



THE REHEARSAL MAN

Or: How to Turn Your Lesbian Daughter Straight

by Jill Dearman

You love your daughter; you've always done right by her. She mismanaged her money and you called a stern financial advisor who dug her out of debt. When she had her eating disorder, you hired a hip, alternative nutritionist and your girl was healed. But now there's a problem that has you stumped. She's gay.

Allow me to introduce myself: Jill Dearman, Rehearsal Man.

That's right. Give me a lesbian, any lesbian from fashionista to feminist, and I'll turn her straight. My methods are based on the same tried and true principles that make vaccinations effective: Give the patient a bit of the poison and her body will resist future assaults. A romance with me will prep your daughter for the relationship she's meant to have... with your future son-in-law.

Of course you'll want to see my resumé.

Christie
1986 -1990

At 17, I left conservative Queens for a swinging upstate arts college and discovered the love that dared to chirp its name, "Christie." She was a music major, a flutist, and every man, woman and illegal ferret on campus followed her around as if she were the Pied Piper. In our Dramatic Structure class alone, Kimberly, Darcy and some gender-bending Boy George type in the back row were all smitten, but I knew I could woo her and win her.

One day I sat on the plaza in the center of campus listening to The Violent Femmes on my walkman, while several yards away, Christie sat on a brick wall holding a yellow balloon from a blood donor drive. Kimberly lay on one side of her weaving a friendship bracelet, while Darcy played Hackysack in front of her. I waved Christie over. She let the balloon go, left them behind and walked towards me. I could see how fickle she was, but then she smiled mischievously and handed me a Jethro Tull mix.

"Thanks," I gushed. 'Aqualung' is one of my favorite songs." (A total lie.)

We fell passionately in love.

Yet late at night as I held her, I worried: What would my ultra-conventional mother think? She'd had me late in life, yet even with our generation gap, we were intensely close. And when my father died, during high school, I became my mother's constant companion. We went to movies and the theater together; sometimes we just sat quietly in the living room watching "women's pictures" like "Imitation of Life" and "Stella Dallas" on *The Late, Late Show*.

Would my mother somehow blame herself for my queerness? What about Christie? I imagined I could bring her to family dinners as my "friend." It just might work. After all, Christie — a dead ringer for Andie MacDowell — could pass. But by semester's end, before I had a chance to bring her home, Christie dumped me... for the Boy George look-alike, who yes, was most definitely a boy.

I was devastated. Almost as devastated as when I came home one weekend to do my laundry and found my mother in my old room, holding a letter I'd written to Christie.

"This is the worst possible thing you could have done to me," she said.

Mom sent me into therapy. And back into the closet. I dated girls at school, but brought boys home to Queens.

As the youngest child it had been my Passover duty to ask: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" But finally, one post-graduation Passover, I stuck around until the rest of the family had gone, and answered that eternal question like this: "Because I'm officially coming out to Mom!"

Over the next few weeks she slid into a severe depression over my "lifestyle." She retired to Florida; I feared that her grief would cause her to die suddenly, like my father, so I stopped talking about my love life. I'd come out, but nothing had changed.

Luisa
1991-1994

"Lesbian Chic" was a heartbeat away and I was ready for my photo op. But first – since we gay gals always travel in pairs – I'd need the right chick by my side.

I met Luisa at work, at an AIDS organization, shortly after she'd made a stir by getting a Letter to the Editor published in the pioneering gay magazine *Outweek*. The point of Luisa's missive was that femme dykes like her were just as gay as butch dykes. I wasn't into labels but Luisa sure was. I sensed she just might be erratic enough to make me ecstatic for a weekend and miserable for a lifetime.

I had to have her.

And for a few mutually contemptuous years I did, during which time we avoided our families who were less than thrilled about our union. I knew Luisa had been raised as a Navy Brat and had also noted that she tended to adapt her personality to whomever she was with. Yet I was still shocked when my two-year anniversary card from her featured a mannish spinster on the cover and several smudged lines in girlish handwriting about "not being able to imagine two women growing old together."

