

My Perfect Family: Two Moms

By Daniel Belasco



Sandy, my mother's companion of 14 years, says she knew I understood her relationship with Mom when I was 10. Mom, Sandy, my sister Judith and I were in the car and a radio DJ announced that the grand prize for the station's contest was a romantic getaway to Hawaii. From the back seat, I asked if that meant that if Mom won, then she would take Sandy and have to buy tickets for Judith and me.

Because Sandy is a rabbi, I've met enough other lesbian Jewish clerics to give me an unusual sensibility. For years when I was a child, I thought that all women rabbis and cantors were lesbians. Mom and Sandy (or Rebbe, as I call her) exposed me to so many other Jewish gays and lesbians who seemed comfortable with their lives that it was easy for me to consider being gay or lesbian as a stable and legitimate identity. Their casualness belied all the traumatic coming-out stories that typify the mainstream media's representation of queer identity, though I only later understood that they shielded Judith and me from their conflicts to help make our lives seem as normal as possible.

Until I was about 20, my acceptance and understanding of Mom's sexuality was as passive and unconscious as my consideration of my own Jewish and straight identities. Over the years, my friends have asked me questions about my mother, and they were surprised that I was often unable to answer them. I've never discussed the intimate details of Mom's and Rebbe's lives. In fact, up until the time I wrote this essay, I never asked Mom when she knew that she was a lesbian, and she never told me. This crucial experience was not a part of our family's narrative: We were too busy celebrating the present to consider the past. At the time, I liked to joke that we were the lesbian Waltons. My reticence obscured the complexity of my family so that only when issues of continuity and sexuality intersected in my own life did I begin to actively consider how much work had gone into supporting what appeared as such a casual identity. And only when Mom and Sandy challenged me to live up to their conception of a Jewish life was I forced to consider what living a Jewish life really means.

My first family fissioned into two when my parents divorced and my mother came out. I was eight and Judith five. Struggling to keep our lives at an equilibrium, my parents decided to live near one another and to

maintain joint custody. Within a few years, my father remarried and my mother began her relationship with Sandy. Jude and I schlepped back and forth between our lesbian family and our straight family, spending Monday to Thursday with Mom and Friday to Sunday with Dad. My time with Mom

and Rebbe was only one half of my bipartite life and I could forget about my lesbian family from when Dad fetched us Thursday nights until Mom retrieved us from school Monday afternoons.

Mom, Rebbe, Jude and I were secure in the validity of our family, but we rarely spoke about the difficulties of two lesbians trying to have a normal life in the suburbs. Mom told us about the times she was excluded from the community almost as if they happened to someone else. Some friends distanced themselves from her, she was never invited to PTA activities, and every year had to call the school to put her name back on

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the regular mailing list, but these were her problems, not ours. Any difficulty that I had with my family—say, my early misplaced discomfort with being seen in public with two grown women—was overshadowed by the fact that Judith and I remained the central focus and were never expected to concern ourselves with our parents' happiness.

The summer before I entered the sixth grade, my mother and Sandy bought a house together in White Plains, four miles from Edgemont, the tiny, affluent town where Judith and I went to school and where our father lived. I'm glad Rebbe moved into a new house with us because it was a fresh start for creating a new family together. Before long, we became Sandy's congregation. After a few stints in synagogues in New Jersey and Brooklyn, she gave up formal institutional work, preferring the nine-to-five routine at nursing homes over the proprietary rights that congregants would exert over her time. Sandy introduced a new level of religious observance to my mother, and her two extra sets of dishes made it easier to start keeping a kosher house. We ate together nearly every night that Judith and I were there, our complicated lives always made to intersect at the dinner table. Mom playfully dubbed us the family Fresser, the Yiddish word for hearty eater, an obvious solution to the fact that we all have different surnames.

An old cozy colonial, that house still radiates warmth. The dining room is decorated with Judaica while the living room displays family photos and quaint tchotchkes: a ceramic

Scrabble set we designed with words like family, love and ethics permanently displayed on the board sits on the coffee table, along with a pottery bowl Jude crafted and a painted wood figure of Patrick Ewing, the stoic big man on our beloved Knicks. Mom made sure that family was always a major part of our lives, so our house has always served as the family gathering place. Though Grandma Lou is still feisty and Tante Karen is three years older, my mother is the family ringmaster, bringing us all together for seders, birthdays and Thanksgiving feasts.

