There’s rampant homophobia,” she points out, telling the story of an Orthodox gathering where peers described LGBTQ people as “disgusting,” unaware that friends in the room would be affected. At an Orthodox synagogue, she heard the rabbi declare the Supreme Court decision in favor of marriage equality a “desecration of G-d’s name.”

Describing herself as a “*halakhic egalitarian Jew*,” Singer follows her understanding of Jewish law but sees men and women as equals. “I think that queer people can keep all areas of *halakha* [Jewish Law] but obviously others don’t agree,” she says. “It’s important that they come to an understanding that people who are queer in this community aren’t going to destroy it.”

Both Singer and Greenberg look to the future with hope. “There was a time if you were gay and Orthodox, you either stayed and were silent or you spoke up and left,” Greenberg says. “The emerging reality is that people are now wanting to stay and speak up. I think that’s what coming home means. You get to say the truth and be a member of the religious community you love.”

## LGBTQ Jewish Communities

While communities in all four of the main branches of Judaism have made strides toward inclusion, synagogues founded and run by LGBTQ members continue to play a key role in advancing LGBTQ Jewish life. Congregations Beit Simchat Torah in New York City, Beth Chayim Chadashim in Los Angeles, Sha’ar Zahav in San Francisco, Bet Haverim in Atlanta, Kol Ami in West Hollywood and Bet Mishpachah in Washington, D.C., are flagship communities that provide a catalyst for progress, while also serving the specific needs of their LGBTQ congregants.

Senior Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah notes the history that such communities often share. “I arrived here in the midst of the AIDS epidemic,” she remembers, “to a community that was broken and in deep pain. We addressed that pain with profound rituals of illness

and of dying." Her congregation has witnessed extraordinary change in the decades since.

"Our membership started as almost exclusively male," she points out. "It's now about 50/50, with many more transgender people joining in the last 10 years, and a lot more families." Straight allies are also a new phenomenon. "The straight person who wants to be part of a vibrant Jewish community, and is comfortable being in a minority, is always welcome," Kleinbaum says.

While acknowledging the importance of developments in the larger community, Kleinbaum also recognizes the unique value of an LGBTQ synagogue. "Our role is very different from the welcoming synagogue that has a few gay families," she explains. "We care about the cultural phenomenon of being LGBTQ and being Jewish. Also, it's becoming easier for LGBTQ couples to fit into mainstream congregations, but what about LGBTQ people who are single? Or queer people who don't fit into certain, proscribed roles? We're not just providing a spiritual place that is comfortable. We're creating a cultural identity that is profound."

Looking to the future, Kleinbaum notes five key issues still to be addressed. "We have to think in a very sophisticated way about the needs of LGBTQ families," she says, "about issues around LGBTQ aging, about economic and racial injustice in our community. Our congregation is also deeply engaged in working for peace and justice in Palestine. Finally, as Jews and as a congregation we must look for a transformation in ritual and liturgy as we reconsider how we think about gender."

## A New Generation

As cultural norms are reconsidered and Jewish communities address the needs of their LGBTQ members, the influence of younger generations becomes of critical importance. As with Isabel Singer's experience, personal growth is often heightened during college years, when students work to establish their adult identity. The ripple effect of those personal discoveries is felt across the larger community as young professionals begin to shape the worlds they enter after graduation.

### Finding Your Community

President of the Nice Jewish Boys gay social group in Washington, D.C., and a board member of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington's Young Leadership program, Ben Rosenbaum grew up in a Conservative synagogue in a small Southern town. He never heard the LGBTQ experience discussed and there were no role models for being LGBTQ and Jewish, not even an acknowledgement of the possibility.

#### ARE YOU LOOKING FOR LGBTQ JEWISH SOCIAL GROUPS IN YOUR CITY?

Here are some suggested places to start looking:

**Jewish LGBT Network**

[www.jewishlgbtnetwork.com/place\\_category/jewish-lgbt-social-groups](http://www.jewishlgbtnetwork.com/place_category/jewish-lgbt-social-groups)

**Hillel International**

<http://www.hillel.org/college-guide>



"It wasn't until coming out and getting involved with organizations here in D.C. that I realized how much of Judaism is built on life events," Rosenbaum says, "There are rituals at birth, at marriage, at coming of age, at death. For a long time, those life events just weren't the same if you were gay. That's changing though. Judaism is becoming more open and, across the country, there are more opportunities for LGBTQ people to participate in those life-cycle events."