She moved out and, mercifully, a male friend who was also going through a break-up with his girlfriend needed a place to live. We converted the office into a second bedroom and spent several weeks partying and crying in our beer over the exes who had done us wrong.

When the tears dried and we'd filled about five recycling bags with Brooklyn Lager bottles, Mr. Roommate told me that he'd found his own place and had to move, immediately. A week later a friend informed me that she'd spotted him at a Dave Matthews concert, sitting cozy with... Luisa!

I couldn't believe this was happening again, but I blamed Luisa for being a coward. When her vacation to the exotic Isle of Lesbos was over, she sailed back to the safe Straits of Hetero, and I, feeling duped, considered writing my own self-righteous letter to *Outweek*, but it was too late, the magazine had folded.

Sam
1995-2005

Her name was androgynous and so was her look. Her hair, buzzed, her body, toned, and her heart, pure. Sam was a dancer. I'd gotten used to doing the chasing and so when she came after me I couldn't believe it. Was she really being so nice just because she truly liked me? Surely this was a sign that she was crazy, unstable.

Naturally we started going steady.

And we built a beautiful life together.

Sam was a wild performer onstage and an introvert offstage; I spent my days holed up writing, but outside was an extrovert, a raconteur. We balanced each other out, and were utterly devoted to each other. As couples (gay and straight) broke up when times got tough, we stuck together, and grew even more committed.

Our decline began many years into our relationship, when I expressed a desire for marriage, kids, a country house. Sam waffled; and in truth, I was just as ambivalent. Sure, when my mother occasionally flew in to New York we all had dinner, but I never felt comfortable bringing my lover to Florida for a visit. So how could we plan a wedding?



Judith Hausman

Then Sam abruptly quit dancing to write, and with her career transformation came an unnerving change in appearance. She grew her hair long and started shopping at Anthropologie. I sensed she was becoming attracted to men, and I subtly withdrew from her.

She came home in February 2005, after a month-long stay at a writers colony, and announced she wanted to move out. I instantly knew. I refused to believe this was happening to me again. In our decade together, I'd been no angel, but I did not want us to throw our loving relationship away over what I wanted to believe was a fling.

Then my friend Donna sat me down and said:

"Jilly, you have to decide whether this is an Anne Heche situation or not."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if she's now *into* men there's nothing you can do about it."

And, like those fleeting "it girls," we broke up quickly. Unlike them, we stayed friends. And when our friends asked what went wrong I babbled: "Yadda, yadda... amicable... yadda, yadda... grew apart..." I should've just said "Yadda, yadda, Yaddo" because it was at the famed arts colony that she met the man she is now with.

In fact, Sam just moved in with Yaddo-Man.

She's the third of three lovers who I have set on the heterosexual marriage track. Luisa married Mr. Roommate; Christie recently bought a house with her current boyfriend — in fact, *his* 'gay' sister just announced she is pregnant and marrying the father. That's how strong my mojo is; I don't even have to sleep with a lesbian to turn her straight!

I told you I was good.

But I've grown weary of my work. I'd love to retire at the top of my game and finally fulfill my adolescent dream: to bring the right girl home to Mom, not as my friend, but as my lover, my mate. Instead of retiring, I suspect I need to do just the opposite: go back to school and truly learn how to integrate all the parts of my life. And this time I will pay attention, instead of sleeping through class.

N.B.

In truth, I have fudged a bit on my resume. I never really had the power to turn gay girls straight. I did have the uncanny—or should I say canny—ability to choose girls who were bisexual or straight all along, girls who'd eventually leave me and save me from having to truly confront my mother.

In typical lesbian fashion I already have a new girlfriend, and already it's a lovefest. Don't panic. I am finally awake and see how complicit I was in creating the pattern of my past. So maybe now I can break the cycle. My new lover wants kids, and, get this, she wants to have them with another woman... because she is actually gay!

