A place where you don’t have to hide

An Orthodox parent of a gay son and a queer kid from Monsey talk about Eshel and its parents retreat

JOANNE PALMER

What do parents who live in a tight-knit community and love their children deeply, devotedly, with all their hearts and all their souls, do when they learn that there is something about one of their children that would put them at odds with community? Not something that the child did, or even chose, but an inherent part of that child? Like, say, being gay? And being Orthodox? What do they do?

About 4.5 percent of Americans identify as LGBTQ — that’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer — and that statistic doesn’t count the people who have not yet acknowledged the truth of their identity to themselves, much less to the Gallup representative whose work ended up in the 2017 poll that came up with that figure. The number of people who are LGBTQ is the same in the Orthodox community as it is anywhere else. People are people. For many years, the response to those people was pretty much the way it was in the outside world; the culture in general was not tolerant of difference, much less open to it. People came out carefully, expecting rejection, which often was what they found. Recently, though, that response has changed, to the point that now same-sex marriage is legal and LGBTQ people do not have to hide and lie as they once did.

But there are extra barriers to openness in the Orthodox world. Normative halacha — Jewish law — forbids homosexuality, based on the verse in Leviticus that seems to call it an abomination. (There are halachic arguments on that point, but they’re new and controversial.) And in a world so tightly connected that everyone seems to know everything, the only way to keep secrets is to bury them deeply.

That means that parents whose children are gay have some stark choices to make — they can accept their children or they can reject them. They can try to talk them out of their gayness — as if. They can try to pretend that they haven’t heard or don’t know or can’t understand. Or they can accept their children, love them as they always have, and learn how to live in their surprising new world.

Often, though, what parents cannot do is be entirely open in their communities. They have to protect their children — all their children, including siblings — from judgment, and they have to renegotiate all their other relationships. They always have to be masked.

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and their families.“ The organization takes the “their families” part seriously; it offers an annual retreat for parents that allows them a chance to live openly, honestly, without secrets, without stigma, and without shame.

To be proud of their children— all their children— without having to lie, by either omission or commission, about who those children actually are.

To learn more about the retreat, see the box.

But those parents and some of their children still have to go back to their communities, where they are not fully comfortable being out, or where they fear that the repercussions of being out online might be onerous. So in the discussion with a mother about her son, and with a son about his family, we will use pseudonyms here, and we’ll fudge details a bit.

Bluma’s son Avi— the youngest of a respectable number of children— is 23 years old. “I’m not just a Jewish mother talking— our son is a gem,” Bluma said. “A rebbbe in his school told me that when he’s in your class you have to be prepared every single day, because he is that brilliant. He was valedictorian in high school, he got a 5 on all of his achievement tests, he got into Columbia, and he is also a poet and a pianist. He played piano for 10 years, and he has a beautiful voice. He’s an excellent mathematician. He’s always been an excellent writer, and when he went to Israel he started writing piyyutim. He loves to read. Later, when he came out, he said to me, ‘I don’t understand how you didn’t know that I’m gay sooner. I hate sports and I love musicals.’

“The reason he came out then was that the brother ahead of him was about to get engaged, and he wanted to adjust our expectations. He has wisdom beyond his years.”

Avi first came out to one of his brothers when he was about 12. “He told his brother that he thought he was gay, and the brother said lots of kids your age think that, but they grow out of it, so don’t worry about it.” That’s the kind of well-meaning but devastating answer that demolishes so many kids, because it implies that being gay is something that of course you should grow out of. Later, when he was in Israel after high school, he came out to another young man who his gaydar told him— correctly— also was gay.

Then he told his parents. He did it when he was

**SEE ESHEL PAGE 34**
And at the end of the day, he has a relationship with God, and he doesn't care what anybody else thinks.

Some parents work on a mosaic at the retreat last year.
The deepest truth of all is that she loves her son, Bluma said. “I am a religious person. God and I are good. We have been friends for a long time. I will do what I think is correct, and if I am wrong I will take my punishment. But I believe that I have the chance to say to God ‘What do you want me to do? I don’t know what you want me to do, but I did what I thought you wanted me to do.’”