Rosenbaum recognizes that LGBTQ people in small or rural communities might still feel isolated from such landmark moments. In many places, they may also feel isolated for the simple fact of being Jewish. "I was the only Jew in my



class," he says of his high school. "So I understand that struggle from both perspectives, from being gay and from being Jewish. But in a city like Washington, D.C., there is so much diversity that you can envision a life where you can participate fully."

To those outside the larger urban areas, Rosenbaum advises, "Find your community, explore. One of the beautiful things about Judaism is that it lends itself to a very progressive point of view. There's a questioning aspect built into the religion. To ask 'Who am I?' or 'How do I fit in this world?' is a very Jewish thing to do. The vast majority of the Jewish community lends itself to this more open, progressive aspect."

Shonna Levin grew up in what she calls "Ultra-Orthodox Judaism," largely separated from mainstream culture. "Essentially, I grew up in a shtetl," she explains. "Everything is very stringent and communal and runs completely organically. It's a wonderful way to live strictly according to the Torah."

### ARE YOU LESBIAN, BISEXUAL OR QUEER IDENTIFIED WOMAN WHO IS RELIGIOUS, OBSERVANT AND/OR ORTHODOX?

You may want to consider exploring Tirtzah, a community of *frum* queer women. Learn more at [tirtzah.wordpress.com](http://tirtzah.wordpress.com).

The experience, though, posed significant challenges as Levin moved toward adulthood. "There isn't language for attraction," Levin points out. "Sexuality is not talked about in general and queer sexuality is not talked about at all." Like Isabel Singer, she became profoundly aware of hurtful language. A family friend known for his commitment to speaking well of all people made an exception for those who were LGBTQ. "He would talk about gay men being animals," Levin remembers. "He would talk about a gay couple holding hands and he'd say – in front of me and all the children – how disgusting it was. I wanted to tell him, 'My first kiss was with your daughter and she's in the room right now and I'm in the room and this is harmful!'"

Levin started coming out to friends slowly, as she continued to date men. Finally she spoke to her father, a rabbi and Talmudic scholar. "He was wonderful," she says. "I had so much fear built up in my head. That's a big problem for a lot of LGBTQ Orthodox Jews. There's an assumed rejection that is just as bad as the actual rejection, which may not even happen."

Like Singer, she places great importance on Jewish law. "Most problems will come up when I'm committed to a partner for life," she predicts. "And I'd like to be in a relationship with another Orthodox woman but, because of the way they're treated, they usually leave the community or they're closeted and date men. Those two choices are not things I want for myself." Levin, though, lives in hope. "I believe every partnership is a miracle and that God has a hand in it," she says. "How much more must that be true for queer people?"

She finds strength in community. One of her early steps in the coming out process was reaching out to Jewish Queer Youth (JQY), which offers anonymous services, including an email listserv. "I felt less alone," Levin says. "I found people with similar narratives to mine. Just knowing that JQY existed helped me, just knowing that community was out there."





## A Transgender Experience

In her memoir *Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey Between Genders*, Dr. Joy Ladin writes, “We all have to become ourselves – not just once, by growing from childhood into adulthood, but throughout our lives.” As a Jewish woman who is transgender, Ladin finds a tension between that constant evolution and established faith structures. “Religious communities,” she says, “are about stability, which is in tension with spiritual traditions of changing and shedding.”

### CONVERTING TO JUDAISM

If you are transgender and considering conversion, the mikveh demands us to be both physically and spiritually vulnerable. Consider the following resources to help you through the process:

Jewish Transitions offers conversion guidelines.

[www.jewishtransitions.org](http://www.jewishtransitions.org)

Read “Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community” by Noach Dzmura.

Consult with your rabbi to talk through individual concerns.

A professor at Stern College for Women at Yeshiva University, Ladin stresses the power of the individual experience. “All religions have to do with the individual growing into a fuller relationship with God,” she says. “God knows you’re already the person you need to become, even if you don’t know that yet. But, you can’t separate that experience from the community.”

