

INSIDE OUR FAMILIES, OUTSIDE IN OUR ORTHODOX COMMUNITIES



2019

Parent survey and report

In December 2019, Eshel held its seventh annual retreat for Orthodox parents of LGBT+ children. Approximately 100 parents attended. The following report is based on an anonymous survey of those retreat participants.

Inside, Outside

Parents are finding ways to manage, but shuls and schools largely fail LGBT+ Jews and their families

Eshel Parent Survey 2019

In December 2019, Eshel held its seventh annual retreat for Orthodox parents of LGBT+ children. For the first time, other close family members were invited to the retreat, as well. Approximately 100 parents and family members attended from across the country and from a wide range of Orthodox communities.

The retreat's theme was "Inside/Outside." Orthodox parents and relatives of LGBT+ Jews who attended this retreat shared their experiences with each other, intending to give and/or hoping to receive strength and support from other parents and the speakers. At the end of the weekend, Eshel distributed a short, six-question survey. The survey's purpose was twofold: 1) to learn about their family dynamics and how LGBT+ children affect how they parent; 2) to explore their perceptions of how their institutions, shuls and day schools are (or are not) educating community members about the LGBT+ Jews in their midst.

The survey asked respondents to answer a mix of six questions, some offering a ranking, some asking for single answers. All questions offered closed-ended multiple choice selections, as well as an "Other" option, along with a space for open-ended comments. Parents were encouraged to add comments or explain why a question did not fit their circumstance or explain how the answer they wanted to give did not neatly match one of the options offered. We inserted the original question and possible answers at the beginning of each section.

The following document is a compilation of their anonymous answers. While rigorous statistical analysis is impossible in such a small and varied sample, more than 60 of the approximately 100 retreat attendees responded to the survey. This report describes how this group of parents feel about their community, the challenges they have faced and how they express their love for their LGBT+ family members.

Note: This is a snapshot survey of a very complex and emotional topic. We designed this survey to gather a brief glimpse of parent opinions and viewpoints. As soon as we saw the variety of comments received for each of the six questions, we understood how many more or different questions we could have asked. We also learned how nuanced and complex the issues are, as well as the many ways parents are grappling with them.

To the 60-plus participants who answered our questions in this survey, thank you for your time, your thoughtful responses, and your comments. We wanted to capture as complete a picture as we can. It's important that the Orthodox Jewish community hear your collective voice. In that spirit, we expect to continue to ask your opinions in the years ahead.

Editorial note

With respect to their LGBT+ Jews and their families, Orthodox *shuls*, schools, and communities are on an education, communication and acceptance journey that some embrace but that most institutions do not.

The *shuls* and schools are the gatekeepers for any Orthodox community. They “hold the keys” that lock or unlock our communal doors and give people access. If communities, meaning the *shuls* and schools, are to improve dialog and positive acceptance of LGBT+ Orthodox Jews and their families, they must take the initiative.

That said, *shuls* influence schools and vice versa. In many communities, local *shul* Rabbis and community members are also the teachers in the local day school, making the two institutions nearly inseparable.

It appears from anecdotal conversations that surfaced at this retreat, and in the prior six retreats, that parents paint a picture of stalemate. Many Orthodox parents with LGBT+ children see *shul* rabbis and school administrators staring at each other over this issue. Each institution’s leader waits for the other to make the first move. Who is going to be the first to open the conversation in public, rather than remain behind closed doors? Who will take the lead, despite political and peer pressure?

While both sides wait, it is the LGBT+ children and families in a community who suffer by being silently (or not so silently) marginalized – or worse.

Parents do not want pity, or advice to “love their child.” They already love their children. No rabbi or community leader needs to tell them that. Parents need to live in a community that accepts their children and their family. They want homophobic fear tactics to cease. They want the whispering and the shunning to stop. It is cruel and unnecessary, not to mention *K’neged Halacha*, against Jewish law.

Homosexuality has been known for millennia. But our knowledge that it is not a choice – indeed, that it is immutable – has been a medical fact for the last few decades. Educated people no longer dispute this truth. Scientists, and increasingly the lay public, have universally accepted this reality (with the notable exception of fundamentalist religions). When our Orthodox leadership rejects this knowledge, which has led to the acceptance of homosexuality as normal and ever-present part of the spectrum of human sexuality, it signals to modern Orthodox children that *Halachic* declarations of prominent Rabbis are false or driven by fear or hate.