As for Eshel, “it has empowered me,” she said. “It has emboldened me to get rid of the shame.

“If Avi gets married we will be there” — that’s absolutely no surprise, they’ve already been to same-sex engagement parties and weddings — “and if he has a child that will be my grandchild.”

She’s also “a mother bear,” Bluma said. That is hard to miss, and so is the love.

Yossi, 31, grew up in Monsey, “part of the yeshivish community,” he said. His family has been there for many generations; “it’s a source of elitist pride, and I am very happy to be unlnearing all of that,” he said.

Because his family is not chasidic, he grew up speaking English at home, he said; still, “I was surrounded only by people from that specific subcommunity, with very little interaction with anyone outside it.” He had some limited access to the internet, and some secular education.

He started sensing that he was different — as in not straight — “probably in the fourth or fifth grade, right before puberty, and I was like ‘oh no,’” he said.

“I didn’t have the language for it, but I knew that I really liked some of the boys in my class, and that I felt different from other boys.”

He was growing up in a highly gendered culture. “My school was completely all boys, starting from when I was 5 years old,” he said. “And not only the school, but the entire environment. I had zero connection to anyone not exactly like me. I never spoke to anyone of the opposite gender.” He had no sisters either.

His absolutely worse memory was from 10th grade. “For the first time, I had an overwhelming crush on a boy in my class. I’d always had those feelings, but this was the first time that I felt overwhelmingly out of control. I didn’t know what I wanted or how to express it, but I knew that it was something that nobody could find out about, and particularly not this boy. He was a good friend of mine at the time, and looking back, I have no idea what he was thinking.

“It lasted for about a year, and it got so bad that I was super depressed. I lost a lot of weight. I was suicidal.

“I don’t think that my parents noticed anything, but eventually there came a point when I knew that if I didn’t talk about it with someone I wouldn’t make it through the year. So I was able to talk to my parents. I don’t remember exactly what I said, but basically I said I feel really strongly attracted to a kid in my class, and I think that I might be gay, and I don’t know what to do.

“And essentially they crushed me with love. They weren’t mean about it. There wasn’t any ‘Ohmygod you are terrible get out of my house. There was no rejection.

“Instead, they said ‘Of course you’re not gay. Look at those people in the parades, who dance around half naked. Don’t worry. This’ll pass. It’s normal. It’s no big deal.’

“This was the most soul-crushing thing. They didn’t reject me — but in some ways it would have been better. It would have been ‘This is who I am, and this is my story.’ But here I was so confused. They were telling me essentially that everything I know about me can’t be true. But now what?

“And also I spoke to my rebbe, and he had a similar response. He asked me if I quote unquote did anything. I was like ‘No! No! Never!’ So here I was, my soul was crushed, I am suicidal, but I didn’t touch anyone.

“Basically they were saying that I was a wonderful and amazing person, so I couldn’t be any of these horrible things. Everything will be fine. But they were saying that the things you are telling me — if they are true, then you are a horrible person. So they cannot be true.”

The story got worse. “They ended up throwing the other boy out of the school. I spoke to my rebbe about it, and he said ‘Okay blablablablah you have to go home and you can’t come back until we figure out what to do about it. And then a week later they said you can come back — and he was gone.”

That sounds implausible until you understand more about the situation. Yossi was smart, popular, good at sports, and from an old family. The other boy wasn’t as smart or as athletic, he was new to the school, and his family didn’t have the same yichus. The choice was clear. And it was devastating. “That was the lowest point of my life,” Yossi said.

He went to Israel, as everyone assumed he would, and when he got back he got married and had two children. “I wasn’t out even to myself,” he said. “I did not think of myself as queer in any way.

“When I was shidduch dating, I was in complete denial about being queer, and at the same time I kept having a super crush on my roommate. Never once did it cross my mind that maybe those things were related to each other.

