

STRAIGHT-WELCOMING?!

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

50

JOSHUA LESSER

Jewish Communities of all stripes are grappling with the challenge of creating more inclusive communities. In particular, there is an unprecedented focus on welcoming LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) Jews. At Congregation Bet Haverim (CBH) in Atlanta, our commitment to inclusivity emerged organically. Founded by gay and lesbian Jews, the congregation also became straight-welcoming; today, straight members constitute the majority. We had to decide whether our values were queer-specific or queer-universal. Was our mission to create a community that primarily serves LGBT people, or was our mission to honor all those who struggle to find welcome, comfort, or celebration? Did we know only our queer hearts, or did we know the heart of the stranger and seek to love the stranger as ourselves?

At CBH, our evolution is firmly grounded in our beginnings. Haverim, a social group for gay men and lesbians, preceded CBH. As the story is told, Haverim had existed for almost two years when it held a Passover Seder in 1985. During the traditional telling of the Israelites' journey from oppression

to liberation, a parallel discussion began. This group of oppressed Jews did not need a social group as much as a spiritual home – a place to worship where their lives could be celebrated as sacred and where they could further their Jewish learning and connection. They envisioned a place where they felt free to be themselves: a gay synagogue. This is an origin story ripe with symbolism to which I continue to refer as we change and emerge, no longer a gay synagogue, but something altogether different.

When CBH was founded, synagogues were not welcoming of LGBT people. At best, synagogues would overlook one's sexuality; participation was contingent on silence. CBH was not permitted to join the Atlanta Reform Synagogue Council. First, the council excluded the congregation because it didn't have a rabbi. When a rabbi was hired, the council disbanded, because there was disagreement over whether to allow the "gay synagogue" to join. Thus, well into the 1990s, CBH and LGBT Jews generally were excluded from the community: A synagogue founded by and for gay and lesbian Jews was needed.

In the early 1990s, leaders in the Jewish community discovered that gay Jewish men dying of AIDS were having to turn to Christian ministers to bury them. In response, the community initiated a conference focusing on the Jewish community and AIDS, and CBH began to partner with the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta. This was CBH's first primary encounter with the "mainstream" community, and a funny thing happened. A few of the straight Jews who participated liked the people they met from CBH, and they began to attend CBH services. Soon, a small minority of straight folks joined the congregation. According to an apocryphal story, one of them asked for permission for his family to join, and said that they would not come silently; they would invite others to this community where they felt at home.

Once families with children joined, a Hebrew school became necessary. It required discussion, but the congregation eventually voted to establish one of the first supplementary schools for children at an LGBT synagogue – a decision that forever changed the course of CBH. Having a place where children could be educated made it possible for other straight folks to consider CBH a viable option.

At that point, the very definition of CBH became fluid. Were straight members equal? Debates ensued about whether straight members could

hold leadership positions, particularly that of president. While there was no consensus (even among straight members), ultimately the congregation rejected the notion of second-class citizenship. All should be equal. This is a value CBH has held onto through shifting demographics. Valuing the egalitarian standing for all members, along with an emphasis on grass-roots democratic leadership, were significant in CBH's decision to affiliate with the Reconstructionist movement, a decision made when the congregation was almost exclusively gay and lesbian. When I arrived as rabbi in 1999, I found tension among different groups. There were complaints that one group was favored over another. Some felt that lesbians were the key decision-makers. Others feared that the number of straight members was growing too quickly and that the synagogue would cease to serve its founding vision. Some prospective members were reluctant to join, either because the synagogue was not "queer" enough or because it was not sufficiently "straight-welcoming."

I had served in different capacities in two other primarily LGBT congregations, and I started at CBH with the belief that LGBT-exclusive communities were no longer the most vital choice. While safety and creativity could thrive in LGBT-exclusive communities, such communities could also be limiting, and they might sometimes

prevent healing by recreating a cycle of victimhood. We did not need ghettos, but rather a place where our value as LGBT people was inherently a part of the foundation and could be utilized to cultivate allies and companions on a Jewish path of renewal. But the initial situation was challenging. Despite attempts to treat everyone equally, people's fears were not allayed.

Two things happened in close proximity. I joined a clergy-supervision group and asked the members to join with me to explore this challenge. A simple solution emerged: Change the conversation from us vs. them to us *and* them. At the suggestion of a member of the executive committee, leadership began to refer to the synagogue as a "grand experiment" – when speaking to the entire congregation, in our literature, in sermons and in *kavanot* (meditations on prayer). We began to represent ourselves as a synagogue where gay and straight people were courageously exploring how to be in spiritual community together. As members embraced this vision, a culture shift began in how we viewed the work of our synagogue.

The community became the focus as we worked to create a comfortable atmosphere in which people could get to know each other, as well as opportunities for them to do so. Labeling it as an experiment permitted members to acknowledge their initial discomfort. During one High Holy Day talk,

I pointed out the challenges of this "experiment." Gently, I discussed how the progressive but privileged group in society (the straight community) often tries to erase lines of difference, claiming that we are all the same. On the other hand, frequently, the progressive but marginalized group (the LGBT community) sees only the lines of difference. Ultimately, I said, as a spiritual community, the opportunity is to mark both: how our lives are different due to significant inequality and how we transcend our differences as human beings. I have continued to emphasize how we all gain spiritually by moving out of our comfort zones in order to connect with each other.