Although we do not necessarily know how to reconcile Torah prohibitions with our current knowledge, our ignorance is hardly a justification for *sinas chinam*, baseless hatred. When Rabbis make merciless homophobic pronouncements on Torah, Torah’s eternal truthfulness is tarnished. Hateful homophobic messages from our Rabbis (or messages of hushed silence that marginalize) only drive away our LGBT+ children from Torah observance. They also risk all our children drawing the conclusion that if such a hateful, anti-scientific, homophobic stance reflects Torah, why should they not embrace the glittering, secular world with which they are surrounded?

Unless both schools and *shuls* begin addressing this issue in an objective and open manner, these institutions will further alienate Orthodox LGBT+ children and their families. The loss of LGBT+ youth and some of their family members to Orthodoxy is the predictable outcome of their rejection by the Orthodox leadership. The modern world brings with it many challenges that cannot be addressed by pretending new knowledge does not exist.

Part I: Outside in our community

This portion of the survey asked participants how welcoming their *shuls*, schools and leading Orthodox thinkers and speakers make them feel.

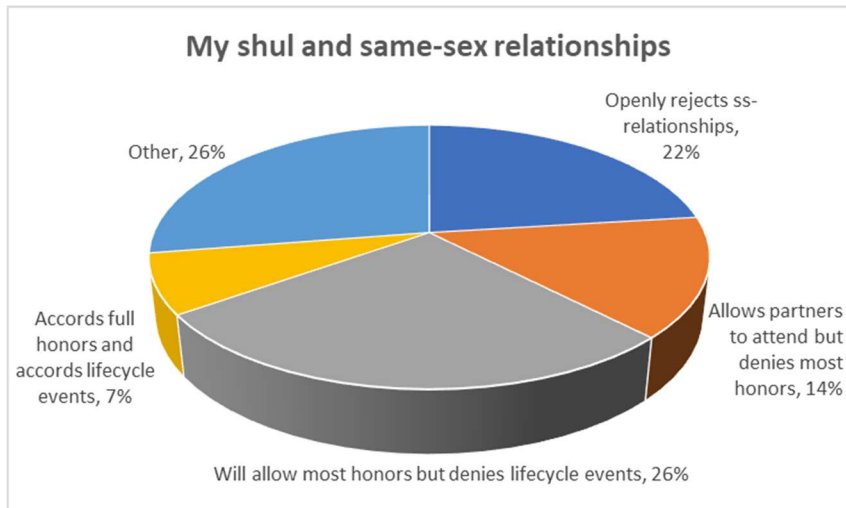
Shuls: Citizens with second-class privileges

1. **Same-sex relationships: My shul...** (select one)
- Openly rejects same-sex relationships
 - Will allow partners to attend services but refuses them some or most honors
 - Will allow some or most honors but not acknowledge life events, such as birth of a child, nor allows household or family membership
 - Accords full honors and acknowledges life cycle events, including family membership
 - Other _____

This question asked participants to identify the level of acknowledgement and privilege their LGBT+ child or children receive when they attend shul with a partner. Respondents had to select the one answer that most closely resembled their child’s experience in their *shul*. Choices ranged from “reject same-sex relationships,” through full acceptance and acknowledgement of life-cycle events.

Over one-third either reject same-sex relationships altogether (22 percent not allowing attendance) or allow partners to attend but denies most honors (14 percent).

Just over one-quarter (26 percent) allow most honors but do not acknowledge the lifecycle events for its LGBT+ members. The remaining quarter (26 percent), for the most part do not know the *shul* policy for LGBT+ partners.



Yet, in the “Other” category, parents admit to the fact that their *shuls* present a more passive-aggressive

stance. Here are a few comments from the “Other” category that indicate many *shuls*, or their rabbis, do not openly claim any position, which in turn allows for hurtful behavior to these parents of LGBT+ children. These respondents observed the following about their shuls:

- “We have a don’t ask, don’t tell policy.”
- “Rabbi claims to be welcoming but ignores us and our daughter.”
- “Has no stated policy but rejects same-sex relationships.”
- “Has not made a statement but does not appear open-minded.”
- “Will allow honors as long as the man is not distinguishable, i.e. not flamboyant.”
- “The rabbi ignores the subject.”