“A vocabulary break — Yossi refers to himself as queer and pansexual rather than the more restrictive gay because, he said, ‘that means that I can be sexually and romantically attracted to people no matter what their gender — male, female, nonbinary, trans, cis. It’s just not relevant.’

“When they got married, Yossi was 24 and his wife was 21.

“It’s entirely necessary to be married in the yeshivish world, he said. ‘I couldn’t have said no. There is no choice. If you are not married, there just is no place in that world for you. You are irrelevant.

“If you are not married, you are completely out of place. There is no space for them. There is nothing. Where do you sit at a wedding? Not with the couples. Not with the children. Not with the teenagers. There is literally no place for you.”

“So Yossi married, and we have a wonderful happy life. I am not gay. Things could work. We have a kid, and then my ex wants another kid, and eventually the rabbi says it is time, and then she is pregnant with another child.

“Life is tough. I have two little kids. And then a switch flips in my head. It was Ooh! I don’t have to do this. I don’t have to be Orthodox. I actually can make a life that is different from the one carved out for me. I don’t have to do this.

“So much of this is a reaction to his sexuality having been suppressed, and how much of it is that Yossi also has realized that he is an atheist? ‘It is hard for me to tease out Orthodox and gayness,’ he said. But “I no longer believed. In some sense, I never believed. I didn’t want any more kids. And I felt like I was on a train, speeding down a track, completely outside my control. I thought that if I don’t get out of the train now, I will be 50, with 10 kids. I don’t want it. I need to just get off.

“And then about a month after that, I realized ‘Oh, you know something? I’m not straight after all.’

“And once I was able to recognize that, that I did not have to be part of this world any more, that I could just be me, that it clicked, and all the feeling of disconnect stopped. It was an amazing feeling.”

That was four years ago, Yossi said; eventually he and his wife divorced, and he moved out of Monsey. He is in school and he works; he’s always been good at computers. He got a lot of social power in school because if you are a boy and you are super logical then you are good at gemara, and that is a thing. That gave me extra power.” It also set him up well for a career harnessing that logic.

He’s very active at Footsteps in Rockland County, and in Eshel. “Eshel was home for me. It was completely strange — the concept of Orthodoxy and queerness mixed together was entirely foreign — but still it was home. I remember going to my first ever Eshel thing, and I was like whaaaat? Orthodox Jews who are queer? Other people like me? Whaaaat? It was completely mind-blowing and very comforting.”

Although he is no longer part of the Orthodox world in some ways, in other ways of course he still is, and probably always will be. His parents and his children are there. “I don’t want to lose them,” he said. “I try to maintain the relationships. My kids are growing up Orthodox the same way I did, and I have to confront it and to manage it.”

If there had been an Eshel parents’ retreat that his parents had known about when he was coming out — and if they would have been willing to go to it — his life, and therefore his parents’ lives, might be different, Yossi said. But it’s too late for that now.

There is another reason for Yossi’s continuing to be active at Eshel. “I want to make it easier for people who want to be Orthodox. Personally I have some problems with it, but I know that other people want to be part of it. So being part of Eshel makes me feel like I am giving back. That I am using the pain and hardship I went through to move the needle in some small way for the next generation. That carries a lot of personal meaning for me.

“So this is my story. It is not terrible. My parents didn’t throw me out of the house. They didn’t scream at me. I spent last Shabbes with them. On the surface level everything is fine, but there is an underlying distance that I think always will be there, and I don’t think I ever will be able to recover from.”

Eshel, on the other hand, like Footsteps and JQY — Jewish Queer Youth — “helped me. I don’t think I would have been able to do this otherwise. The only way I was able to get the confidence and the skills I needed to become who I am today was with them.

“To this day, most of my friends are from those circles. I am still a work in progress. I am trying to branch out, but it’s hard. But things definitely have gotten better since I was the 10th grade kid who was starving himself and making plans to commit suicide.”