She recognizes a parallel between LGBTQ people working to live fully in their lives and Orthodox Jews who seek to be more *frum* – more religious in their observance. “It can be an alienating experience,” she says of her non-LGBTQ students who have chosen this path. “It can separate you from your [secular] friends, and it’s a feeling that’s not unfamiliar to queer people. It’s coming into a fuller truth, inside and outside. The religious community should be there to sustain you in that.”

Ladin sees clear evidence of the queer experience throughout the Bible. “By ‘queer,’” she says, “I mean having a

sense of who you are that doesn’t fit the identity that society would place on you. From the first moment Abraham hears God’s voice and leaves his very elderly father to go into a land that he doesn’t know, he is completely queered. In terms of the norms of Mesopotamian society at that time, he is as queer as they come.”

Taking the idea a step further, Ladin makes the experience relevant to all. “By virtue of being created in God’s image, our relationship with God doesn’t require the mediation of anyone else, or of social structures,” she says. “What I’ve learned, though, is that finding that strength and sharing that joy requires other people.”

### Actions Speak Louder

Ladin stresses the importance of patience and the fact that changing attitudes often come through a gradual exposure to the unfamiliar. “Confrontation isn’t the way to go,” she advises. “Attend services regularly, talk with people, accept invitations to dinner. If the goal is finding your way home, it’s about exchanging smiles, getting to know people. They don’t know you’re queer but they also don’t know that you’re a stamp collector or that you have corgis at home. Create a space as a human being in a community.”

While acknowledging that Orthodox LGBTQ people have an especially challenging journey, Ladin also spoke about the changes necessary in other Jewish denominations. “The entire Reform Movement has a welcoming policy but many of the synagogues are very socially conservative in interpersonal interactions,” she points out. “A welcoming policy is not enough. You need to do things that make that welcome clear. Are there gender-neutral bathrooms? Are the singles events entirely heterosexual? Do the Hebrew school materials include images of same-sex parents?”

Ladin’s personal journey has been a difficult one. It includes marriage and divorce, the struggle of her children to understand her decision to transition and the struggle of her yeshiva to accept her and utilize her skills. For her, that journey is far from over. “Before my transition, I wasn’t fully a part of any community, because I wasn’t fully myself. I spent so much of my life thinking the worst of the people around me,” she says, admitting an assumption that few people could understand her situation. “That really stunted me as a person. ... My advice to myself is: Commit to the long haul, be patient, shop around, don’t give up.”



## A Fresh Look at the Text

Rabbi Jay Michaelson, author of *God vs. Gay?* and noted columnist and contributing editor of *The Forward*, advocates for inclusive and welcoming communities across all denominations of Judaism. He stresses that the unique experiences of LGBTQ Jews also gives them a unique opportunity. “We’ve experienced being marginalized,” he says. “We know how that feels. But many of us are also in power structures where we can effect change. The lesson of anti-Semitism is not that people should stop hating Jews, it’s that people should stop hating. The same is true of homophobia. We have a broader responsibility than our own lives.”

Michaelson looks to the Torah and other sacred Jewish texts for inspiration, echoing the teachings of Jewish sages across the centuries. “It’s right there, and it’s very clear,” he points out. “It says, ‘You were slaves in Egypt, therefore you can never oppress anyone.’ That’s the core teaching. That’s what we have to remember.”

Dr. Sandra Sterling Epstein, an Orthodox non-LGBTQ ally and professor at Gratz College, adds, “In addition to being ritually observant we believe it is our obligation, according to *halakha*, to be inclusive. The Talmud is clear that we’re obligated to care for others, to treat people with the same inclusivity we expect ourselves. One of the names for God in these texts is The Compassionate One.”

