



CREATING COMMUNITY  
AND ACCEPTANCE FOR  
LGBT JEWS AND THEIR  
FAMILIES IN ORTHODOX  
COMMUNITIES

ESHEL:  
**WELCOMING  
SHULS  
PROJECT**  
2017



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# Welcome

Eshel is a support, education, and advocacy organization, working to create community and acceptance for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews and their families in Orthodox communities. Eshel was founded in 2010 to provide resources for tradition-centered LGBT Jews, and to sensitively and respectfully help open the doors of Orthodox congregations, schools, summer camps and youth groups, to allow our members a place in the observant communities they love.

With a generous grant from the Carpenter Foundation, Eshel has been conducting its Welcoming Shuls Project to assess the current levels of inclusion in the Orthodox community and to help move the needle toward greater expressions of welcome. We have employed a non-judgmental process, interviewing religious leaders about their experiences and helping to clarify for them the needs of LGBT Jews. While there were rabbis who personally opposed greater inclusion on principled grounds, most expressed empathy and a desire to do a better job of including LGBT Orthodox Jews. We learned about the challenges rabbis face from resistant congregants and local colleagues. We understood that for a portion of our community, the very empathy we are urging is experienced as a destabilizing challenge to well worn norms.

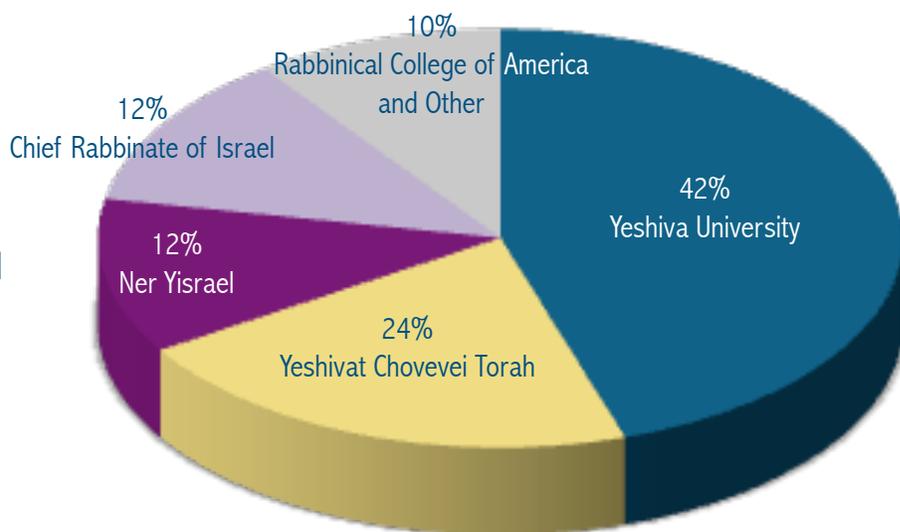
We have created a growing database that is available to LGBT Orthodox Jews who are seeking more welcoming communities. As the list grows, we believe that the political vulnerabilities for rabbis and their communities to actively support inclusion will become more manageable. Lastly, the interview process itself has become a means of opening channels and building relationships, even in the most traditional of communities.

The database is not public at this juncture since we must still promise discretion for the interviewed rabbis. A rabbi taking a welcoming stance, if such is made public, could suffer harsh criticism from forces in and beyond his community. Publicity can shut down successful efforts that are now “under the radar” and even threaten a rabbi’s job. Specific information is shared on an as-needed basis only so that the data on a particular city, community, synagogue or rabbi can be available to help people navigate life choices. Increasingly, we expect straight allies who would like to belong to welcoming communities to ask us for help in finding a home that fits them.

To date we have conducted 60 surveys in 18 states and provinces, in the United States and Canada respectively. We are still continuing to identify congregations where LGBT singles, couples, and families would be able to live out lives of Torah and Mitzvot with a broad sense of acceptance.

We have located shuls that are highly to moderately welcoming in: Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, Washington DC, Wisconsin, Missouri, Illinois, Louisiana, Georgia, Arizona, and California, in the United States. We have found equally welcoming shuls in the Canadian provinces of Ontario, Alberta, and Quebec.

The Rabbis who have responded to our survey represent a wide range of Rabbinic training institutes, from Modern to Centrist to more Right-leaning Orthodox institutions.