A number of years ago, when our membership still had more LGBT households, some queer graduate students remarked that the synagogue felt more like a congregation that was "gay-welcoming" than like a gay synagogue. This caused great alarm to many of our members. Rather than dismiss this critique, we held parlor meetings to focus on it. Two things happened at the meetings. First, many people who had not really met each other in the midst of our growth surges had the opportunity to get acquainted. Second, many straight members expressed their hope that the queer sensibilities of the synagogue would be protected.

We began to view the LGBT liturgy in different ways. Many straight people expressed uneasiness reciting a prayer

for the end of hiding that is a regular part of CBH's liturgy – a prayer that begins, “As gay and lesbian Jews...” In response, we found new ways to discuss the importance of this prayer, and that has led to dozens and dozens of *kavanot* given by me, LGBT members, and many straight folks. We have also rewritten our Pride Seder Haggadah to recognize bisexuals, transgender people, and straight allies more explicitly. The third of the four cups we drink is in honor of allies.

This is not lip service. At CBH, many of our straight members have become outspoken allies. During the marriage amendment fight, some congregants formed a group, Straights in Solidarity, and protested along with the CBH chorus at the Georgia State Capitol. They spoke on television and lobbied members of the legislature. Our school also reflects this solidarity. The curriculum interweaves LGBT issues at age-appropriate levels. We have a pride celebration and workshops. Both in word and action, in an ongoing way, we have thrown our lot in with each other.

We put practical actions into place to ensure the balance, making sure that LGBT and allied voices are represented as leaders. In my ten years at CBH, there have been seven presidents, three of whom were straight and four of whom were lesbian. Our tikkun olam committee has made sure that one of the pillars they focus on is

LGBT rights. As a synagogue, we continue to support the Rainbow Center – a GLBTQ education, support, and resource center managed through Jewish Family and Career Services to serve gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people as well as people questioning their sexual orientation or gender. I founded the center with the help of members from the synagogue and the larger community. The congregation's board and ritual committee try to strike the right balance of programming for the center.

We are no longer an experiment. The vision language that we have developed is that CBH is a gay-founded synagogue that honors and expands the vision and the intent of our founding members. Their desire was to create a place that welcomed Jews who did not feel welcome. It has been an organic and logical outgrowth of these values to continue to open our home to Jews and their loved ones who have been ignored or discarded in our larger community. Thus, we take immense pride in being a home that celebrates its queer values by ensuring that interfaith families, single parents, Jews of color, spiritual seekers, multiracial families, and people of all economic means have a home that honors them. We have become a values-based community rather than an identity-based synagogue. Some call us “post-gay”; I think that term is problematic.

We are creating a Jewish version of the “beloved community” of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.. We have concluded that we cannot ignore that we know the heart of the stranger. This is where our experience, though inverse, can apply to all communities, not just LGBT-founded communities. Here are some lessons learned along the way:

JUST BY SAYING THAT YOU ARE WELCOMING DOES NOT MAKE IT SO. Diversity must be represented by recognizing people’s experiences and identities through music, liturgy, stories, leadership, photographs, programs, articles, and even mundane membership forms or website templates. At the heart of inclusivity is the sense of belonging. Nothing makes someone feel connected and a part of something like being listened to and known. Make time for people to meet each other and to get to know each other face-to-face.

MAKE THE CONNECTIONS, BUT DON’T OVERLOOK THE DIFFERENCES. Build on the common experience of the community. Discover what binds you together despite the differences, but don’t ignore the differences; it is insulting and it makes people feel invisible.

FRAME THE VALUES OF INCLUSIVITY SO THAT EVERYONE IS INCLUDED. Often, inclusivity is expressed as a

gesture offered by those in the mainstream to those who are less fortunate or not as welcome. Make it explicit at the outset that everyone benefits from inclusivity, and then continue to mark and acknowledge the benefits. Create an atmosphere where there is an understanding of what it is to be an ally and what it means to have certain privileges.

BE OPEN, AND DON’T SHY AWAY FROM HARD CONVERSATIONS. Like understandably gravitates to like. Diversity can be uncomfortable. Promote openness to listening to others’ experiences. Go in with a curiosity about what others have to say without a need to “fix” anything. Civil and honest conversations build connections and trust.

CREATE A COMMUNAL CONTEXT AND LANGUAGE THAT SUPPORTS INCLUSIVITY. Discover why diversity and inclusivity are important to your community. If the importance is understood and valued, then people willingly give up the pieces that they have to give up in order to make room for others. Find ways to tie inclusivity into the fabric of the communal “story.”

EVERYTHING THAT IS CHALLENGING BUT REWARDING IS WORTH REPEATING. Remind people frequently that the work may feel challenging, but that it has social, educational, and spiritual

rewards. Repetition is crucial, and this is a conversation that never closes. One never arrives at the end of welcoming and celebrating difference; it is a value that must be continually tended to and addressed as the community changes and evolves.

Our queer foundation is the root that stabilizes us. “*Even ma’asu habonim haitah l’rosh pinah.*” “The stone that the builder refused has become the cornerstone.” (Psalms 118:22) We at CBH retell the story

of our founding much as we repeat the Passover story. This common narrative binds together people of different backgrounds with a shared mission. We let our values guide us in striving for sacred community. Many of us were wandering Arameans – seeking a new home. LGBT and straight, we have found that home at CBH, which is why as one founding member suggests, our unofficial tag line should be Congregation Bet Haverim: Queers of All Orientations.