### The Laws of Leviticus

There are two verses in the book of Leviticus that have traditionally been used to condemn homosexuality:

#### Leviticus 18:22

**וְאֵת זָכָר לֹא תִשְׁכַּב מִשְׁכָּבֵי אִשָּׁה תוֹעֵבָה הוּא׃**

*And with a male you shall not lie the lyings of a woman, it is to'eva [abomination].*

#### Leviticus 20:13

**וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב אֶת זָכָר מִשְׁכָּבֵי אִשָּׁה**

*If a man lies with a male the lyings of a woman,*

**תוֹעֵבָה עָשׂוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם מוֹת יוּמָתוּ דְמִיָּהֶם בָּם׃**

*the two of them have done an abhorrent thing; they shall be put to death. Their bloodguilt is upon them.*

[*Rabbi Steven Greenberg, Wrestling with God & Men*]

Placing the verses in context, however, provides a different story. Leviticus 20, for example, also states that adulterers and anyone who curses their parents should be executed, and that men and women who have intercourse while the woman is menstruating will be cast out of the community. (Elsewhere in Leviticus, slavery is condoned, but only if slaves are acquired from adjacent nations.) Furthermore, many rabbis and Jewish scholars place these verses in the context of a broader prohibition against the non-Jewish, idolatrous rituals of rival cultures that sometimes used same-sex sexual acts in their religious ceremonies.

### Sodom and Gomorrah

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has long been used as a prohibition against same-sex relations. In the Bible, Lot, Abraham’s nephew, welcomes strangers into his home; strangers who are, in fact, angels in the guise of men. The men of Sodom, young and old, insist that Lot send these visitors out of the house to be raped. Lot offers the mob his virgin daughters instead, which the mob rejects. In the end, the disguised angels send Lot and his immediate family out of the city, which they then destroy entirely.

The story contains no depictions of consensual, same-sex relationships. It’s a tale of attempted rape, and of a city that violates the basic law of hospitality that ruled society at the time. When Sodom and Gomorrah are mentioned later in the Bible, their sin is never identified as sexual. In both Ezekiel and Amos, the sins referenced are pride and an unwillingness to share with the poor and marginalized.

### At the Center of the Torah

Epstein stresses the importance of reading the full text. “It’s actually Leviticus 19 that is the center of the Torah,” she says. “There are commandments on how we are supposed to respect each other and reminders that every person is created in the image of God. It should be taught as a unit, Leviticus 18 through 20. Right smack in the middle, in Leviticus 19, you’ll find, ‘You should love your neighbor as yourself!’”

“The Bible has been read a certain way for 1,500 years,” Michaelson notes. “But we have more information about human sexuality than we used to. People used to talk about the four corners of the earth. To think about human sexuality as people did two millennia ago would be like acting as if the earth actually had four corners.”

In his work, Michaelson draws on a core tenet of Judaism: the ability of textual interpretation – and application – to evolve alongside social and scientific advances. He calls on Orthodox rabbis to take up the challenge of examining ancient texts with a new eye and applying new knowledge about the human race. “It’s up to them to do that heavy

lifting,” he says. “It’s up to the rest of us to recognize the crisis that the traditional or literal interpretation creates.”

## Gender Fluidity in the Torah

The same paradigms for reading and rereading text have aided our approach to transgender, genderqueer and intersex identities within Judaism. Rabbi Jane Rachel Litman writes in *Struggling in Good Faith: LGBTQI Inclusion from 13 American Religious Perspectives* [eds. Mychal Copeland and D’vorah Rose, Skylight Paths 2015]:

“It is notable that the verse in Genesis that states that human beings are created in God’s image, so often quoted by contemporary liberal authorities in regard to LGBTQI inclusion, is also the basis for an early rabbinic *midrash* [Hebrew – literally “interpretation,” usually a narrative] on human gender identity.”

**Rabbi Samuel Ben Nahman said:  
“At the time that the Holy One,  
Blessed Be He, created the  
human, God created him as an  
androgynous.”**

**Resh Lakish said: “At the time  
that [Adam] was created, he  
was made with two faces, and  
[God] sliced him and gave him  
two backs, a female one and  
a male one, as it says: ‘And He  
took from his sides’ [Genesis  
2:21, the midrash is playing  
with the plural form of the  
word ‘sides’].”**

**(Leviticus Rabbah 12:2)**

The *midrash* pictures Adam [Hebrew – “human”] as both male and female, each “side” as the frontal half of a man and a woman. Then God divides the human vertically and places a back half on each front. Evidently this was a popular interpretation of the scriptural dissonance between Genesis 1:27, which portrays the bigender creation of humanity, and Genesis 2:18, which presents the lone human for whom God must create a companion.

