

How I Ended Up at the Jerusalem Same Sex Attraction Discussion Group

By Phil S. Stein

Note: This month is Jewish Social Action Month, a new observance devoted to helping those in distress within the Jewish community. We at Zeek thought about who within our community is vulnerable to violence, repression, and subjugation, and are devoting this space to a phenomenon which only now is gaining attention in America: the efforts within religious communities to “convert” gay people to heterosexuality, often by means of coercive, violent, and thoroughly discredited modes of “therapy” which have a zero to .5% “success” rate. The essay’s (pseudonymous) author is a secure, confident adult, and so this essay is a humorous look at the often-ridiculous efforts of the Jewish “ex-gay” movement. However, hundreds of vulnerable teenagers and young adults are being systematically mutilated — tortured may not be too strong a word — at the hands of our own rabbinic establishment. Further resources on this crisis may be found at the end of the essay. Names have been changed to protect privacy.

1.

I came to Jerusalem with the intention of being a true pilgrim, making some kind of honest and open *tshuva* (return to Jewish law and observance) — in my fashion.

What clinched it was my sister’s announcement in September ‘04 of her engagement to be married at the end of October. I would be coming to Jerusalem, at least for her wedding, and take it from there. I began to allow my beard to grow, in anticipation that it would come in handy. Both as a beard and a ‘beard.’ I knew somewhere in the Torah, the Talmud, somewhere Jewish law or custom said you should have a beard. Certainly a man of my age — while I was (and am) frequently flattered to hear that I look a virile early 30’s, I was, in fact, on the verge of 40 at the time of my trip. But the beard would cover more than my chin; I thought it would help me pass in a community that, if they knew everything about me, might never let me in.

Really, my desire to come and learn in Israel dates from my teens, when I spent a mediocre and frustrating few years in Hebrew School at my suburban New Jersey Conservadox synagogue. While I had been a curious, adept student, the quality of the teaching and programs varied so widely, and worse, the commitment of the other students and their families was so conflicted, that the atmosphere inhibited genuine learning and growth as much as facilitated it. And while we were only 45 minutes drive from New York City, probably the largest and most varied Jewish population in the world, we rarely made use of that vast resource, and instead were cooped up



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with our teachers in our cramped cinderblock classrooms, filled with adolescent hormones, frustration, and confusion about just why we were here. For those few of us with a genuine interest in learning, the experience was even more hellish because the student disdain and acting out made it impossible to focus. Judaism was tantalizingly close, yet ultimately remote.

No one could explain to me what the big deal was, really, about being Jewish — and if it was such an ancient, true, noble thing, then why Hebrew school was such a joke, and the services were, at best, melodramatic, campy mumbo jumbo, which few really seemed to understand or appreciate. There were a few older men in the congregation who clearly knew what was going on, because they had had genuine, effective Jewish educations when they were younger, clearly somewhere else (typically, Europe before the war). But otherwise, no one seemed to care. Very few people kept Kosher at home. Few kept Shabbat. I'm not sure I would have survived synagogue with any positive Jewish identification at all were it not for the choir.

Blood and Iron Steele, *Der Eiserne Kantor*, I dubbed him. Trained in the top cantorial school in Berlin before WWII, Joshua Steele had come over as a young man, together with the congregation (which was led out of Nazi Germany in 1938, the last year such an escape was possible, and somehow ended up in suburban New Jersey). He led the choir with an aging, yet still iron, classically Prussian fist, and an increasingly threadbare but formerly glorious *heldentenor* voice. I had started singing in the choir as preparation for my Bar Mitzvah, but I quickly became hooked. The services were still fairly classical Yekke services — composed by Lewandowski, a mid 19th century Jewish composer, who wove traditional niggunim into a larger oratorio structure, so that much of the service was one, long musical offering (8:30 am to 12:30 pm on Shabbat mornings). The choir was critical to this structure, and is to this day the most memorable part of my Jewish upbringing. I could probably reproduce much of those Kabbalat Shabbat, Shacharit, and Musaf Shabbat services from memory, and even today when davening them, it's that service, that choir, and the voice of Joshua Steele still echoing in my mind.

Aside from the choir, though, there was nothing to keep me engaged in Jewish education throughout my confused, closeted teenage years. Later in high school, then at college, I would return to sing in the synagogue choir for the holidays, and to lead my family's Passover seder each year. I was the most educated, interested and religiously adept in my family, but I still craved a passionate, committed world of Jews living and learning and seeking to integrate Judaism into their modern, worldly lives.