She's also half-black/half-Sicilian and all-Catholic, but at this point, being in a mixed relationship is the easy part. Besides, to Jews, she looks Jewish. It's the *mazal* of being born

partnership I know my mother truly wants for me, the kind that I am sure I will someday want for my child. And I've come to see that every family has its own version of a mixed-up heritage. None of us get off clean.

And as for me personally, I see now that only by leaving the probably Jewish, intensely merged union I shared with Mom as a child can I at last return home as an adult, the Prodigal Daughter, with a partner of my own, ready to have children of my own, and ready to bring all my loved ones together.

I want to stop rehearsing for my life, and start living it.

As an offering of (I believe) acceptance and even encouragement, Mom keeps telling me stories about people who were involved in nine- or 10-year relationships that stalled and then ended, where both partners went on to find their spouses



"Couple" by Lea Majaro-Mintz

I always chose girls who would eventually leave me, saving me from having to confront my mother.

with beautiful, naturally curly hair. She's excited to meet my mother and I've told Mom all about her. Well, maybe not all. You see, both her parents are gay—which for my money is a blessing—more of a chance she truly possesses the “gay gene.” Maybe that will balance out some of the homophobic genes that have coursed through my own blood, and the blood of those who have come before me, including my father, who was hospitalized all those years ago for reasons that I have come to suspect had a lot to do with his sexuality. But all of that is in the past. I'm ready to create the kind of successful

in the very next relationship. Maybe that will be the case for me. I imagine that the day I bring my girlfriend home will be beautiful, awkward, funny...just like real life.

Jill Dearman, winner of the 2006 First Place Prize for Fiction from the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, has appeared in New York Stories, North Atlantic Review, and other publications. As a journalist, she has been published in the New York Daily News, Time Out New York, and Publishers Weekly. She teaches journalism at New York University.



WHAT'S NEXT, AFTER GAY RABBIS?

by Melanie Weiss with Rabbi Susan Schnur

When the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Laws and Standards [CJLS] passed their multiple *tshuvot* [rulings] this past December about whether gays and lesbians can be ordained as rabbis, the press reported it—with white-bread oversimplification—as a victory for gay ordination. The facts are far more complicated, and far more, well, *Jewish*. The rulings offer complex opinions—mutually irreconcilable ones (two of them argue against the ordination of homosexuals). What they *don't* offer is a single, simple bottom line.

Jewish institutions—largely congregations and schools—are expected to consider the influential committee's *tshuvot* and make decisions for themselves. That is, the CJLS rabbis who pored over texts and wrestled with how to interpret *halakhah*, Jewish law, were somewhat thrillingly showing-and-telling us that at the heart of Judaism is *conversation*—a conversation that has stretched over 3,000 years. Torah *lishmah*—studying, thinking, enjoying intellectual and moral complexity for its own sake—is at the core of Jewish identity. We Jews famously answer a question with a question, and study religious texts with the understanding that *all* ideas must be fathomed, regardless of what rabbis ultimately decide is “right.” Appreciating Jewish thought means valuing the untidy, respecting

the process of argument, and living honestly with life's ambiguities, tensions and plasticity.

Feminism, from its inception, has been a movement disproportionately stuffed with Jews, and our ability to think outside various boxes doubtless has its roots in Torah *lishmah*—the Jewish preoccupation with studying, pushing, naming, thinking, re-thinking, arguing, agitating. The Conservative movement has opened the door to gays and lesbians, but here's what's coming down the pike: not just lesbians or gays applying for admission to the Jewish Theological Seminary, but those on the next ramparts: young Jews who reject “binary sexuality” altogether—who don't identify as gay or straight—who, with sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, acknowledge both hetero- and homo-sexual desires;

fest or a latent fashion, over objects of both sexes.” What about the “straight” rabbinical student who becomes “gay,” the “gay” student who becomes “queer,” and the male, or female, student who becomes... something else. *What's a seminary to do?*

The reclamation of the word “queer” was intended to loosen up binary sexual thinking in a society that offers us only Either/Or. What's more, Jewish texts, and their interpretation, provide us with support. The oft-quoted Leviticus verse (18:22) enjoining men not to “lie with a male as one lies with a woman” is generally taken as a commandment against homosexuality, but even the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards has significantly interrogated this. The prohibition is literal, one of their *tshuvot* argues—it is a prohibition against the most techni-

What happens when the “straight” rabbinical student becomes “gay,” the “gay” student becomes “queer,” and the male, or female, student becomes... something else?