**Rabbi Yirmiyah ben Elazar said:  
“At the hour when the Holy  
One, Blessed Be He, created  
the first human, it was  
created androgynous. As it  
is written, ‘Male and female  
God created them.’”**

**Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman said:  
“When the Holy One, Blessed  
Be He, created the first human,  
it was created with two front  
sides, and then God split it,  
creating for it two backs, a  
back here and a back there.”  
(Genesis Rabbah 8:1)**

Jewish legal texts dating back to the first centuries of the Common Era discuss seven genders, including the *androgynous* (mentioned above), with both female and male genitals, and the *tumtum*, whose genitals are hidden. One rabbi teaches that rather than being labeled either female or male, “An androgyne, he is a case unto herself, and the Sages made no decision whether it is a man or woman.” (Mishnah Bikkurim 4:5)

Noach Dzmura, in *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, writes, “Mishnah Androgynous introduces the postmodern idea that – for all genders – one’s social role is not the sole determinant of gender, and that certain negotiated alliances can foster recognition of a variant gender identity” (p.176).

Litman explains that the Sages also commented on the biblical restriction on cross-dressing, which reads, “A woman must not put on man’s apparel, nor shall a man wear women’s clothing; for whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 22:5).

The Talmud comments: “Why does Scripture say, ‘Men’s effects are not for a woman,’ etc.? If it were merely to teach that a man should not dress in a woman’s garment, nor a woman in a man’s garment, behold it says this is an abomination, but there is no abomination just in that! It must therefore mean that a man should not put on a woman’s garment and socialize with women, nor a woman a man’s garment and socialize with men.”

Thus the Sages interpret the biblical verse on cross dressing as a ban on disguise rather than on wearing gender-variant clothing, which they understand as obviously acceptable. Medieval commentator Rashi elaborates on the issue of clothing, gender and sexuality by explaining that the prohibition is not only restricted to disguises but specifically to disguises for the purpose of (hetero) sexual seduction, to obtain greater access and trust across gender lines in a relatively gender-segregated society.

The *Shulchan Aruch*, a central legal code, reiterates the biblical concern with the policing of gender expression and forbids men from dyeing their hair or looking in mirrors on the grounds that these activities are reserved for women. (Yoreh De’ah 182:6). However, some authorities permitted cross-dressing on the spring costume festival of Purim (Orach Chayim 696:8).

**Rabbi Moses Isserles explains:  
“On Purim, a man wearing  
women’s clothing or a woman  
wearing the garments of a  
man is not prohibited, since  
they intend to be joyful!”**

Elliot Kukla and Reuben Zellman write in *Torah Queeries* that, “If we follow Isserles’ thinking, then choosing to wear clothing that is traditionally designated for a different gender from the one in which we were raised is acceptable if we are doing it because it makes us happy...all the more so is it appropriate to wear the clothes that express our authentic selves.”

## TORAH QUEERIES

The blog series *Torah Queeries*, available on the Keshet website, offers weekly interpretations from an LGBTQ perspective.

Lesser, who contributed to the series, notes its particular value to people in remote or rural areas. “It’s great for someone who wants to do some Torah study on their own,” he says. “We wrote with a two-tiered goal – to use in seminaries and colleges but also to make them accessible for the average Jewish person or someone who wants to pursue a queer Bible study. Some writings in there blew my mind.”

Rabbi Eleanor Steinman, director of education at Temple Beth Hillel in Los Angeles, collaborates with her congregation to explore the kind of perspectives that Michaelson, Lesser and others uncover in the text. “It’s not just Leviticus,” she points out. “Look at the story of creation. Human beings are created in the image of God. Not just Adam, but all human beings. What are the implications? Then look at all the names of God, and notice that some of them are plural. Think about that. Then notice that the Talmud speaks about more than just two genders. There are so many ways to be expansive when you read the text, rather than exclusionary.”



## Taking Stock, Taking Steps

The scholars and leaders interviewed for this guide are intimately involved in the work of creating and sustaining inclusive and welcoming Jewish communities. They are also profoundly aware of the personal rewards available to individuals who make a commitment to those communities. In addition to their expert knowledge, they offered the following advice for people on the journey.