I came out when I went to college, but, while I had various and occasional boyfriends, they were far fewer and further between than I'd ever envisioned, with long periods of loneliness. I'd never found love. And finding a nice Jewish boyfriend with whom I could also be passionately interested, and turned on, and sexually compatible was beginning to feel like waiting for Moshiach. The two Jewish guys I'd dated were painfully unsatisfying in very



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different ways. Rob was a handsome, tall, lean, long distance runner from Chicago; very smart, very diligent. I'd spied him several times at Columbia's gay dances, and wondered out loud to a friend who lived in his dorm how I might meet him. Somehow, meet him I did, and while I was fumbling through small talk, I invited him home to my family for Pesach. At that time I was in the process of emotional, educational meltdown — I was behind in all my classes, behind with papers, and was missing classes to try to catch up with what I could — and was generally in a state of neurotic denial. Nonetheless, the hottest Jewish gay boy I knew on campus, brilliant, athletic, romantic at times, had accepted my invitation home for the Passover. Perhaps surprisingly, things went very well. We very discreetly played a little footsy under the table, as I again led the seder for my clueless family, and we made out after hours upstairs in my room. This led to a three week period where we met almost every day for at least an hour, usually in a park just off campus, to have lunch, schmooze, and make out just a bit. It was deliciously like the classic romance I'd never had. Yet while I had managed to mostly keep the reality of my educational and emotional implosion hidden from him, he was beginning to get an inkling. When finally he'd finished all his exams, and the fullness of my disaster played out, the sex we had was passionate if neurotic. Our final day together came with the revelation of the fullness of my last semester's crisis, and him telling me just how fucked up that was and how I needed help, and he needed to move on.

My only other Jewish boyfriend, David, was a small town political operative in New Jersey, on the town council, involved in Democratic politics, with a patronage job working in the office of a local politician. Totally closeted, with a budding ulcer, and with deep hangups about his body and sex. Not the brightest bulb intellectually, socially, or culturally either, and within three or four months of commuting to suburbia for *this*, I bailed.

All my other boyfriends were goyim, who, while exciting, titillating, emotionally engaging, lacked one little thing: being Jewish. Mario, my little bed monkey and renaissance English lit scholar. Gregy, the pretty, blond twink, actuarial student, whose career was a metaphor for his pathologically cautious and repressed emotional life. Mark, the totally hot and dramatically self destructive masochist with whom I'd had the best sex of my life, until his ongoing spiral of self destruction led him to a boyfriend who *really* abused him. Roberto, he of the *platano grande*, the macho Latin lover who taught me — Ai! que rico, que suave, que sabroso! — how to love sex. Dionne, the buff, hung, young black stud whom I met on the internet, with the wild sexaholic background and amazing feats of fetishistic derring do... Those and others, all exciting, appealing, amazing, romantic, hopeful — and all not Jewish. While I felt I might have loved any of them, I wanted marriage... permanence... yiddishkeit. Where were the hot, nice, available Jewish boys?

Career wise, I had ridden the Internet craze at a top Wall Street investment bank all the way to the Firm Management E-Commerce Strategy Group, just to have it all evaporate beneath me. I



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was laid off a week before 9/11/01, and, with meaning I'm still fathoming, missed my meeting on the 41st floor of the World Trade Center II at 9am that morning by oversleeping. I spiraled through a series of dismal, short term jobs, financial disaster, and the eventual loss of my Park Avenue South apartment, into a guest apartment attached to my parents' home in Jersey.

So it was time for a change; a leap out of the unfulfilling mess of a life in which I had fallen, and a leap into new realities. I wanted to explore what had so inspired my sister to transform her life from modern, independent, rising fashion industry exec, to marrying a yeshiva *bucher* met through a shadchan (matchmaker) after only five weeks of dating, and to the very traditional role of wife and mother in Jerusalem's haredi (ultra-orthodox) community. It was time to explore more fully what this Jewish thing was all about, how it worked, where it came from, and what it might mean for me. Even me: the campus gay leader, founder of an Ivy League AIDS education and activist group, past president of my university's LGBT group, co-founder of the international gay foot fetish organization — the very model of the modern homosexual. If I could survive and thrive in one of Wall Street's tightest, rightest, whitest, old-school investment banks, I thought, I'd survive haredi Jerusalem.

2.

