

MOVING FORWARD: A REQUEST FROM ORTHODOX PARENTS WITH LGBTQ CHILDREN

2018 Eshel Parents Survey and Report

ABSTRACT

In November 2018, Eshel ran its sixth annual retreat for Orthodox parents of LGBTQ children. Approximately eighty parents attended. The following report is based on an anonymous survey of those retreat participants.



Looking Back, Moving Forward

Eshel Parent Survey 2018

In November, 2018, Eshel ran its sixth retreat for Orthodox parents of LGBTQ children. Approximately eighty parents attended. This year's keynote speaker was Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, Chief Rabbi of Efrat, Israel and Chancellor Emeritus and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone.

The retreat's theme was "Looking Back, Moving Forward." During the weekend, Eshel distributed a short, seven-question survey. The survey's purpose was to ask participants to anonymously tell us about their religious reality. They were asked what they would want from the Jewish community to make their families and children feel a part of – and not apart from – the Orthodox Jewish community.

The following document is a compilation of their answers. This is not a statistically significant study. However, of the 80-plus parents who attended, 71 responded to the survey.

Ordinarily, a survey contains an executive summary with bulleted highlights. We are taking a different approach. We have written the summary in the form of a letter to the Orthodox community.

Parents who attended this retreat did so to share their experiences with each other, as well as to give and receive strength and support from other parents and speakers. It is for this reason that we present the survey's findings within this emotional context. This summary describes how the parents feel about community acceptance and the hopes they have for the future of the Orthodox community.

Here are their voices.

To the Orthodox Jewish community:

We are parents with LGBTQ children. We love them. We love all our children, just as you do. But we have a problem that only the community can fix together with us. We often are marginalized by our Orthodox community for no other reason than our child is not heterosexual.

We do not represent a social action movement of any kind but believe that this survey will allow us to express ourselves to you. We want you to know how we feel and what you can do to change the often negative and sometimes bigoted viewpoints you express. For many of us the “deafening silence” within our Orthodox institutions about LGBTQ issues also causes great emotional damage.

We came from across the United States in November 2018 to attend an Eshel retreat for Orthodox parents of LGBTQ children. There we had a chance to share our experiences, our feelings and concerns about our children’s acceptance by or rejection of Orthodoxy Judaism. Some of us, our children, and our families remain closeted because of fear of communal retribution. We attended the retreat to be able to talk to others with similar concerns. Some of us came to the retreat because we needed an outlet to learn and share. We are concerned because in many cases our children have withdrawn from our community (for now). Others of us are open in our community, speaking to our communal leaders about a change in attitude and action.

We invite you to read this survey report and use it in your shuls and schools to encourage awareness and discussion. Among the survey highlights worth noting are:

- Our families are Orthodox, yet our LGBTQ children are leaving Orthodoxy in very large numbers.
- Shuls need to have positive and public discussions of LGBTQ issues. Having private discussions with our Rabbis has not really changed attitudes within the Orthodox community.
- Schools should sponsor mandated staff and faculty training on LGBTQ issues.
- Our national Orthodox institutions should reassess their positions. We would ask them to reverse their generally negative statements about LGBTQ Jews and reach out to the broader community to begin a positive dialog.
- We love all our children. We want our LGBTQ child to be as happy as any heterosexual child and find a life-long partner.

Overall, we are optimistic that our community will hear our request and will begin to reflect on its messages and its behavior towards LGBTQ Jews and their families. We hope you find this report thoughtful and useful.