Despite our vibrant private life, when I was in high school my life at Mom's always felt removed from my social life in Edgemont. I rarely brought friends home. In a sea of seemingly buoyant nuclear families, I was the one trying to float on two rafts. None of my friends had divorced parents, let alone a lesbian mom. To retain a cohesive sense of self while moving between my two worlds, I chose to keep them separate. Although I brought Sandy to the school for parents night, I didn't sufficiently narrate the story that everyone could see. My teacher from high school told me recently that she thought that I was "really cool" when I introduced Sandy as Mom's companion to all the other moms and dads, but Mom remembers that I called Sandy her "friend" and Sandy recalls that I simply presented her as "Sandy," never giving her the same title of "stepmother" that I had so easily applied to my father's wife.

When I was a high school senior I finally decided that I had to publicly say the words "my mom is a lesbian." Before the weekly school discussion group I attended, I excitedly told everyone that I had an announcement to make. When it became my turn to speak, my schoolmates anxiously turned toward me to hear my great revelation. My admission of the obvious evoked support, although I sensed some disinterest. People politely asked me a few questions, which I answered, and the discussion quickly turned to other things. I felt pathetically relieved, and promised myself that when I got to college, I would tell people who my mother is, which I did.

A Jewish lesbian couple recently made an autobiographical film and titled it "*Treyf*," indicating their distance from the traditional strains of Judaism that lump the laws of *kashrut* together with heterosexuality and morality. *Treyf* is a Jewish version of queer, a way for lesbians and gays to create identity by embracing and celebrating their marginal or outlaw status. My lesbian mothers are literally kosher but metaphorically *treyf*, a complicated, challenging ethic that I wrestled with. Besides, I ate bacon cheeseburgers outside their home, so I too was kosher and *treyf*, but not in the same way they were.

Although I became engaged with intellectual issues of identity, sexuality and gender, for many years I never considered applying these new analytical tools to better understand what being Jewish meant to me. I received a perfunctory thrice-weekly Jewish education that was hardly inspiring. Mirthlessly attending until I was 17, I memorized prayers

that I did not understand and learned never to give back a scrap of land to the Arabs, that Nazis played catch with Jewish babies on bayonets, and never ever to marry out of the faith. We never discussed Judaism and homosexuality. My family and my education grounded me in Judaism, but I never took my identity seriously until Mom and Rebbe raised my consciousness by labeling me a Jew and challenging me to be a Jew as they were Jews.

From my senior year in high school to my sophomore year in college, I was in love with a woman who was not Jewish. After we had been dating for about a year, Mom sternly addressed me: I did not raise you to marry someone who isn't Jewish. Another time she voiced her disapproval by informing me as I was foraging in the kitchen that Sandy does not perform intermarriages. Rebbe would happily marry two men or women, as long as they were both Jewish, Mom reminded me, but she would never officiate at the union of Jew and Gentile. I said something like, yeah, whatever, and left the room. At 18, I wasn't in the mood to consider how the fate of the Jewish people hung on who I dated.

As a part-time family member, I thought that I could be outside its jurisdiction. But at the same time, Mom's dissenting opinion resonated with me. She planted a seed of doubt that was nurtured by my own positive associations with our family.

My girlfriend was baffled by how my mother, who struggled for the freedom to love women, could then disapprove of another form of love. I tried to explain it to her, but at the time I had difficulty understanding this apparent paradox myself. It wasn't until months later, one Rosh Hashanah, that I appreciated that Jewish values could only be transmitted by people who valued being Jewish. Between dinner and dessert, my Grandpa Ben quietly said that he had something to tell me. I walked with him to the living room, away from the usual din of Mom and her sister's cackling laughter, and he firmly whispered to me, Daniel, you're expected to marry a Jewish girl. These words from a man who as a boy had fled the Cossacks across Siberia with his mother were sobering. Grandpa echoed Mom: I was the one who threatened Jewish continuity, not my lesbian mothers, who were an ironclad chain that linked me to our religion and culture.

Now, a kiddush cup and a set of Shabbat candlesticks sit on my radiator, unused housewarming presents that Mom and Rebbe gave me a year and a half ago for my first post-college apartment. The awakening I've had to my Jewish identity has, as yet, no denouement. I am 24, and most of my questions about my Jewish identity remain tantalizingly unresolved, encouraging me to move through Jewish culture with antennae poised to receive those transmissions that resonate for me. My mothers' commitment to their own Jewish life is a message that got through. Their commitment to my Jewish life is still being received with static. ■

Daniel Belasco, who lives in Brooklyn, works for the National Foundation for Jewish Culture.

**To my Grandpa,
I — by dating a
non-Jew — was
the one who
threatened Jewish
continuity, not my
lesbian mother.**