Two weeks prior to my departure, I spoke with the rabbi overseeing admissions to a well-known yeshiva in Jerusalem. The yeshiva was part of the same organization through which my sister had made tshuvah, and this was my entrance interview. I felt my conscience required me to inform him that I was gay. I knew that the Orthodox still consider homosexuality a sin, and that this would be a problem of some sort for this rabbi, but surely I wasn't the only gay man who'd ever contemplated entering the yeshiva world. Anyway, I felt that they'd become aware of it sooner or later, and that it was better for me to be up front about it, rather than it seeming as if I were hiding or being duplicitous. Little did I know that the Orthodox way of handling sexuality was that one was presumed straight (even if one were unmarried, say, and forty) until there was absolutely no other choice. The rabbi was a bit taken aback. He asked me if I was "obvious," and whether I would have to tell everyone. I replied that I understood, at least on a surface level, Orthodox Judaism's prohibition against homosexuality, but that, while I was not effeminate, or overtly gay, over time people who were attuned to these things and became well acquainted with me would figure it out, and that in any event, I wouldn't lie to close friends. But, I said, I wanted to "approach Judaism with an open heart and mind, and see what happens and where it leads." (As I learned to say it later, "to be mekubal to HaShem, his Shechina and Torah.")

The Rav decided the yeshiva could provide me with free tuition, but, unlike the deal given to the rest of their students, no housing. While I was in, I now had to figure out how to find a place to live and pay for it, and how to negotiate my way as a gay man of 40 through an Orthodox yeshiva for guys typically 18-35.



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What I thought of being *mekubal* (receptive) and what they understood... well, it would be an area of further exploration and clarification. I certainly had no desire or expectation to give up my homosexuality, as if that were possible. Not that it had ever really made me particularly 'gay,' in the old fashioned sense of the word; often I find myself feeling lonely, lovelorn, a bit neurotic and unhappy. On the other hand, I have a strong sense of self, however conflicted, a vastly deep, rich, and complex identity and set of perspectives, which, however eager for new ideas, experiences, and perspectives, is not prone to complete self re-invention overnight. I was hoping for new wisdom, a refreshed vista on life, the world, even myself, perhaps, you never know, even on my prospects for relationships.

In many ways, my fantasy was a common one: to learn enough about Judaism to be able to function in any Jewish setting with a feeling of confidence. To have a better appreciation for Jewish laws and traditions. And, finally, hopefully, while doing all this, and like most other people who come to Jerusalem to learn and reconnect, to find my *bashert*

I was also going with an open heart and mind, and... who knew. The Torah makes wise the simple, good the evil, happy the sad. Who was I to say it could not, with God's mysterious help, make straight the gay. While it seemed less likely than pigs flying, certainly there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of even in my philosophies. This was going to be an adventure .

Inquiries of whether I was available for *shidduchin* (matches) started early, and, once people learned that I was 40 (?!), it became top priority. Everyone is known to be in Jerusalem for a match, and an unmarried, handsome man, with an Ivy League, Fortune 500 background — of 40 no less! — in the Orthodox world, especially in Jerusalem, is a hot commodity. Didn't matter that I had just arrived. Didn't matter that I didn't know my *halacha* from *haskala*. Like Rabbi Akiva, 2000 years ago, I'd emerged from the *sheker* (lie, shadow) of ignorance, clearly destined to take a wife and go to yeshiva at age 40, to go onto become one of Jewish history's most inspiring teachers. And, I had a *baalat tshuvah* sister; such a brother of such a *tzadekis* would make a perfect match for literally hundreds of sisters, cousins, friends, daughters, nieces, granddaughters.

The eligible female to male ratio in Jerusalem is terribly out of balance, something on the order of 3:2, leaving a large, ravenous, female population out there in increasingly desperate search of a man. I thought the fact that I couldn't speak Hebrew, function in Israeli society, or have any means of making a living here were compelling obstacles. But not in this world. Whether you spoke Hebrew or not was really a minor matter, as long as you understood enough to say your prayers and learn in yeshiva. You'll have a wife, study in kollel, receive a meager subsistence stipend, sire several children over several years, be heavily subsidized by family back in the States, and finally, when you're totally in it, and financially, socially, emotionally totally dependant on this new support group and culture, with your back up against the financial wall,



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then you'll see about a job. Frequently, thereafter you'll live in semi-poverty, unless you happen to be particularly lucky, well connected, come from money, rarely will anyone have anything like the material comfort they'd known before. HaShem will provide as we toil in the fields of the Toirah, and we will be satisfied.

I was told: "What, you still think you're in America, land of the slave to the dollar and material decadence?! It's a mitzvah and a bracha to be happy with what you've got." Meanwhile, the yeshiva soft-sold Hebrew skills so that guys *couldn't* function in general Israeli society (deemed irreligious and corrupt), so that they would be dependant on the Yeshiva and the English speaking baal tshuva heredi world in which they now found themselves marooned, and so that they would be cajoled, coaxed, co-opted, and compelled to learn Torah and conform to their new environment and culture. I was hot, new kosher meat for the yeshiva-shidduchin grinder, and I was in constant danger of getting sucked in. Who knows, were I not an "incurable" homosexual, maybe I might've been. Certainly many others seemed envious of my easy access and perceived readiness to matches, which they still yearned for.