Jews who are transgender; Jews who don't want their orientation or gender dictated by other than themselves. Even Freud acknowledged “continuum sexuality.” “Every human being's libido,” he wrote, “is distributed, either in a mani-

cal definition of gay male intercourse. It is not against homosexuality. The Bible legislates behaviors, but it doesn't speak the language of “fixed” sexual identities or orientations. It has no concept of a person whose *identity* is “homosexual.”

FORBIDDEN AND PERMITTED RELATIONS

by Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon

Among myriad injunctions as to how Jewish *females* should behave is a line from the *Shulhan Arukh*, the 16th-century Code of Jewish Law, prohibiting women from “committing lewdness” with one another—with the simultaneous instruction for men to keep such women away from their wives, suggesting that such behaviors can “spread” even to those in the married set. This rule strongly hints that the rabbis understood sexual desire to be a many-layered phenomenon. Look at King David; the Bible seems comfortable allowing him to traverse back and forth from “gay” to “straight,” making him, in fact, a transgressive character. In eulogizing his fallen cherished Jonathan, he laments, “Your love was more precious to me than the love of a woman.” Rabbinic sages, indeed, seem to tacitly acknowledge multilateral desire, to entertain this possibility of two-things-at-once.

Dimorphic sexuality—being either “gay” or “straight”—negates the experience of many of us; falsifies what we feel and what we do, and we know that Jewish institutions will soon be confronted with questions that go beyond accepting lesbians and gays into pulpit life. Jewish feminism has taught us to value pluralism, to “own” our identities—and to change systems from the inside, rather than leaving them. The “conversation” part—the Torah *lishmah*—comes from Judaism. The bravery part—turning “conversation” into action—comes from feminism.

When I first heard the news that the lawmaking body of the Conservative movement rejected two proposals for full acceptance of gay and lesbian Jews and accepted the responsum, or *teshuvah*, of Rabbis Dorff, Nevins and Reisner, advocating partial acceptance, I almost cried with frustration. I am a newcomer to the Conservative movement, having identified as Orthodox for most of my life. I am devoted to *halakhab*, Jewish law, but no abstract principle is more important than real human beings. Rejection of the two most liberal *teshuvot* seemed an inversion of these priorities.

Then I read the Dorff/Nevins/Reisner *teshuvah*. To my surprise, it made me proud to be a Conservative Jew. I loved this *teshuvah*, because I **love** *halakhab*. Professionally, I am a scientist. I relish categorization and logical deduction, and the essence of *halakhic* reasoning is categorization: the 39 categories of forbidden work on Shabbat, different types and levels of nonkosher food, etc.

Of course, it’s not just the categories that I love. A scientist, if she is spiritually-minded, may find in this world hints of God through science. But the *halakhicist* uses *halakhab* to direct her actions, bringing God into this world. To quote Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik in his book “*Isb HaHalakhab*” (Halakhic Man): “Holiness represents an ordered life, established by *halakhab*, and finds

its fulfillment through the sexual prohibitions, forbidden foods, and so forth.” (My translation.)

A scientist makes her best attempts at describing reality, hoping to improve upon the understanding of her predecessors. The *halakhicist* hopes to make reality conform to the wisdom of her predecessors, because our predecessors connect us, in an unbroken chain, back to Sinai.

The Dorff, Nevins and Reisner *teshuvah* is an exquisite *halakhic* piece. It is filled with subtle but accurate categorizations. The bible forbids a man to “lie with a male as one lies with a woman” (Leviticus 18:22). The rabbis of old read in these verses a prohibition against anal intercourse between two men, and to be true to their scholarship Rabbi Dorff and colleagues upheld this prohibition. But they distinguish it from ancillary ones: homosexual touching, kissing, even oral sex. These they permit, masterfully grading prohibitions in order to reverse all but the weightiest.

