

## Challenges in Outreach to GLBT Interfaith Couples

By Jeffrey Scheckner

*The primary mission of the Jewish Outreach Institute ([www.JOI.org](http://www.JOI.org)) is to “reach out and welcome in” the intermarried, and to promote inclusiveness in the Jewish community for intermarried families and disconnected Jews. Originally founded in 1988 as a think tank and research facility devoted to the study of intermarriage, JOI’s services have since grown to include advocacy, training of outreach professionals, and the sponsorship of innovative outreach programs throughout North America as part of its Jewish Connection Partnership program ([www.JewishConnectionPartnership.org](http://www.JewishConnectionPartnership.org)). This column is an opportunity for JOI to share its findings and views with the [InterfaithFamily.com](http://InterfaithFamily.com) readership.*

As advocates for an inclusive community, we want to make sure that all feel welcome, regardless of the path they follow. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans-gendered (GLBT) interfaith couples are a prominent subgroup of the large number of interfaith family households in the Jewish community. As a matter of fact, it seems that they are over-represented among interfaith couples and families. It could in part be a simple issue of availability. The pool of Jewish GLBT singles is relatively small, which makes it even more difficult for them to find each other, except where specific groups or networks have formed.

This may be exacerbated by the very real possibility that those who are GLBT may feel alienated from the formal Jewish community or from specific members within the community, including their own families. So they may socialize to a greater degree with others who are not part of the Jewish community. And the “peer group” is probably the most significant variable in interfaith marriage, because research shows that individuals tend to partner with those they socialize with. Whatever the reason for the high GLBT interfaith rate, it is a permanent and important feature of the interfaith community that the Jewish community at large has yet to widely address.

GLBT Jews with non-Jewish partners are faced with a double burden. Some go as far as to call this double jeopardy. Although many of the issues faced by GLBT interfaith couples are the same as those in straight interfaith relationships, they face potentially twice the challenges. For example, it is difficult enough for interfaith straight couples to find a rabbi to officiate at their wedding, and likewise, it is difficult for GLBT couples to find a rabbi to officiate even when both partners are Jewish. But an interfaith GLBT couple must deal with both issues, because some rabbis will perform same-sex unions but not intermarriages, and vice versa. Therefore, the pool of choices is vastly reduced. This also extends to other life-cycle events for which people might seek out Jewish clergy.



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

There is also twice the potential for rejection from the Jewish community. Any interfaith family may find itself confronting anti-intermarriage sentiment within Jewish religious institutions. However, there are a growing number of synagogues where intermarried couples receive increased acceptance and are able to “blend in.” GLBT couples often do not have the option to “blend.” The issues of identity must always be confronted if they are to live in the open. Even in GLBT synagogues, policies vary and some of these institutions may welcome only the Jewish partner as a member or active participant. So the challenge is again doubled: to find a temple that is not only welcoming to the intermarried population but also to the GLBT population.

There are few programs to support GLBT interfaith couples, and without such support members of this community could feel an added sense of isolation and seek a position on the periphery of both communities, furthering the sense of isolation. When children are present in these families, outreach and encouragement to be involved may be an even more pressing need, but rarely is the necessary support offered. The GLBT interfaith families may be reluctant to participate in communal activities due to real or perceived lack of acceptance.

How has the Jewish community welcomed GLBT Jews and responded to their needs? Are GLBT Jews and their non-Jewish partners even aware of any desire on the part of the Jewish community to reach out and welcome them in? The bottom line is that the community must do a better job of helping interfaith families to make Jewish choices for themselves and their households. In our initial scan of relevant Jewish outreach programs, we found few that specifically address the issues confronted by interfaith GLBT couples. More often, we found occasional one-time workshops or seminars at a GLBT synagogue or national GLBT conference. Yet we know that there is a high level of interest in addressing these issues among institutions that have never formally ventured into this area.

Since the training of Jewish professionals is an important part of JOI’s work, we want to share “best practices” with those who work with GLBT interfaith couples. These Jewish professionals need assistance in locating the GLBT interfaith population, working through issues of acceptance in the Jewish and GLBT communities, helping them to resolve relationship issues, challenging homophobia in the Jewish community, offering guidance in outreach approaches and program initiatives, and sensitizing the entire field of outreach.

JOI is working to address these important issues. We are currently at the beginning stages of several projects focusing on the specific needs of the GLBT interfaith community, and we welcome support and mutual cooperation from interested individuals and other organizations. We believe that such an approach will help to make all feel welcome in a stronger and more diverse Jewish community.



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

Jeff Scheckner recently served as director of professional training for the Jewish Outreach Institute.

Posted with permission from Jeffrey Scheckner.



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

[www.keshetonline.org](http://www.keshetonline.org)