I quickly devised defensive strategies. "Well, you know, I really just arrived and have just begun to learn.... I'm really not ready yet... I can't even halachically manage my own davening, no less a wife and household... Give me about a year... You'll be the first to know." This worked for most.

But not the rabbis.

The first to make his move on me was the Surfer Dude Hasid. Former California surfer-rocker-beach-bum, who came from an irreligious family of academics, and had himself clearly learned much in psychology and sociology studies prior to his tshuva, he had a huge talent to connect emotionally. Now he was the yeshiva's reigning cool dude spiritualist. The one newbies could most often and most strongly relate to, especially when he laced his teaching with reminiscences of stoned Dead concerts, tripping, racing on the LA Freeway, and other intimate, juicy minutiae of pop youth culture. Actually, I had approached him first, with my need for a confidant and advisor, but it quickly became apparent to me that his superstar Rav and best-buddy-to-the-world status meant that he was in constant demand. He immediately assumed too much about me and my marriage prospects in our first conversation. He was flying on Auto-Connect.

But he who sought me out a few weeks later, for a private counseling session. The atmosphere was light, friendly, curious, but Rav Simcha clearly had an agenda for me and he was working his way through it. "Now, Phil," he said, "I'm wont to discuss things that are a bit, uhhh, personal, and if I'm off the mark, please forgive me. But a few ideas came to mind that I feel are worth exploring. They might be totally out of left field, and wrong, and if so, please forgive me.



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But, I have a hunch... that you may have had some experience with sexuality other than hetero.”

Now, by this time, a couple of months into the Jerusalem haredi Baal Tshuvah yeshivish world, several things had become clear to me. The place was crawling with beautiful, glorious, fascinating, cute, hot, gorgeous, blessed *neshamas* (souls), dwelling (however fleetingly) in not-too-shabby man flesh. Oh, what flesh. And oh, what confusion! The place was full of guys from all walks of life, from all over the world, who were exploring ancient new worlds and realities. Frequently escaping from messed up, disastrous, miserable, or simply unfulfilling lives, these guys were intriguingly open to new ideas, perspectives and experiences. They were exploring new possibilities and new identities: a *mekubal* state which made their souls shine all the more beautifully in both God’s and my eyes. In the BT yeshiva environment you could leave your past behind. Questions were rarely asked, and any problem could be erased by the mists of time and communal willingness to forgive and forget, especially for boys who were for the most part from good families, had been eligible to attend good universities, and were now willing to embrace HaShem, His Law, the authority of the rabbis, and the community’s desperate daughters in holy matrimony.

There were clearly a number of guys here for whom same sex attractions seemed to be an issue — among students, staff, and rabbis as well. There are people who in New York would easily be classified as queens — but here they were studious buchers eagerly awaiting a shidduch, or particularly spiritual, devout, and loving rabbeim with a special affection for their fellows, not infrequently expressed in arm squeezes, back rubs, and warm embraces.

In short, here were what appeared to be many excellent candidates for my bashert! There was the astonishingly beautiful Aaron, the Yemenite boy who looked like he was the model for the young Moses in Dreamworks’ Prince of Egypt, and who had the sweetest distracted scholar air about him, except when praying with quiet, inward intensity. I still remember his long, smooth, warm fingers on the base of my neck, straightening my tefillin strap early one chilly winter morning at prayers. Or Max, the muscular, hunky, action figure Jew, built with big muscles and a square Hollywood leading man face with thick beard and deep voice. Or Guillaume, the dark, slender Moroccan from Montreal, with the smoldering, Latin beauty of North Africa, who was exploring kabbalah and who also happened to do marketing graphics and web design on the side, and was eager to ‘see my stuff.’ *Ai, que bueno* would it be for men to live together in friendship, if those men were me and David, my Motorcycle Diaries Argentinean documentary journalist, with the wild macho abandon of a Gaucho in his pursuit of *emmes*, and *que rico, que suave, que sabroso* his fiery passion for his fellow Jews.

There were many others — Stewart, who looked as if he just stepped out of *Brideshead Revisited*, with a lithe body and blond hair, Oxford accent, and a smile even Prince William could kiss; Manny, the former fashion biz bad boy, dark curly mop of hair, rangey, tightly



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muscled, walking with a bit of a ghetto swagger (useful for cruising after-hour clubs), a London East End accent, and the marks of several ear piercings still visible in both ears; and Jonathan, for all intents and purposes, an LA clone, whom you, and I, and others frequently, assume is gay because he's the spitting image: worked out gym bod, tan, fashionable but macho boy wear. I thought certainly here was my boyfriend, lover, husband! Ahh, HaShem would have it otherwise.