Leading Orthodox thinkers: Beginning to talk but mostly in private

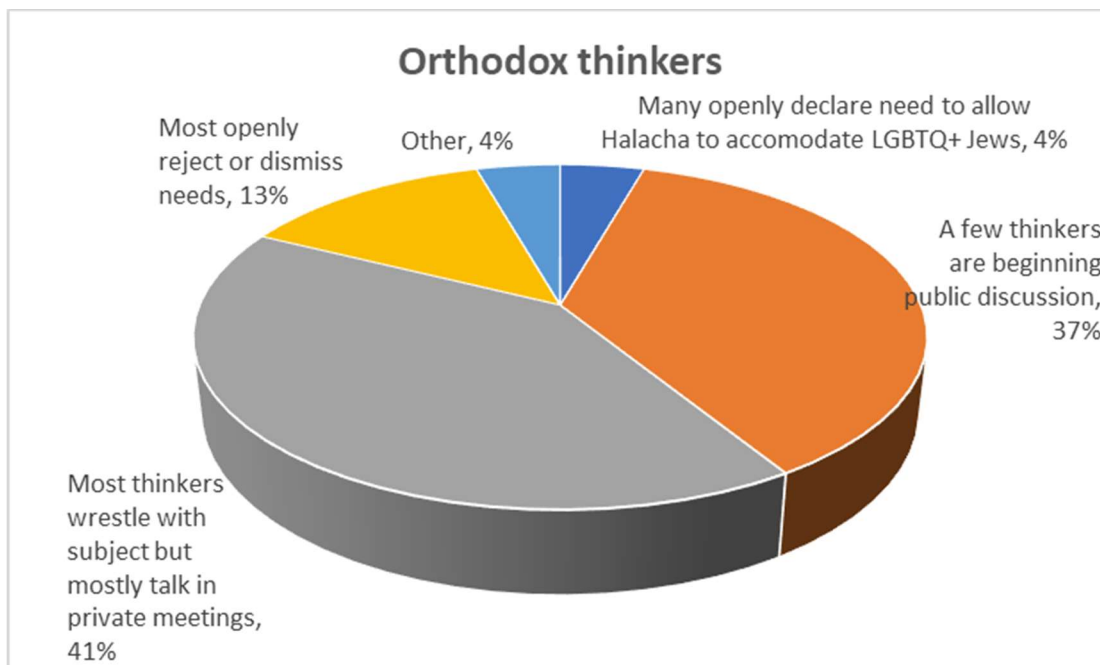
2. **Orthodox thinkers: My perception is that in the wider, US Orthodox community...** (select one)
- Many leading thinkers openly declare a need to allow *Halacha* to accommodate LGBT+ Jews
 - A few thinkers are beginning public discussion
 - Most thinkers wrestle with the subject but mostly talk in private, closed-door meetings
 - Most leading thinkers openly reject or dismiss the needs of LGBT+ Jews or any attempt to accommodate
 - Other _____

We asked participants about their perception of Orthodox thinkers and their willingness to address how *Halacha* can, will or should accommodate LGBT+ Jews. The question offered answers that ranged from “a need to allow *Halacha* to accommodate LGBT+ Jews” to “Most leading thinkers openly reject or dismiss the needs of LGBT+ Jews or any attempt to accommodate.”

Respondents very much perceive leading Orthodox thinkers as beginning to deal with the subject but for many of these parents what they have witnessed are conversations with these thinkers largely held in private (41 percent). Others see that leaders are beginning to talk in public (37 percent).

A very small segment of the respondents (4 percent) see leaders openly declaring a need for *Halacha* to accommodate LGBT+ Jews.

Another small group sees their leaders as openly rejecting or dismissing the needs of LGBT+ Jews. (13 percent).