### Ordination of Rabbis Interviewed

- 42% Yeshiva University
- 24% Yeshivat Chovevei Torah
- 12% Ner Yisrael
- 12% Chief Rabbinate of Israel
- 10% Rabbinical College of America (Lubavitch) and other individual Yeshivot in Israel or the United States.

### Rabbinic Responses

1. Respect: 100% said LGBT people deserve to be valued and treated with respect. Of the 60 Rabbis interviewed, many have shared personal stories that reinforced for them the importance of acknowledging and respecting the dignity of LGBT members of our community.
2. Awareness: 100% are aware of at least one member of their congregation or children of members who is LGBT.
3. Relationship: 96% said that they were personally involved with families who had LGBT members. In many cases these rabbis offered various forms of support for LGBT community members, including referring them to appropriate and supportive mental health professionals when necessary.
4. Advocacy: 93% said they would advocate for children and teens who came out to be able to continue in their schools, camps, or youth groups. (Any hesitation expressed was often due to the limits of the schools, camps, and youth groups available in the area.)
5. Lifecycle: 100% said that the life cycle events of children with LGBT parents should be celebrated. 65% said that such events could be celebrated in their shuls with the entire family being honored, while about 35% said that such celebrations should probably take place outside the shul. (Many of the latter group said that this circumstance has not come up, and they are not completely sure how they would handle it.)

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96% personally involved with families who have LGBT members.

93% would advocate for children and teens who came out to be able to continue in their youth groups.

65% would honor entire family in shul during lifecycle celebrations.

35% families should celebrate outside of shul.

93% would give ritual roles such as aliyot to gay men.

30% offer family membership to gay couples.

50% are unsure how to characterize gay families.

62% have begun to think about transgender halakhic questions.

38% have not.

56% would allow trans person on their preferred side of mechitza.

44% are unsure how to respond to a trans congregant.

6. Ritual Roles: 93% said that gay men could receive aliyot and participate in the service. (80% said gay men could lead prayer on weekdays and Shabbat. Some of these had questions about prayer leadership roles, especially at prominent times, such as Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.)

7. Single Membership: 96% of rabbis (of the shuls with membership categories) said that LGBT people were already or could be individual members of their shuls. (It should be noted that 13% of the shuls whose Rabbis we interviewed do not have membership categories.)

8. Family Membership / Household Membership: 30% of rabbis (of the shuls with membership categories) offer Family Membership to gay couples; 21% offer Household Membership to gay couples. About half of the rabbis were still uncertain how to characterize gay families, and are concerned about the appearance of normalization. 13% of the rabbis felt that couples and families would be better off affiliating elsewhere.

9. Transgender: The Orthodox community is just beginning to address this halakhic challenge. We asked rabbis if they had begun to think about the relevant halakhic questions; 62% said yes. 56% said they would allow a trans person to sit on their preferred side of the mechitza. The remaining 44% were not sure how they would respond to a transgender congregant. Some rabbis felt that it would be especially difficult for people to remain in a community in which they had transitioned, but once transition was complete, acceptance would be possible in a new community. All agreed that this is a complex and multi-faceted issue that needs more thought and consideration.

## Emerging Distinctions

We discerned the outlines of four categories of welcome for LGBT Jews:

**High Welcome:** In highly welcoming shuls inclusion is explicit, principled and broadly acknowledged. While there is a strong commitment to inclusion, for halakhic reasons, the celebration of marriage/partnership rituals is not supported. However, in these shuls, most of the other familial life cycle events can be celebrated. Family or household membership is commonly available to gay families. (33% of those surveyed)

**Moderate Welcome:** In moderately welcoming shuls inclusion is implicit and pragmatic rather than explicit and principled. In these shuls individuals tend to fare much better than couples whose presence can appear as an explicit challenge to halakhic norms. Often in such shuls family or household membership is not available for gay couples and even non-marital life cycle events, such as births and bar/bat mitzvahs, can require careful navigation. (61% of those surveyed)

**Inattentive:** Inattentive shuls practice a “don’t ask/don’t tell policy” requiring discretion (as opposed to closeted secrecy) in regard to any behavior or ritual that appears to normalize LGBT identity. Discreet individuals can manage and couples that interact publicly as roommates can be included even if most people are aware of the truth. However, mild couple behavior and shared parenting of children can make the realities too explicit for such shuls to accommodate, let alone celebrate in the context of life cycle rituals. (6% of those surveyed)

**Rejecting:** In rejecting shuls exclusion is explicit. While a fully closeted member could attend, the threat of exposure is always present. It should be stated that none of the 60 Rabbis that agreed to be interviewed fell into this category. We are well aware of its existence by anecdotal report.