So I thought, when Rav Simcha broached the "personal" subject, of all the amazing shidduchim I was imagining with these absolute gems of men (a value beyond rubies, priceless), the beautiful Jewish lives, homes, families we could invent and build. But instead, I am urged to immediately enter into counseling with him to help me overcome this highly curable *yetzer hara* — my evil inclination.

Rav Simcha tells me he has counseled many, many men suffering from same-sex attractions and has a 100% success rate. "What?!" I say, thinking: this I have to explore. "You mean to tell me EVERYONE you counsel on their homosexuality ends up happily heterosexually married?!"

"Well..." he replies, everyone who stayed in therapy with him to the end. The end? Yes, until they graduated yeshiva and became *frum* Jews and got married. Aha! And how many is that? Hmm, he hasn't really got any numbers. And what percentage does that represent of guys who started counseling with him but didn't finish? No answer. And does he do any kind of in-depth follow up over time after they get married? No. And has anyone done any third party evaluations of his techniques, their efficacy, or results? No. And what are his techniques, by the way? Masculinity reparative therapy, hypnosis, and past incarnation/life regression. What?!

I have had various types of therapy over the years — psychotherapy, psycho-analysis, group therapy, massage therapy, family therapy. I've known therapists socially, and even have a few as relatives. So when it comes to various forms of therapy, psychological theories and practices, I'm a very well-informed, and wide-ranging, consumer. But the bizarre and toxic cocktail of therapies that Rav Simcha was now suggesting were just the types I had been investigating online while researching the various completely-discredited 'treatments' for homosexuality. They were common among the 'homosexual cure' crowd, and decried by everyone else for leaving the majority of their victims psychologically mutilated, and no more straight, even after years of difficult, painful therapies, celibacy, straight marriages, and divorces. Yet this is what he was proposing.

I told him I'd have to think about it — but decided while I try to be mekubal, there were limits, and I was already crazy enough as it is. As far as the religious community is concerned, every soul that they save from the "horrors" and sin of homosexuality is as if they saved the entire world, and well worth the many others whose lives were left even more dysfunctional than



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when they began. This is part of the reason why they don't keep any data — if they did, no one who saw it would agree to these odds, and the downside and costs.

So I essentially told Rav Simcha: prove it. I said that I had doubts about these forms of therapy, that they had high failure rates, and that what I really wanted to do was start by meeting some of these now happily married and well adjusted former homosexuals. Show me! Give me proof. Let me see and decide for myself how happy and sane they seemed.

This, he said, might be difficult.

In fact, it proved impossible. However many of these people there are, they are either so few, or so deeply hidden in their new identities, or so fragile in them, that either he couldn't produce them, or they wouldn't participate. But, to this day, almost a year later, Rav Simcha has never made such an introduction. No one has. Clearly people in therapy exist — I later learned there are quite a number of guys at this yeshiva seeing one of the top homosexual “reparation” therapists. But no one, apparently, whom Rav Simcha could trot out as a successful “cure.”

I knew that Rav Simcha wouldn't let go, and he didn't. About every six weeks or so he would corral me into a conversation, or ask me to help him with some task (like saying tehillim at the grave of a mentor of his with a group of hippie hasidim), only to rejoin this specific issue. Then another Rav in the Yeshiva set me up on some shidduchin un-asked. He just informed me that I should go and meet such and such *ayshes chayil* at such and such location one motzei Shabbat! The man barely knew me, hadn't asked if I were interested, ready, or even what kind of shidduch I might want — he just decided I was ready and he had just the woman.

The thing is: I actually enjoyed those dates. But that had more to do with my enjoyment of the company of someone other than a yeshiva bucher. The Rav had, in some respects, made a balanced and sophisticated match. Yet while I could love her like a sister, or a friend, that was it. Actually, not even that, because *frum* Jewish men and women can't be just friends. But I could see this pressure was going to continue until I took the red heifer by the horns, and took some action which indicated to the rabbis that I was 'dealing' with this issue. I asked about support groups — wasn't there one in Jerusalem? — and was told that “Support groups are cesspools of self delusion, avoidance, and backsliding!” sounded fascinating to me. So I hunted down the guy in town who ran the Same Sex Attraction (SSA) support group, sent him an email, and we scheduled an intake interview.

3.