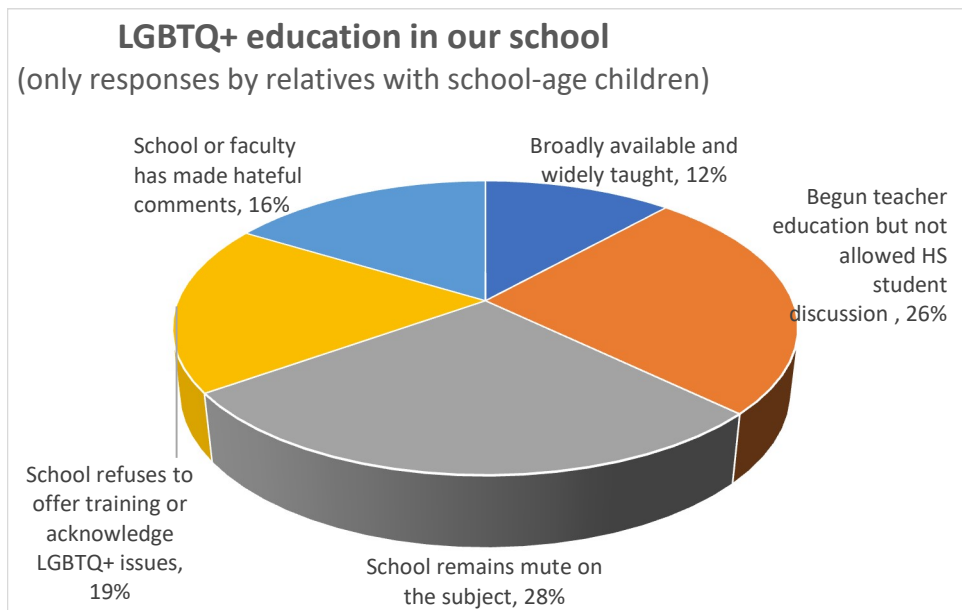
LGBT+ education in our school

Day schools receive failing grades: Most schools are mute on the subject, do not offer training, or acknowledge LGBT+ issues. A significant number report that school faculty has made hateful comments.

3. LGBT+ education in our local school: Based on my knowledge, LGBT+ education... (select one)

- Is broadly available and widely taught in our school
- Our school has begun teacher education but has not allowed student high school discussion
- Our day school remains mute on the subject
- Our day school refuses to offer training or acknowledgement of LGBT+ issues
- Our day school or its faculty/staff has openly made hateful or anti-LGBT+ statements
- Other _____

Only the answers by parents of current day school students were included in the analysis of this question. Nearly one-third of survey participants were not included in this analysis because their children have either not attended day school or graduated their day schools long ago and they no longer know current school policy or school actions.



Overall, parents give their child’s day school failing grades.

- Over one-quarter (28 percent) state that their school remains mute about LGBT+ Jewish students
- Nearly one-fifth (19 percent) report that the school refuses to offer training or acknowledge LGBT+ issues
- Approximately one-seventh (16 percent) state that their faculty has made hateful comments

A relatively small number of parents do see some hope for open discussion and education on LGBT+ issues within their local institutions. According to respondents, roughly one-quarter of their neighborhood schools have begun discussion of LGBT+ issues; yet, even those do not allow open, dialog on the subject among high school students.

Only 12 percent of parents send their children to day schools where faculty and students are openly and actively educated and trained about LGBT+ issues.

Part II: Inside with our families

Parenting: Protective and loving with different approaches to parenting

We posed two very direct questions to respondents. Most respondents were parents. Fewer than a dozen were other relatives, including grandparents, aunts and uncles. If both parents attended the survey session, they were also asked to respond individually.

4. Parenting: I find myself... (Please rank order 1=Agree most; 6= Disagree most)

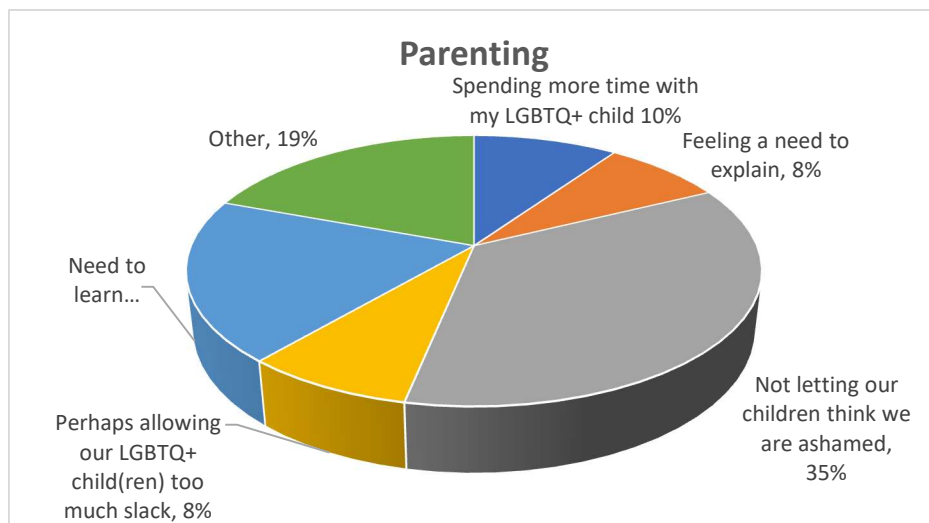
- Spending more time with my LGBTQ+ child than with our other child(ren)
- Feeling the need to “explain” our family to other families
- Not letting our child(ren) think we are ashamed by failing to speak out about LGBTQ+ issues in the larger community
- Perhaps allowing our LGBTQ+ child(ren) too much slack
- Needing to learn new rules about parenting my child(ren)