### For LGBTQ Individuals

Kushner advises that LGBTQ individuals first research their movement's policy regarding welcome and inclusion. "If you know that the Reform Movement has had a policy of full inclusion for 20 years," he says, "but you're not experiencing that at your synagogue, you get to say, 'Hey, wait a minute.'" He notes that the Conservative Movement presents no obstacles to LGBTQ people who wish to attend services, to read from the Torah during services or to have a marriage celebrated. "But a Conservative rabbi may not know that there are sanctioned marriage ceremonies. Use your resources to educate them, to inform them that their denomination says it's okay," he says.

#### JEWISH MOVEMENTS

Jewish movements in the United States have taken supportive stands on the issues that affect LGBTQ people in America, such as the fight for freedom from discrimination, the solemnizing of marriage for same-sex couples and the ordination of openly LGBT clergy. Learn more at [www.hrc.org/faithpositions](http://www.hrc.org/faithpositions).

Rachel Laser warns against feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of coming out. "Often our fears of the hardships ahead are much greater than the actual experience," she says. "The Jewish community, as a whole, has its heart entirely in the right place. It's important to understand that, so you're not walking in with that predisposition to feel unwanted. You might well find that the rewards far outweigh the challenges or obstacles."

Ironically, Laser also notes that newly out or newly joined LGBTQ congregants might be *too* popular. "You can become the 'cool' person to be seen with," she says. "And that can be annoying. My advice is to simply be yourself. Recognize that we all have multifaceted personalities. Be confident; understand that people will be just as likely to react to your sameness as to the difference. Don't feel like you're not being true to yourself if you lean into that."



Lesser notes both the challenges and benefits of smaller and rural communities. "It's a double-edged sword," he says. "There's a certain kind of intimacy. Someone might have a bias against a group of people, but they get to know you and then choose to exclude you from that stereotype. It might be a stereotype about LGBTQ people, it might be about Jews. But that's where a tremendous amount of changing hearts and minds is happening right now, as people become less isolated and the stereotypes break down."

Ladin suggests that the best way to find welcoming communities is to look to the individuals within them. "Communities can be very rigid," she points out, "but individuals are often much less so. There are many Orthodox rabbis who offer regular pastoral care to LGBTQ Jews but who can't reveal themselves as rabbis who do this. And some Orthodox leaders may also be open to welcoming trans people. Some may say that they would have advised you not to transition, but now that you have, they will work to make you a part of the community."

For guidance on finding such communities, Ladin points to Eshel. "It's good for support in many Orthodox communities," she says, "but it's also good for this kind of advice. You can say where you live and ask for recommendations, for rabbis or communities that are open. It's about knowing people who know people. Just having a conversation ahead of time, getting the lay of the land from someone who has been there, gives you more control."

## For LGBTQ Youth and Their Parents

Joanna Blotner, a non-LGBTQ ally and an organizer at Jews United for Justice, recounts that her parents' worst nightmare came true when her younger brother was harassed and cyberbullied in his first months of college. "A parent's job is to worry about their children," she explains. "When my brother came out, this was just one more thing to worry about. They wondered, in a society that is far from perfect, will he be safe, will he be accepted, will he be loved? There were definitely missteps and gaffes that my parents and I made when my brother came out but some of them were done under that guise of worry. When parents worry, it can be how they show love. But when children are the recipients of worry, it can be misunderstood as disapproval or disappointment."

For young people coming out to their families, Blotner advises, "Be patient in those first days, weeks, and months. It took you 5, 15, 18, maybe 20 years to come out to yourself and to your family. You can't always expect a radical change in them overnight. You need to give them space to worry and to grieve some of the challenges that society poses

to LGBTQ people and families. Be partners to them in that journey; be willing to have patience with all those little missteps they are going to make. But if your family is hostile or abusive, and continues to be, you might need to walk away for a time and build family elsewhere. There is a strong ethos in Judaism for self-preservation and self-advocacy. Our traditions can help guide you in navigating difficult circumstances."