The offices of the SSA Support group and related therapists are located in a converted apartment on the fourth floor of a working class apartment building in a religious neighborhood



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which borders on an industrial part of Jerusalem. Low-rent, dreary shrink- and group-therapy-spaces resemble each other the world over, apparently: schlocky, worn furniture, bad art on the walls, dim yet garish fluorescent lighting, and enough dust and wear to be forlorn without being filthy. Yonatan, the group coordinator, met me in the waiting room, and suggested we do the interview outside, since several of the therapy rooms were in use.

A man of indeterminate age, probably latter thirties (big bushy beards often make precise dating difficult in Jerusalem), dressed yeshivish, yet still with the air that his leadership of the SSA group grew out of his own need for it, Yonatan led me around the corner to, of all places, a playground. We tried to find a place to sit amid the screaming kids and gossiping parents, insulated from the loud roar of traffic from the four lane road on the other side of the hedge, over which peeked the smoke stacks and silos of the industrial bakery across the road. A lovely place for an intimate discussion about homosexuality.

I knew what Yonatan needed: evidence that I was seriously “working” on my sexuality. Nonetheless, I wanted to be as honest as possible. Fortunately, years of obsessive/compulsive introspection, discussion with untold thousands of persons about sex and sexual identity, gay discussion groups at college, chatting online, writing stories and papers in psych class, as well reading untold magazine articles, books, and pamphlets had well prepared me for this. I related with effusiveness the winding and woeful, the rushing and rambunctious history of my sexuality. The full flower of my tongue blossomed in the songs of love and lorn, of my frustrated search for meaning and wholeness, body and soul amid the distractions of the diaspora. Now, as I came to Jerusalem with an open heart, mind, and hopefully, soul, I was trying to be *mekubal* to all possibilities, and wanted to explore this one. Ahh, the true penitent! And one gifted with vision and speech! Few experiences inspire the SSA therapist, Rav, and shrink as much. All the many and varied sins, from founding the gay foot fetish society, to reaching out to mislead people as the GLBT outreach coordinator for a state presidential campaign, all that raunchy, wild gay sex — all these *averos* (sins) could be turned to mitzvos, so many, many mitzvos, through the miracle of tshuvah. And these great skills, this great understanding and awareness, could be harnessed for the service of G-d.

I made it into the group.

SSA meetings, though occasionally verging on tedious, were always fascinating for the revelations and insights into the participants. The mental two-step of denial and repression is a favorite subject of mine, and always close to the surface at these affairs. Six to eight guys, sitting around in a small room, going through the formal report on last week’s session, followed by check-ins, each guy’s brief (under five minute) recollection of the major events and issues of the previous week. These typically served as starting points for general group discussion. The guys were mostly in their early and mid 20’s — there were one or two guys in their 30’s, and me. Several were yeshiva buchers, several married, several trying to get married. I rated myself



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as one of the more eligible men in the group: handsome, charming, well spoken, even eloquent, well dressed, well coiffed — all good prospects for *parnassa*. To my disappointment, however, these guys seemed to really mean it. The married guys were essentially there to salvage what sounded (from their dismal descriptions) like desperate, miserable, conflicted marriages which hung on the edge of various precipices, not least their own tortured sexual identities. The rest were merely tormented. I was intrigued to see how much acting out there was even in this discussion group. Subtle sexual signals flowed between us, it seemed: half-hidden staring, verbal teasing, the ebb and flow of acknowledgement and identification with each anecdote, each word sometimes. All performed in this dreary fishbowl.

Cellphones frequently interrupted — the worst offender of all being that of the leader, Yonatan, whose own life, it turned out, was in worse shape than perhaps anyone else's in the group. Calls regarding his never ending issues with his children, with caretakers, etc., were always taken, even in the middle of a conversation.

Afterwards, those interested, usually two thirds of the group, would head off to a small food court in a mall next to the Central Bus Station for a meal and gossip. This was my favorite part of each meeting. Here I could be freer in my stated perspectives, in my questions of dogma, in interpretations of what people said and did.

By the fourth or fifth meeting, I had finally been given the task of making next weeks report on the just ended session. I wrote my report, including in brackets things I noted to myself but was unsure I wanted to share with the group. You might imagine the scene. Read on....

The bare bulb shines more piercingly than before, its naked filament a small, angry, endless glare, blinding as much as revealing.

I arrive at 8:20, afraid I might, as usual, be late. But as I enter the almost-empty room, I remember that the group is both Jewish and gay. We were on SSA time. There are only two people in the room. Someone's phone beeps.