Other _____

The first question asked parents to rank a parent’s impression of how they navigate the tension of managing the entire family and how he or she represents the family to the outside community. This question tried to capture the tension of managing a family and dealing with community pressures.¹

Parents were steadfastly defensive of their families and their LGBTQ+ children – irrespective of whether they were “out” to their communities. This is evidenced by examining the most and least popular responses. The largest single response, representing over one-third of respondents (35 percent), was “Not letting our children think we are ashamed.”

The fewest respondents (8 percent) chose either “Feeling a need to explain their family to other families,” or “allowing our LGBTQ+ child(ren) too much slack.” Nonetheless, nearly one-fifth (19 percent) admitted to the fact that having an LGBTQ+ child has required them to “learn new parenting rules.”



¹ In questions that ask for respondents to rank answers, we analyzed only the first-ranked selections.

Shalom bayit: We achieve it in many ways, but for most of us nothing has changed since our child has come out

5. **Shalom bayit: I want peace at home...** (Please rank order 1=Agree most; 5= Disagree most)

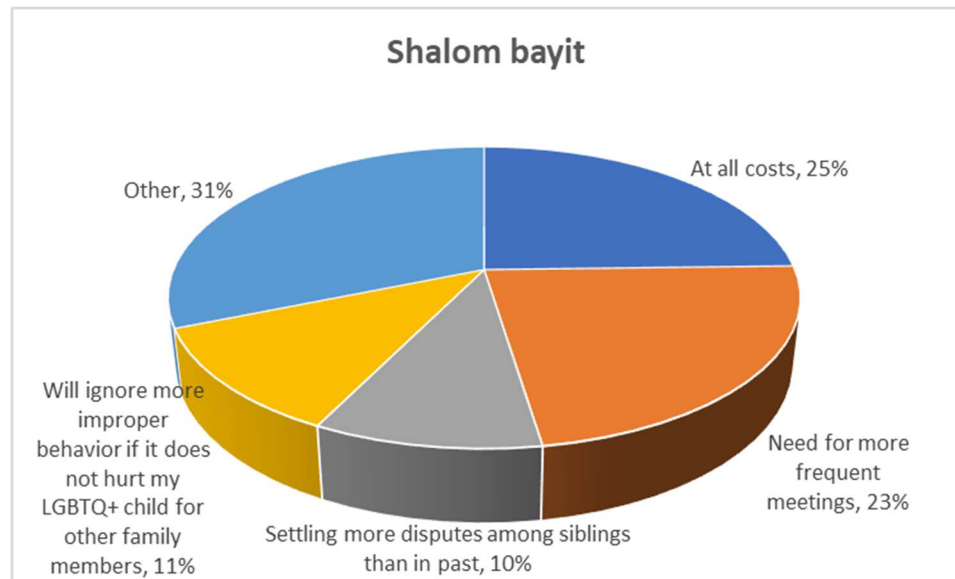
- At all costs, even if it means we allow behavior we are unhappy with
- Feel the need to have more frequent family meetings in order to ease tensions or address concerns
- Which means I settle more disputes among siblings than I might have in the past
- Generally, will ignore “bad” or improper behavior if it does not hurt my LGBT+ child(ren) or other members of my family
- Other _____

Parents with an LGBT+ child have parenting challenges not unlike parents with “straight” children. How they maintain peace and harmony at home takes different forms. One-quarter (25%) seek *shalom bayit* “at all costs.”

Nearly the same number (23 percent) state that they need to have more frequent family meetings.

Apparently, only a small number of families feel that the family dynamic has changed very much among siblings or parents and their children. Only 10 percent

feel they settle more disputes among siblings than they did in the past. Only 11 percent will “ignore more improper behavior.”