## Big Tent vs Little Tent

In the process of this survey we have also begun to see two Orthodox communal sensibilities that parallel the terms, “big tent” and “little tent,” employed in the political arena. The “big tent” Orthodox communities focus on outreach and welcome, and often attract a diverse membership. They aim to draw in seekers who are on a spiritual journey, who are engaged with the richness of the tradition, but who may not be ready to adopt full halakhic comportment. “Little tent” communities tend toward ideological cohesiveness, rigor and single-minded commitment. These two depictions, while in tension, are not mutually exclusive; elements of both sentiments exist in all Orthodox shuls. Still, we did notice that those synagogues that portrayed themselves as “big tent” communities tended to be much more relaxed about the inclusion of LGBT Jews. Those shuls better described as “little tent” were more concerned about publicly challenging norms by being visibly welcoming of gay couples.

## Limits and Learning

Our initial aim in embarking on the survey project was to discover where we might find welcoming communities. In addition, we hoped to open conversations with Orthodox rabbis who were still reticent in order to build trust and understanding. Finally, we sought to provide clarifying data on how welcoming Orthodox rabbis actually are and where the challenges remain.

The vast majority of the rabbis we surveyed are Centrist or Modern Orthodox. We did not focus on Haredi (Ultra Orthodox) communities, nor did the survey include a significant number of Mizrahi or Sefardic congregations. In the coming year we intend to reach beyond the center and left-Orthodox congregations, to these much more insular and intensely socially-cohesive communities. Our goal will be to assess their willingness to consider inclusion, and how we might be able to help them to care for the LGBT people in their midst.

### **There are a few trends that can be discerned from this survey.**

It appears that many if not most Centrist and Modern Orthodox rabbis (and even some of those in the Haredi world) have become demonstrably sympathetic to the realities faced by LGBT people. These rabbis can now associate names and faces with “LGBT”. As people have come out of the closet at younger ages and as more of them seek to remain in the midst of religious communities the emerging human encounter refutes the “old time” presumption that LGBT people are willful sinners. Real life encounters have shaped a powerful empathy, and, in some cases, an alliance, with those who wish to live, worship, celebrate and learn in observant communities. This broad move toward inclusion born of empathy, understanding, and relationship is very new and exciting!

However, this ground of empathy tends to falter when gay people find companionship and wish to comport themselves as couples, with or without children. Paradoxically, the more a gay person lives a life parallel to his/her straight peers, in committed partnership and raising children, the more acceptance appears to wane. Our survey demonstrated that in half of the communities we encountered there is positive movement on a pragmatic level for gay couples and families. A full two thirds of the rabbis did not want exclude the children of gay parents from lifecycle celebrations in the shul. Whether the parents could be recognized as such and stand together on the bima was a more challenging question for the rabbis. Even in the most welcoming of communities we continue to find a concern for the appearance of “normalization,” of what is deemed, at least formally, a transgressive reality.

Lastly, more than half of the rabbis interviewed were willing to allow a transgender person to sit on the side of the mechitza that is consistent with their gender identity and presentation. While there is halakhic support for this practice, it was nonetheless a surprising discovery for us that so many rabbis were willing, if only in theory, to agree to this level of acceptance of transgender identity. Many questions about the ramifications of gender reassignment surgery are still being debated in halakhic circles. However, in regard to simple presence, the shift toward compassion and inclusion, incomplete as it is, remains remarkable.

The survey process will continue over the next two years as we add many more rabbis and their communities to our list. For more information on Eshel, its Welcoming Shuls Project, and how you can help us to add your rabbi and your shul to our growing list, contact Dr. Sandra Sterling Epstein at [shulisrose@aol.com](mailto:shulisrose@aol.com).



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