The report by Mordechai, or as I have dubbed him to myself, *The Queen of England*, seems, as typical, laced with his frustrated, ever-purple desires, and is marked by a somewhat effeminate self-presentation, around which dances some kind of never-consummated, neurotic ballet of denial. I have difficulty remembering Mordechai's name, in favor of my shorthand for him, and worry that I might call him "Your Highness" by mistake. Middle aged, appearing to be somewhere in his 40's, paunching, grey, yet with one of those classically English ever-bashful faces, ready to flush at a moment's notice. I'm fascinated that he's so open about his sexual fantasies in this group, and wonder if it might be part of the game for him, as if he can't get off by actually having sex, but can by talking about it... here, with us. His reports feel like little lust letters as well as 'dear mom's', masturbatory and exhibitionistic in their exposed titillation and



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frustration. Very autoerotic, except that they cease to be auto- when shared with the group. This week's effort is particularly interesting, as he prefaces his report with his feelings about the recent London bombings: an almost inevitable "I told you so" schadenfreude that I'd heard from a few other bitter Jerusalemites. Something like how I feel when talking about this group. Otherwise he reported on his frustration with a change at his job, and on his success at surviving his insecurities about having to change a flat tire in front of his family.

Mordechai ends his report with a conversation-provoking comment about how he always introduces his reports with an apology. Discussion on apologetics ensues, with focus on what an immasculine and emasculating behavior it is. We consider how much more powerful and empowering it is to simply say what you think and mean, and deal with the consequences. More often than not, we conclude, people will accept you, particularly when you're confident in your self presentation. I think: why not simply present yourself as happy, confident, and self-accepting of your homosexuality? Except for in Jerusalem, it's been a winning tactic most of *my* life. On the other hand, in this town you can be an obvious queen and confidently present yourself as straight, and no one will say a thing to the contrary.

More phone rings and conversation essentially stops.

Next we talk about "clearing," an interpersonal communication and issue-airing technique encountered by Yonatan at a "Journey into Manhood" retreat. In "Clearing," people sit in a circle and address one another directly about "issues" they have with a particular person, who then responds. It helped Yonatan, he says, to get over some bad feelings and misunderstandings with another man in the group, and they became friends afterwards. (I think: Journey into Manhood?! *Girlfriend*, let's get real! Journey into Repression. Journey into the Closet.)

Shlomo goes next, and he clears out some significant items. He had previously claimed to be fully satisfied with his wife, but this time, finally, after a bit of prodding (ok, make that months of curious questioning and tacit disbelief from the group which finally burst like a ripe pimple), he does finally, almost explicitly admit that ok, maybe, sort of, sometimes, while he's struggling with his, or maybe someone else's, yetzer hara, he does sort of slip, you know, *bli eyin hara, has v'shalom, oy vey*, maybe it was actually someone else having that thought, but he might actually occasionally have a vision or imagining regarding other, well, you know, he didn't intend it, it was almost like someone else's brain or imagination imposing itself on him, that slip that moment that thing about..... men. It is astounding seeing him finally get there, after all the denial and circumlocution and trying to squirm away like a wriggling tadpole or a caged squirrel, until, under direct, repeated inquisition from virtually everyone in the room, he was rhetorically cornered and did actually, finally, more or less clearly admit it. More or less. He tries to take it back a little bit. But we wouldn't let him.



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Still more phone interruptions offer brief respite — or distraction. Of course things were just heating up under that merciless bulb, that piercing electric eye in the sky.

Amitai goes next, and wonders about which Jerusalem neighborhoods to live in, and whether to tell his Rosh Yeshiva, whom he's coming to know and respect, about his... special SSA situation. A conversation about overcoming fear of sex ensues, with a focus on "do you tell your dates or potential fiancée up front about your SSA issues." Some suggest that maybe it would be better to experiment first with sex with women — after all, maybe they'll like it, and then they won't have to say anything. While various persons point out that halachically this is a big no-no, Yonatan informs us of an SSA acquaintance's happy and "successful" experiences with a prostitute. Amitai explores his performance anxieties with the group, and ends up considering that his bashert might prefer that he keep himself pure and honest with her, rather than sleep with a prostitute.

Amitai seems the best adjusted of any of us, in a perverse sort of way. He knows he has desires for other men. He's explored them. He's enjoyed them at times and enjoyed sex. But it hasn't fit comfortably with his religious and family aspirations, so he's made what appears, on the surface, to be a fairly practical decision: to return to Israel and see if he can marry a nice Israeli girl who has been raised in a religious culture where she'll be demure, supportive, submissive, and where the eligible female to male ratio makes women so desperate they'll get married by any means necessary. Of course this is "practical" only insofar as a marriage of deceit and semi-fulfillment is "practical" — but, Baruch HaShem, out of such nightmares dreams are possible, or so the rabbis teach. He, admits that at a minimum he needs to consummate the marriage (i.e., get it up for her at least enough to sire children), and that what he is contemplating might be a minimally happy marriage, upon which could be stapled a happy public face. Baruch HaShem.