Sincerely,

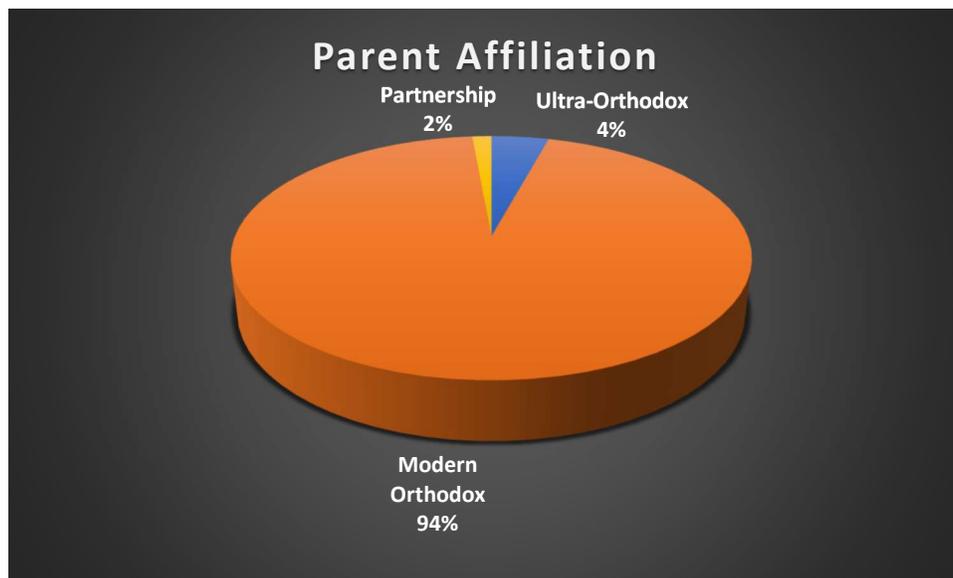
Orthodox parents with LGBTQ children

Survey findings

The survey asked respondents to answer a mix of seven single-answer questions, as well as questions that required a ranking. Where necessary, parents were encouraged to add comments to explain or elaborate on their answers.

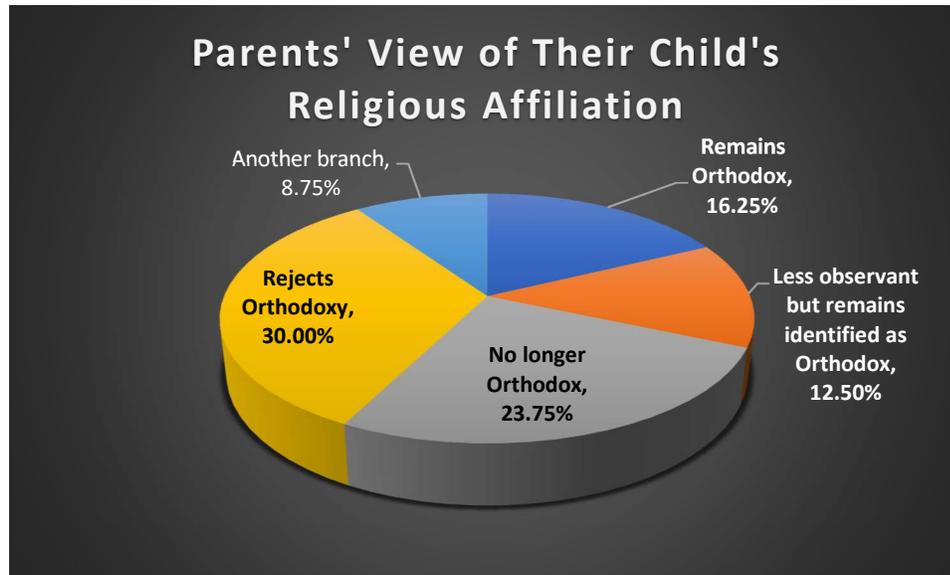
You and Your Child

- **Parents are overwhelmingly (94%) Modern or Centrist Orthodox.** Just over 4-percent declared themselves as Ultra-Orthodox or Haredi. A small percentage (1.4%) are Shomer Shabbat and attend a Partnership or Egalitarian minyan on a regular basis.
 - **Family reaction** (anecdotal information): During the course of the weekend, a few parents stated that they do not attend services as frequently as they did before their children came out. Others spoke about their other children moving away from Orthodoxy, in support of their LGBTQ sibling or in response to witnessing the communal treatment of their family.



- **LGBTQ children largely depart Orthodoxy:** The survey asked parents to describe their LGBTQ child's opinion of Orthodoxy and level of observance. According to parents, a minority of their children, 16-percent have remained Orthodox once they came out. Just over 12-percent consider themselves as Orthodox but are less observant than before they came out. Over 62-percent are no longer Orthodox, either rejecting Orthodoxy outright, affiliating with another branch of Judaism, or not practicing or affiliating with any branch of Judaism.