### SUPPORT FOR PARENTS OF LGBTQ CHILDREN

When an LGBTQ child comes out, it can be a major life change for parents. Be partners with them on that journey by connecting them with resources and peer support:

Keshet provides *The Keshet Parent and Family Connection*, a support group connecting to other parents of LGBTQ children.

Eshel provides several resources of support to Orthodox parents of LGBTQ children.

Patience is also key for the parents who are facing – and overwhelmed by – news of their child's sexuality. "The thing to remember," Blotner says, "is that your child has been this person since you brought them home from the hospital. And it's okay if you don't understand everything right now. If you're confused or don't know what to say, that's fine. The commitment is to learning and growing as a family. Show your support by being willing to educate yourself."

Steinman works closely with parents of children who are transgender. "My synagogue has an elementary school," she explains. "We have a second grader who was assigned male at birth and who is wearing dresses and is expressing the desire to be called by a female name. The parents, the school, everyone is totally supportive. Our job is to create an environment that is safe, where a second grader can figure this out. Parents at the school are asking the right question, which is, 'How can we help our children talk about this?' And we're providing them with resources so they have the correct language, so they have ways in which to talk with their children about those who are gender nonconforming."

Kurlander reminds parents to look to their children's future potential. "They can be involved, engaged, committed members of the Jewish community," he says of the young people he mentors. "As openly LGBTQ Conservative Jews, they can rise to the highest level of leadership. I'm proof of that. They can get married and have kids. They can be successful in business. Now, more than ever, they can have it all."



### For Non-LGBTQ Allies

Michaelson emphasizes the influence that non-LGBTQ allies can wield. “They don’t have the concern for their own safety that many Jewish LGBTQ people have,” he points out. “I’d like to see them asking for a safe sticker to be put on the synagogue, on schools, on summer camps. I’d like to see them offering to read a prayer for pride or on the Trans Day of Remembrance. They should force the issue.”

Greenberg’s work at Eshel includes the establishment of an Orthodox Allies Roundtable. “Those allies are encouraging Orthodox rabbis not to argue Jewish points of law but to recognize the full responsibility they have for the LGBTQ people that they serve,” he explains. “What’s really happening is that they’re being called to be better rabbis.”

Blotner stresses that becoming an ally requires a commitment to ongoing education on LGBTQ issues. “If you want to become a better ally, do your homework, be willing to hear criticism on what you don’t know yet, get involved in making a difference in your Jewish community and in your broader community as well.”

Most important, Michaelson adds, straight allies can tell their personal “feel, felt, found” stories. “In speaking with other straight people, the ally can say ‘I know how you feel because I felt that way too,’” Michaelson says. “Then they explain what changed their mind, and how they found something new to be true. It’s actually more effective than LGBTQ people advocating for themselves.”

### For Rabbis and Congregational Leaders

Kushner’s advice to congregational leaders is to start from a place of self-assessment. “You have to look at yourself,” he says. “You have to learn the difference between tolerance and inclusion. Once you know where you’re starting from, you can develop a plan to move further along the continuum. For some the next step might be celebrating full Jewish marriages in the sanctuary, for others it might be deciding that hate or exclusionary speech will not be allowed, and that no congregant will feel the need to lie about who they are.”

Kushner is frequently confronted by congregational leaders who claim not to have LGBTQ members. “If you have 100 members, you have someone who is LGBTQ,” he insists. “For your members under 18, they may not have declared yet, or may not know, but they’re hearing everything you say – and don’t say.”

He stresses the need for a sense of inclusion that pervades the community. In his work with rabbis, he asks key questions, such as, “Have you ever talked about same-sex marriage? Do you use LGBTQ people in the foreground of stories that are not about LGBTQ issues? If you’re sharing an anecdote that relates to the state of Israel, do you make sure that your examples include LGBTQ people? Does your website’s language and visual content reflect an inclusive policy?”

Steinman emphasizes the need to model inclusion of the transgender experience. “We make a point of recognizing the Transgender Day of Remembrance,” she says. “A special prayer is said in service that day. But always, every day, we make sure to model the inclusion that is so important to who we are as a congregation. As a result, both our synagogue and our school have gained a reputation. People seek us out. Parents seek us out because they want their children raised in this kind of environment.”