Yossele has his laptop splayed inexplicably on his lap throughout the meeting. I feel uneasy. Why is the computer here? I thought these meetings are supposed to be private (these notes notwithstanding), and am annoyed that the ground rules for privacy of these meetings seemed forgotten, unclear, and certainly in breach. I can't wait to read all about this group on Yossele's blog! What fun! Will everyone else?

The computer bleeps, and so do phones. I wonder why people don't even set them to silent vibration, or turn them off.

The biggest hit of the evening is Yossele's "messed up broken youth self-destructive sexaholic fag" show. This is the best "scared straight" show I've seen in some time. After luridly describing his lover's naked BLANKs slapping against his vulnerable BLANK while they were BLANKing like bunnies (diseased, doomed, animalistic little rodents, unkosher bunnies, or perhaps lemmings), whereby the chronic disease was probably transmitted in a tainted splatter, Yossele paints a detailed picture of his now wart-pocked, bleeding, diseased and infected



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BLANK. And then: the various doctors and other aiders and abettors both failing to diagnose the disease and not bothering to teach anything about safer sex to poor Yossele, who was forced to go on his own journey of self education.

At this point, everyone is horrified, embarrassed, enthralled and titillated — and not sure they should hear more, although wondering how and whether to ask. Yonatan carefully directs us from these dangerous thoughts back to the task at hand: appropriate hate of the sin, not the sinner; fear and loathing of the disease, not the diseased, for whom we should have pity and compassion. “Amen” the group dutifully intones, safe to be back at a predictable port amidst a perfect storm of conflicting emotions and desires.

This group is WAY better than the movies. Speaking of movies, it wasn't until after the meeting — when we went straight for the hot *fleish* at the mall — that we got to see what was on Yossele's laptop. But... after-schmoozes have not been agreed to be included within these reports, so I've censored that part.

After Yossele, it's my turn.

My report, unlike the others, is a withering critique of the group itself, a broadside which reveals my own emotions, and bracingly distinct perspectives, and challenges the reigning *hashkafa* of repression and regret. There is a surreal and awkward silence in the room as I give my report. It's as if the group is experiencing a revelation, or at least a cold wet slap in the face, like someone telling the unwanted, unvarnished and unexpected truth at a cocktail party. They all sit shell shocked, looks ranging from astonishment, disbelief, barely suppressed manic glee, to the steely game face under marginal control.

The rest of the session is focused on issues raised in my report, and a very wide ranging, heated and fertile discussion it is. The report, the group said, had been inspiringly detailed and articulate, although it also brought in a whole host of new, problematic ideas and perspectives. Clearly I was somewhere quite different from the rest of the group in my sexual identity and willingness to embrace it, rather than circumcise it. And I had a mouth. A big and dangerous one. And, while the verbal sprezzatura, observations, psychological insights and techniques I brought to the group were clearly useful, and certainly enlivened the group, *how* I used them seemed to present a challenge.

In fact, that was my last SSA meeting. I realized that I didn't want to play these games anymore. It was also, I found out later, Yossele's last session, and he was the only thing I was finding particularly interesting and inspiring in the group. I'd gotten the big picture: being gay in the haredi world sucks. Unless you're one of the rare few who manages to construct a Rube Goldberg-esque happiness out of a heterosexual marriage — either by totally repressing and sublimating the gay side of your sexuality, or acting it out secretly in internet trysts or mikva-



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made sex shidduchin — you're bound for a life of misery and struggle. And, there were no eligible guys here!

Clearly the orthodox yeshivish world was neither going to accept me and my sexuality, and continuing my life of impoverished yeshiva-bucherhood, of tantalizing closeness to all my beloved bucher neshamas and their beautiful physical presences, was going to lead to further frustration. In the weeks after my last meeting, service interruptions in the gas, phone, and internet service due to late payment served as a convenient *siman* that HaShem, in the local parlance, wanted me to focus more on my parnassa — that is, on actually paying the rent. And lo and behold: simply focusing on work and cutting off the big chassidishe beard, and some serious job opportunities in Tel Aviv appeared. Baruch hashem!

And so... the next phase of my Yiddish adventure beckons, a trip among the population of Israelis outside the haredi ghetto's walls, from the National Religious crowd to all those progressive, reconstructionist, New Agey Jews — even to the secular Sodom! Perhaps there will I find my bashert.

“Phil S. Stein” is a pseudonym for the writer, who lives in Jerusalem.

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