- **In sharp contrast with a PEW study of the general Orthodox population, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans¹”:** In the PEW report, for Jews, ages 65 and older, only 22-percent raised Orthodox remain Orthodox. The retention rate is far higher for younger Jews. According to the 2013 PEW study, “83-percent of Jewish adults under 30 who were raised Orthodox are still Orthodox.” In contrast to the PEW study, responses by parents in this Eshel survey are almost completely reversed. Parents reported that most of their LGBTQ children have departed from or outrightly reject Orthodox Judaism.



¹ <http://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2013/10/jewish-american-full-report-for-web.pdf>

Our Community

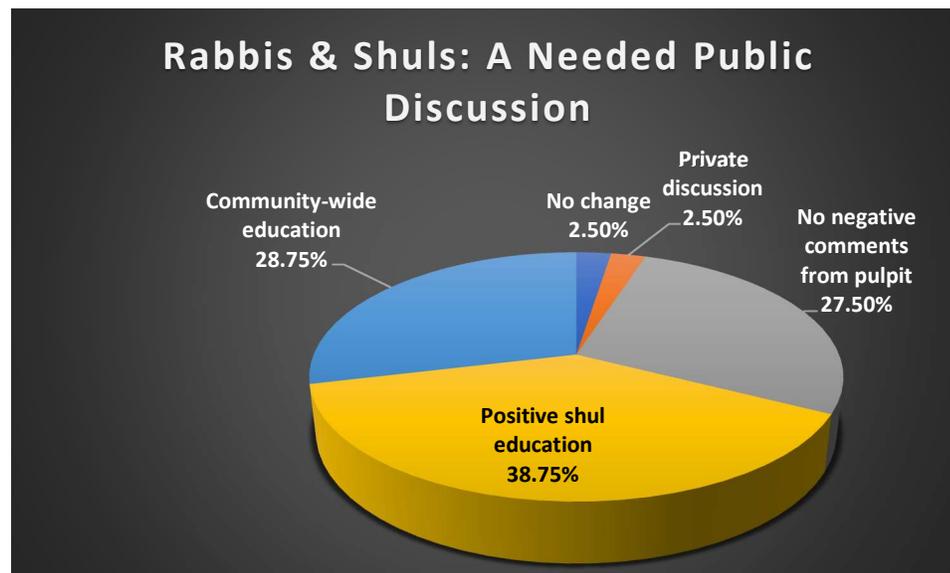
- **Our Rabbis need to discuss this subject in public in a positive, supportive way:** The survey asked the parents rank order the following question:

Rabbis and shuls should

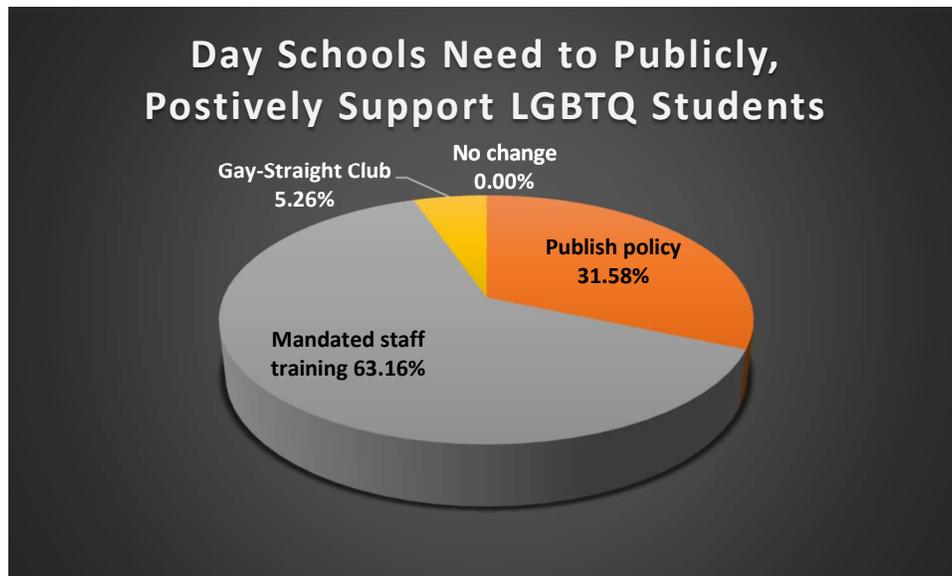
- *Not change anything*
- *Meet with us in private, but not make any public statements*
- *Cease negative statements from the pulpit*
- *Begin a positive education program for the shul to educate members about LGBTQ*
- *Rabbis and shul lay leadership from all community shuls meet for a community-wide LGBTQ-positive education program*

