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POST RELIGION

Welcoming Synagogues: Queering Jewish Religious Spaces

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Rebecca S. Wax knows what it's like to feel unwelcome.

"I have an Orthodox [Jewish] sister, 14 years older, and when I came out at 22 she brought me straight to the rabbi's wife," said Wax. "It was really scary. She said I would be sad and lonely my entire life, and I sat there and cried."

Wax wasn't allowed to visit her sister's seven children, until the fifth daughter protested to have her invited to her bat mitzvah, saying, "This is not a Jewish way to treat your sister." She attended an Orthodox synagogue in Atlanta, where she hid her sexual orientation, referring to her girlfriend as just a roommate.

"The rabbi of the congregation said he welcomed anyone in his congregation, yet also suggested celibacy and reparative therapy for homosexuals," Wax said. Now 42, and a mother of two, Wax lives with the same "roommate," her partner of 20 years. She joined congregation [Bet Haverim](#), a Reconstructionist synagogue in Atlanta founded by gays and lesbians.

"When I sat down for the first service, I thought, 'Oh, this is what Judaism is about,'" she said. "There's a connection, a warmth I would feel, and just an understanding."

Many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Jews may not have the luxury of a synagogue that welcomes them. However, an ambitious Welcoming Synagogues project, launched in 2007 at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, aims to train congregations cross across denominations to become safe and welcoming spaces for Jews of all sexual orientations and gender expressions. Dr. Joel L. Kushner, 48, the director of the Institute for Judaism and Sexual Orientation, IJSO, at Hebrew Union College, began the pilot version of the project last year, which involves a 12-month curriculum led by a task force of congregants set up in each synagogue with the guidance of an outside consultant. Seven congregations -- in Atlanta, Seattle and California -- are now participating in the pilot program, and some are finishing within two to three months.

"We're in a period of complacency, thinking everything is fine, when I think it is not quite fine at all," said Kushner. On a continuum of inclusion -- from hostile to embracing -- Kushner believes that most Jewish congregations are tolerant of LGBT people, insisting they "welcome everyone" without specifically reaching out to LGBT Jews and addressing their needs. Few congregations are actively welcoming -- saying they want LGBT members, or affirming and celebrating them.

"Inclusion is a common buzzword, everyone says 'let's be more inclusive,' but research on gay and lesbian people show that when a mission statement says we welcome everyone they read it as, 'they welcome everyone but us,'" said Kushner in an interview early November after a tour at the One National Gay and Lesbian Archive, the largest LGBT library in the world. "To say we're welcoming isn't enough," said Kushner. "For LGBT people to feel welcome in a congregation they need to be explicitly identified and affirmed." (*Full disclosure: I took a class with Dr. Kushner on Judaism and Sexuality at the University of Southern California.*)

The first step of the Welcoming Synagogues project was to survey 3,000 synagogues across denominations in the U.S on their diversity and practices of LGBT inclusion -- including topics covered in sermons, language used in the mission statement and outreach programs offered. The survey was a joint effort of IJSO and [Jewish Mosaic](#), the National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity, and the research was conducted by Steven M. Cohen, research professor of Jewish social policy at Hebrew Union College, and Caryn Aviv, a senior instructor on secular Jewish society at Colorado University and co-author of "Queer Jews." The results, released in 2009, were that while most rabbis think their synagogues do a good or excellent job welcoming gays and lesbians, most congregations offer no targeted programming aimed at LGBT Jews. Only 33 percent of rabbis report that their congregations held programs related to gay and lesbian people, and most Orthodox rabbis feel their congregations are minimally or not at all welcoming of gay and lesbian Jews. Aviv doubts the Welcoming Synagogue project will have an effect on Orthodox communities.

"That change has to come from within. It's a hard sell to get an entire congregation to sign up for a program of reflection and transformation when they're really not interested anyway," said Aviv.

Wax was hired as a consultant to three synagogues in Atlanta participating in the Welcoming Synagogues pilot. A Conservative congregation she worked with dropped out of the program early.

"The congregation has two rabbis, wonderful people, and they really felt they didn't need the project, which was very disappointing because I know some lesbian and gay folks there who didn't feel that way," said Wax, who also directs the

Rainbow Center, providing resources and support for LGBT people and their families. She thinks many synagogues are afraid they will seem too focused on the one topic of sexuality.

While these strategies of inclusion and organizational change focus on the LGBT community, Kushner noted that they can be applied to outreach that targets any population, such as welcoming teenagers, interfaith families or Jews of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds.

"What we know about welcoming in general is that people want to see themselves reflected in the content and programs of an organization," said Kushner.

He outlined four steps to inclusion: content, visibility, training and language. In implementation, this might mean having visual images on the website of two dads and a child, training clergy and staff on services the community offers for LGBT Jews, or ensuring the membership forms don't just say "mother and father" but "parent or guardian."

Kushner's project borrowed inclusion strategies from a Christian model. The Welcoming Church Movement, which began in the early 1980s, is an ecumenical network of Christian communities in the United States that make public statements welcoming persons of all sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions.

"I realized that's what we need for Jews," said Kushner, "we need a Jewish LGBT welcoming congregational movement."

The Welcome Synagogues program is designed to be scalable for any denomination, so a social-justice focused Reform congregation might have different results than a traditional Conservative community participating in the program.

"My agenda is to move them further along the continuum of inclusion but not to set their goals for them," said Kushner.

Lori Gradinger, 56, chairs the Welcoming Synagogues task force at Temple Beth Am, a Reform congregation in Seattle. Gradinger, a lesbian and a mother of three, is a longtime member of the synagogue with her partner. One main concern of the task force at Temple Beth Am is the activity in the children's Sunday school.

"When we started the committee," said Gradinger, "it wasn't long after many gay teen suicides took place cross-country. To me that's really what matters, that kids can find a place to talk, be understood and listened to." To that end, the committee has begun a survey of teachers, parents and students to assess whether children who thought they were gay were safe to talk to someone at the synagogue.

Caryn Aviv questioned whether the effort to make synagogues more welcoming is viable or of any value. "One of the side questions of the research was, are synagogues the best venues to focus on LGBT inclusion?" said Aviv. "The data suggested many LGBT Jews weren't synagogue goers and weren't inclined to become synagogue goers."

Kushner, however, maintained that many Jews do still seek to connect to Jewish life through synagogues. "We've got to the level of tolerance [of LGBT Jews] for a lot of synagogues but I want Jews to be able to choose to affiliate and be fully welcome if that is what they want," said Kushner. As synagogues combat declining membership rates, Kushner said there's a need to draw members by creating a welcoming space for everyone. Quoting Rabbi Denise Eger of Kol Ami, a predominantly gay and lesbian synagogue in West Hollywood, Kushner said, "We don't have a Jew to lose, and we're losing them all the time."

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