To justify their permissions, Rabbi Dorff and colleagues invoke *kvod habriot*—human dignity. *Kvod habriot* is one of the most beautiful of Jewish teachings. Because God created humanity in His own image, human dignity is precious. Rabbi’s Dorff, Nevins and Reisner write:

“It is difficult to imagine a group of Jews whose dignity is more undermined than that of homosexuals... They have, in effect, been told to walk alone, while the great majority of Jews are expected to walk in pairs and as families. In such a context, where is the dignity of homo-

sexual Jews? How can we hide from their humiliation?”

Kvod Habriot is a profound moral teaching, but it is also a *halakhhic* principle. The *teshuvah* reviews the sources extensively, from the Talmud to modern times, citing cases where the rabbis used *kvod habriot* to suspend a rabbinic prohibition. They also carefully construct a case that non-anal gay intimacy, and all forms of lesbian intimacy, are prohibited rabbinically, not biblically.

This *teshuvah* is quintessentially Conservative. An Orthodox scholar might argue: our predecessors did not see fit to apply *kvod habriot* to homo-

sexuality, so neither may we. Rabbis Dorff, Nevins and Reisner reply that our predecessors were not aware of the findings of modern psychology. Notice: Conservative Judaism allows outside sources into the *halakhhic* arena, even as a direct challenge to traditional wisdom

In discussions of Judaism and homosexuality, many claim to be compassionate but in fact are patronizing. The Dorff/Nevins/Reisner *teshuvah* is different. It announces:

“Our core conviction is that dignity for gay and lesbian Jews—as for heterosexual Jews—results neither from blanket permission nor from blanket prohi-

bition of all sexual activity, but rather from situating it within the matrix of *isur v’heter*, permission and prohibition, that permeates all of Jewish life.”

The prohibition maintained by the *teshuvah* may be unrealistic for most gay men, but most Conservative individuals make their own decisions on personal issues. As Orthodox newlyweds, my husband and I felt obligated to ask a rabbi whether we might use contraception, and if so which form. In our Conservative community, most couples do not observe *hilkhot nidah*, the laws of menstrual purity, though the *nidah* laws are as important *halakhhically* as any law pertaining to



navigating
SEXUALITY
today

BLESSINGS FOR GENDER

by Rabbi Elliot Kukla

Jewish tradition teaches that we should be saying 100 blessings a day to mark all the moments of holiness that infuse our lives. There are blessings to recite before eating and drinking, witnessing rainbows, seeing old friends and arriving at new seasons. Many of the most important moments in the lives of transgender, intersex and gender nonconforming Jews, however, are not honored within our tradition.

This invisibility is connected to the prevalent belief that there are only two ways of being human. From before we are born people ask, “Is it a boy or a girl?” From the moment of birth onward most facets of our life—the clothes we are told to wear, the activities it is anticipated we will like, the careers and hobbies we are encouraged to pursue, the loving relationships we are expected to have—are guided by the answer to this crucial question. The past few decades of feminist organizing have deeply questioned whether we can (or should) see gender as an essential way to divide up humanity. And yet most of us 21st-century people were still raised to believe that whether we are “girl” or “boy” is a simple, and unchangeable, fact.

In the spring of 2006 I came out as transgender and was ordained as a rabbi by Hebrew Union College. As a new rabbi I have had the privilege of talking to people who (in one way or another) can’t or won’t fit within the confines of modern binary gender. Each of these individuals has confirmed that gender-variant lives do exist both in Jewish sacred tradition and in contemporary communities. (For example, two intersex figures—the “*tumtum*,” and the “*androgynos*”—are mentioned more than 200 times in the Babylonian Talmud.) Jewish sacred texts acknowledge and celebrate a spectrum of gender

identities. Applying Jewish textual and ritual resources to contemporary lives names the holiness that is present in moments of personal and social transition.

