

Kol Ishah:  
The Voices of  
Women.

Brava to:

Newsday, the Long Island-based newspaper, for running a three-part series on rabbinic sexual abuse this May. The paper decided to cover the story after receiving a number of calls about rabbis—and leaders in just about every religion—in response to their coverage of the scandals involving Catholic priests. Reporter Stephanie Saul, who covered both the priest and rabbi abuse stories, said that many rabbis she spoke with, both before and after

the stories appeared, said that they were grateful for Newsday's coverage.

Saul, who is not Jewish, told LILITH: "I think the rabbis were more cooperative than the Catholic bishops."

## Out of the Closet and into the Spotlight

They were two married Jewish housewives who met at Concello Towers, a middle-income high rise co-op in Brooklyn in 1958. They babysat each other's kids (they had five between them). Every Friday night, after attending synagogue services, they sat together at the kitchen table over a bottle of wine and talked about what needed to be done in the community. They organized marches on City Hall to get a junior high school in their neighborhood, to get a traffic light on Cropsey Avenue. They were also active in ORT and American Jewish Congress.

And then, in the mid-1970s, they fell in love.

The story of Ruthie Berman and Connie Kurtz has now become a documentary, *Ruthie & Connie: Every Room in the House*, which has been making the rounds of film festivals for the last year and a half. In June 2003, the film premiered on cable television.



It's a love story, and more. The activism that first drew these two women together as friends continued to ignite them as lovers and partners. In 1988, they and two other couples sued the New York City Board of Education—Ruthie worked in the city school system for 25 years as a guidance counselor—for domestic partner benefits. During this time the

two women went public, appearing on *Geraldo* and *Donahue*. (In the film, a clip from *Donahue* has Ruthie shouting, "No, I will not shut up!") They won far more than the battle; as a result of their lawsuit, a domestic partner registry was established for all New York City employees. Today the two are still highly visible participants in the struggle for gay and other civil rights. Says Connie: "We are making demands as women, as older women, and as Jews."

But their journey has been as tough as you can imagine for, as Ruthie names them, two lesbians in cooperative housing with a predominantly Jewish population.

"For me, the most difficult thing was accepting that I was a lesbian. At that time, I thought it was a terrible thing," Ruthie says, referring to the time when she and Connie fell in love. "I had to make a decision, to leave everything and go into a whole new world. I feared rejection by my family, my colleagues, and the world."

"My happiness was a priority that I finally hooked into," Connie says. Their children were teenagers when the two became a couple. That the women had to choose between two worlds—in Connie's words, "we could not live in both"—is one of the most riveting aspects of their story. When they divorced, Ruthie and her husband worked out mutual custody of their children. Connie's husband and children went back to Israel, where the family had lived for four years. The two women took an apartment in Brooklyn near Ruthie's family, so that she would be as available as possible to them.

But it has not been easy. One of Ruthie's sons has not spoken to her for many years. In the film, Ruthie tearfully quotes him as saying that he loves her because she's his mother, but she's also a lesbian, and he doesn't like her.

But that she and Connie, Jewish mothers and grandmothers, are together, says Ruthie, was *bashert*.

— ALICE SPARBERG ALEXIOU

*Ruthie & Connie: Every Room in the House*, 2002, 60 minutes.  
For more information: [www.ruthieandconnie.com](http://www.ruthieandconnie.com).