Parents clearly requested that the issue of LGBTQ Jews in the Orthodox community become a positive, Rabbinically-supported discussion in their shuls and throughout their greater community. For nearly 28-percent of parents, their number-one concern was their Rabbi's pronouncements. They wished their shul Rabbi no longer make negative statements about LGBTQ Jews from the pulpit.

By far, the most popular first-rank requests had to do with education. Over 67-percent of parents very much want broad, positive, and open discussion about LGBTQ issues. Of that number, almost 29-percent elected that the Rabbis and shul lay leadership from all shuls meet for a community-wide LGBTQ-positive education program. Nearly 39-percent want their shul to educate its members about LGBTQ issues.



- **Jewish Day Schools need to provide faculty and staff education and publish positive guidelines:** Parents were nearly unanimous in their desire for day schools to openly educate staff, as well as publish a supportive and anti-bullying message regarding their LGBTQ students. Not a single respondent offered “Not change anything” as their first-ranked choice. Just over 5-percent chose having their child’s school start a Gay-Straight club as their first choice. This anti-bullying and staff education training response echoed discussions taking place throughout the retreat weekend among parents with school-aged children who currently attend day schools or who have had to remove their children from day schools in recent years.



- **Messaging from National Orthodox organizations must change:** More parents asked that national Orthodox organizations end their negative messaging of LGBTQ issues (37-percent) than they did of their pulpit Rabbis (27.5-percent).

Along with this request to stop the negative message is one of reversing the message, openly and publicly. Parents would like their national organizations to publish positive messages (25-percent first ranked), have their campus and community emissaries engage and have a full, positive dialog (24-percent) with LGBTQ students and their communities at large. Finally, parents would like these national organizations to begin direct and open discussions with the LGBTQ community. Some parents commented that they found it difficult to prioritize the choices because, as these two comments illustrate, “...can’t prioritize. All are important,” or “Don’t know how to rank these...they are all part of a package.”



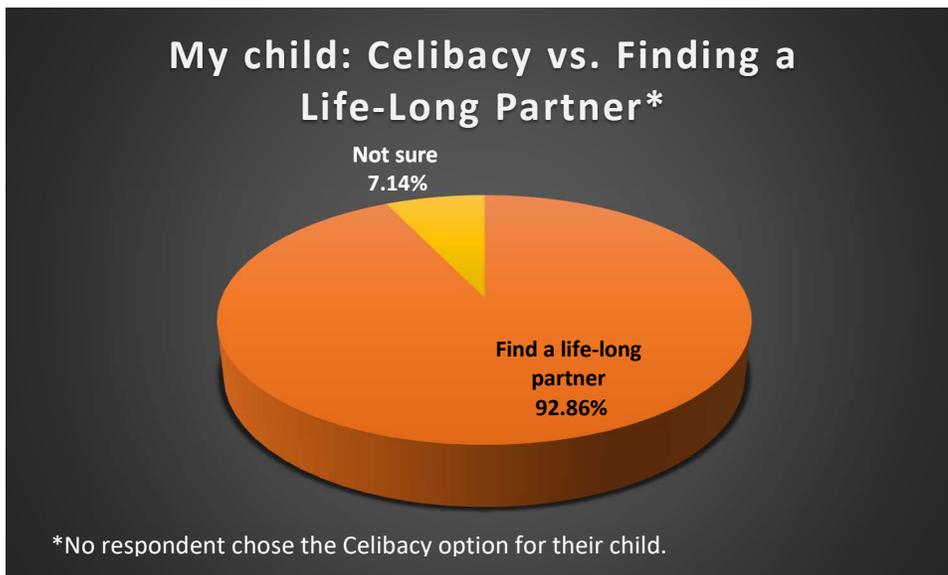
Expectations for Our Child's Future

- **Do we want our child to live a lonely life?** When parents answered the following question