I composed the set of blessings, below, for a friend who wanted to mark each time that he took testosterone. The blessings can be used for name or pronoun changes, coming out to loved ones, or moments of physical transition. The first blessing refers to God as the “Transforming One”—

GLOSSARY

- **Transgender:** Is an umbrella term that can encompass anyone who doesn’t identify with the gender assigned at birth. This includes people who take medical steps to modify their appearance and those who do not. Some transmen and transwomen identify completely with their preferred gender, while other transpeople identify with an alternate non-binary gender identity.
- **Intersex:** Refers to the approximately 1 in 2,000 people who are born with a combination of “male” and “female” physical traits such as chromosome or genitalia.
- **Gender Nonconforming:** Includes anyone who can’t or doesn’t want to “match” the roles and behaviors of the gender they were assigned at birth. This can include sissies, tomboys, butch women, femme men and countless others.

homosexuality. Prohibitions on things done in private impact only those who choose to accept them.

The *teshuvah* recommends gay and lesbian Jews train as rabbis, cantors and educators. It also recommends celebrating homosexual unions with “blessings over wine and *shebekhiyanu*, with psalms and other readings to be developed by local authorities.” These recommendations will lead to practical changes in our institutions, ushering in an era of complete acceptance.

I remain disappointed in one aspect of the Dorff/Nevins/Reisner *teshuvah*. Though the *teshuvah* supports gay and

lesbian relationships, it relegates them to second-class status: “Heterosexual marriage between two Jews remains the halakic ideal.” As the mother of two children as yet too young to reveal their sexual identity, this statement distresses me. God provides many ways to live a meaningful life. We must stop casting gay as second-best.

The Conservative movement is *halakic* because we cherish tradition. Thank God the movement also allows change, albeit slowly. These three rabbis have provided the mechanism for changing our institutions. I hope that popular attitudes will soon follow the moral tide.

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To read Lilith's past articles on negotiating sexuality, and to talk about these issues in our online forum, please visit www.Lilith.org.

TRANSITIONS

“*Ha'Ma'avir*”—sharing the root of the word *Ivrim* (Hebrews). Jews are *Ivrim*—the “crossing over” people—because we “crossed over” the Jordan River into Canaan to escape our oppression in Egypt, and we spiritually “transformed” ourselves. (In Modern Hebrew, this verb root is used to form the word “*ma'avar*,” which means among other things to “transition genders.”)

The second blessing is adapted from liberal morning liturgy. The Midrash (classical Jewish exegesis) says that the first human being was an *androgynos*, an intersex person—implying that *all* bodies and genders are created in God's image—whether we are male, female, transgender, intersex or something else. When we take steps, physically or spiritually, to more fully manifest our gender identities, we are fulfilling the commandment “to partner with God in completing the work of creation.”

The final blessing is the traditional “*Shebekhiyanu*” prayer, recited when we experience something new or reach a milestone. Saying this prayer at moments of transition celebrates God's nurturing and sustaining presence in allowing us to reach this point of self-transformation. This blessing is in the plural (“us” instead of “me”) and it also expresses the hope that we are collectively transitioning as a people: to honor and celebrate the lives of people of *all* genders.

Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla is the rabbi of the Danforth Jewish Circle in Toronto. Elliot's writing on gender appears in Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice (Jewish Lights, 2007) and Kulanu: All of Us (Union for Reform Judaism Press, 2007).

To be recited before any moment of transition:

*Barukh Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melekh
Ha-Olam, Ha'Ma'avir L'Ovrim.
Blessed are You, Eternal One,
our God, Ruler of Time and Space,
the Transforming One to those
who transition/transform/cross over.*

To be recited afterwards:

*Barukh Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melekh
Ha-Olam Sh'asani B'tzalmo v'kirtzonah.
Blessed are You, Eternal One, our
God, Ruler of Time and Space,
Who has made me in His image and
according to Her will.*

*Barukh Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melekh
Ha-Olam Sh'hechianu,
v'kiymanu, v'higiyanu, la-zman hazeh.
Blessed are You, Eternal One, our
God, Ruler of Time and Space,
who has kept us alive and sustained us
and helped us to arrive at this moment.*