For all of the suggestions mentioned above, you will find contacts listed in the Resources section. You can also contact HRC’s Religion and Faith Program for advice and referrals. Email us at [religion@hrc.org](mailto:religion@hrc.org).



We hope that these pages have provided helpful ideas and insights, whether you are a person who is LGBTQ and Jewish, the leader of a Jewish community seeking to become more inclusive or a non-LGBTQ ally who wishes to be better informed and more active in the struggle for LGBTQ equality.

This work could not exist without all the people who shared their knowledge and expertise, and we are deeply grateful for their participation. We are very lucky here at HRC Foundation to rub elbows with the great scholars and thinkers of our time and to benefit from their wisdom. We are even more lucky to benefit from the personal experiences of the many people who have shared their life journeys in these pages and who work so hard for their communities.

Most important, we want to thank you for giving careful consideration to the ideas presented here and for passing this resource along to anyone who might benefit from its pages.

A VERY SPECIAL THANKS to our contributors for so graciously sharing their experiences. Thanks also to those who generously agreed to let us use their photos in this guide. For more copies of this guide, additional coming out resources or more information on the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, please visit [www.hrc.org/jewish](http://www.hrc.org/jewish).

## Resources

### LGBTQ AND ALLIED ORGANIZATIONS

#### A Wider Bridge

An organization working to create more opportunities for LGBTQ Jews in the U.S. and around the world, along with friends and allies, to engage and connect with Israel.

[www.awiderbridge.org](http://www.awiderbridge.org)

#### Eshel

An organization working towards creating a community and acceptance for LGBT Jews and their families in Orthodox communities.

[www.eshelonline.org](http://www.eshelonline.org)

#### Institute for Judaism and Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity

An institute working towards a complete inclusion and welcoming of LGBT Jews in communities and congregations.

[ijso.huc.edu](http://ijso.huc.edu)

#### Jewish Queer Youth

An organization supporting LGBT Jews and their families in the Orthodox community.

[www.jqyouth.org](http://www.jqyouth.org)

#### JQ International

An organization building and strengthening a community that nurtures fusion of LGBTQ and Jewish identities.

[www.jqinternational.org](http://www.jqinternational.org)

#### Jewish Transitions

A grassroots organization working to support the Jewish lives of transgender, transsexual, gender variant, gender fluid, gender

queer, intersex and questioning people.

[www.jewishtransitions.org](http://www.jewishtransitions.org)

#### Keshet

A national grassroots organization that works for the full equality and inclusion of LGBT Jews in Jewish life.

[www.keshetonline.org](http://www.keshetonline.org)

#### National Union of Jewish LGBTIQ Students

A national organization of Jewish Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, and Intersex Students.

[www.nujlsonline.org](http://www.nujlsonline.org)

#### Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

An advocacy organization that educates and mobilizes the Reform Jewish community on legislative and social concerns, advocating on more than 70 different issues, including LGBTQ equality.

[www.rac.org](http://www.rac.org)

#### Southern Jewish Resource Network for Gender and Sexual Diversity

A southern regional network that provides resources, education, and support for LGBT individuals, their families and friends.

[www.sojourngsd.org](http://www.sojourngsd.org)

#### Svara

A yeshiva that engages, educates, and empowers a community of learned and innovative players – people who transform the Jewish world into a more creative, representative, and engaging place.

[www.svara.org](http://www.svara.org)

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### Books

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Shokeid, Moshe. *A Gay Synagogue in New York*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

### Films

*Hineini: Coming Out in a Jewish High School*, 2005.

*Keep Not Silent*, 2004.

*Trembling before G-d*, 2001

### Support Groups

#### Gay and Lesbian Yeshiva/Day School Alumni

A friendly and supportive community for LGBT yeshiva and day school alumni and all others with a commitment to their Jewish heritage.

[www.glydsa.org](http://www.glydsa.org)

#### Temicha

A support group for Orthodox Jewish parents of LGBT individuals.

[www.temicha.org](http://www.temicha.org)

### Tirtzah

A community of *frum* queer women who gather to celebrate and study our *yiddishkeit* [Jewish way of life].

[tirtzah.wordpress.com](http://tirtzah.wordpress.com)