With respect to our child's future family life, we hope that our child

- *Will remain celibate*
- *Will find a life-long partner*
- *I don't want to know about a partnership*
- *I'm not sure*

...they answered with nearly one voice. Almost 93-percent wanted their LGBTQ child to have a happy future (as they would for any other child) and that a key piece of that happiness lies with their child finding a life-long partner.² Approximately 7-percent of parents stated they were not sure. In one or two instances, respondents added a comment here, stating their children were very young and that this was not a consideration at this time; others stated they simply wanted their child to be happy but decided not to select the partnership option. The survey also presented the option of "I don't want to know about a partnership." No one selected this option.



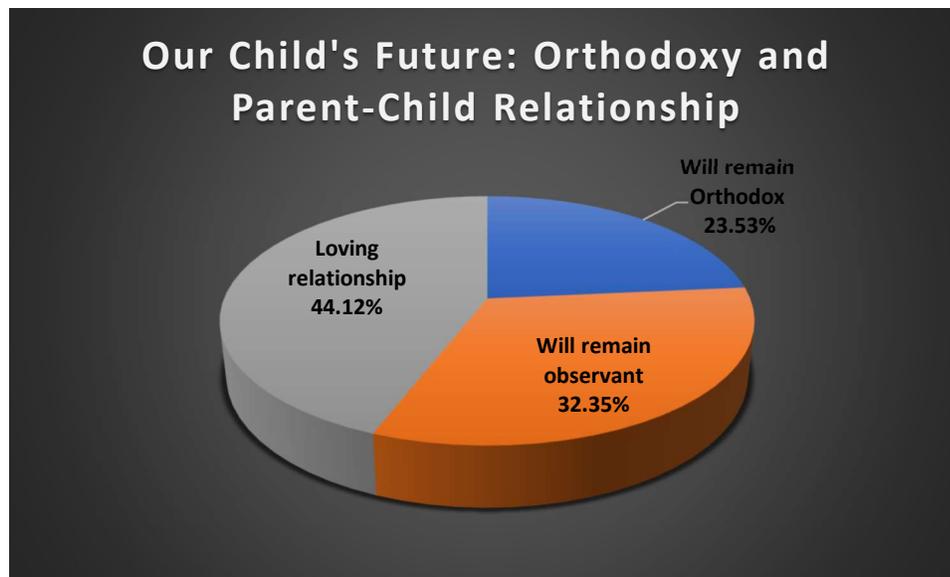
² The survey deliberately did not present the question of partnership as part of a formal civil or religious marriage ceremony. It simply asked the parents if they want their child to find a "life-long partner."

- **We want our children to remain observant but most important is that we want our children to know we love them:** Parents declared their love for the children and stated that no matter what religious path their LGBTQ child chooses, they want to remain close. Over 44-percent stated that they wish for a “loving relationship” not matter what path the child chooses.

With respect to our child’s religious future, we hope that our child

- *Will remain Orthodox*
- *Will remain observant, though not necessarily Orthodox*
- *Will have a loving relationship with us even if not remaining religious whatsoever*

Admittedly, this question allowed respondents to select only one answer, which was unsatisfactory to many parents. From comments received to this question, a few parents clarified that their wish and hope for their child is not a simple either-or answer. For example, these parents let us know that when they chose “Will remain Orthodox,” they also want a continued loving relationship with that child.





Eshel's mission is to create community and acceptance for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews and their families in Orthodox communities. Founded in June of 2010, Eshel provides hope and a future for Orthodox LGBT women, men, and teens. Eshel accomplishes its goals in a number of ways. Eshel trains its members to speak out and act as advocates for LGBTQ Orthodox people and their families; Eshel creates bridges into Orthodox communities to foster understanding and support; through community gatherings Eshel helps LGBTQ Orthodox people pursue meaningful lives that encompass seemingly disparate identities while also fulfilling Jewish values around family, education, culture, and spirituality. Eshel's work has gained national recognition and broad media coverage for its innovative mission and unique reach.

For more information on this report or on Eshel, please contact Miryam Kabakov by email (miryam@eshelonline.org) or by calling 724-374-3501.