For the largest segment of parents, simply asking this question seemed almost insulting. These parents who selected the “Other” box, offered pointed, strongly worded comments. They believe in all their children. Many will simply reject anyone who rejects their LGBT+ child. The response ranged from surprised to indignant and even defiant.

“Not relevant; all sibs accepting.”

“Will not include anyone who is ‘hurtful’ or rejecting our daughter; we have nothing to do with a cousin because of his behavior.”

“Issues are mostly with extended family; nuclear family and most others are fine.”

“This was never an issue.”

“Do the best I can with the same expectations for both children.”

“None apply. These kids are too easy.”

“We have peace at home.”

Intermarriage:

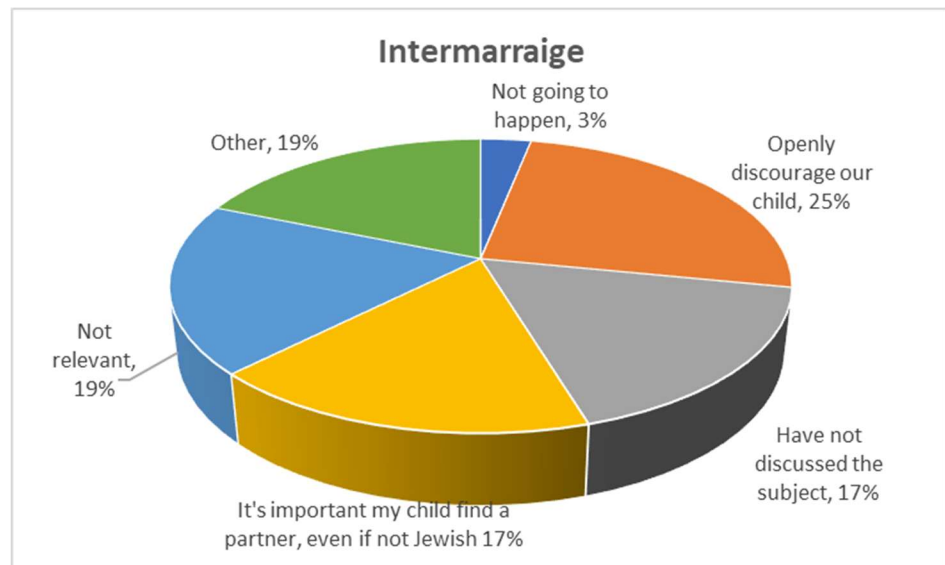
Highly likely, not necessarily in our control, and something with which we may have to come to terms

6. Intermarriage: My view of our LGBT+ child(ren) intermarrying... (Please select one)

- Not going to happen
- Openly discouraging our child from intermarriage
- Have not discussed the subject
- Important my child find a partner even if not Jewish
- Not relevant (e.g. child too young, or does not want partner)
- Other _____

Intermarriage remains a very real and common issue among many parents and their LGBT+ children.

It is not clear why the intermarriage rate is so high among LGBT+ children of Orthodox families. Anecdotally, community rejection is likely the single most cited cause. Nonetheless the evidence is clear that many parents find their LGBT+ children are intermarrying. Within varying degrees, the parents attending the retreat are upset and are at a loss as to what they can do to change this outcome.



The 2018 Eshel parent survey report documented the disaffection of young LGBT+ Jews who were raised in Orthodox homes.

In sharp contrast with a PEW study of the general Orthodox population, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans²": 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 LGBT+ children have departed from or outrightly reject Orthodox Judaism.

² <http://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2013/10/jewish-american-full-report-for-web.pdf>

In this year's survey, we wanted to ask parents a very direct question about their LGBT+ child or children and intermarriage: Will it happen?

Very few respondents (3 percent) declared that intermarriage was "not going to happen." Fewer than one-fifth (17 percent) have not discussed the subject with their children.

One quarter (25 percent) openly discouraged their child from intermarrying.

For one-third to one-half of the respondents, the question is either not relevant (19 percent, because their child has already married, either a Jewish or non-Jewish partner), or, because the parent wants the child to find a life-partner, even if that person is not Jewish (17 percent). Nineteen percent of parents feel the choice is out of their hands.

Comments attached to these three options include:

"It's his choice to make, not ours."

"Up to him."

"Wasn't my choice but will happen [that the child will intermarry]."

"Already married to a woman who converted."

"He started dating Jews but stopped; I think it's probable and makes me sad."

* * *



Eshel's mission is to create community and acceptance for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews and their families in Orthodox communities.

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

