

Oy Vey! The Rabbi is Gay! A Children's Tale for All the Conservative Synagogue Educators Who Might Need a Little Extra Help Next Week

By Rabbi Daniel Brenner

A few years ago, I was fortunate to work closely with a Conservative Rabbi, Benay Lappe, who spent her years at JTS in the closet. I learned about the enormous pain that she went through as she had to hide her identity. She chose JTS because she wanted to learn talmud, to be in an environment that cared about Jewish law, and to be part of a movement that valued tradition. I am sure that there are others like Lappe, in the Conservative movement and in Orthodoxy who are struggling to be practicing Jews and to be both psychologically honest and mentally healthy regarding their sexuality. In part, I wrote this story with them in mind. I hope that you enjoy it.

P.S. Thanks to [Jewbiquitous](#), the [Jewish Robot](#) and [BloggingBaby](#) for blogging about this piece.

OY VEY! THE RABBI IS GAY!

A story for children by Rabbi Daniel S. Brenner

Last year, on Rosh Hashannah, our synagogue got a new rabbi.

"He's better than the old rabbi," Sarah Spitzer said to Bill Steinberg, " He's got a beautiful voice and he remembers everybody's name!" Everyone was happy with the new rabbi.

Everyone except Mr. Birnbaum. Mr. Birnbaum always sat in the back row so that he could talk to his friends during services. He didn't have anyone to talk to at home. His wife had died many years ago. But when he went to synagogue, he had many friends.

"I heard that the new Rabbi is not married" Mr. Birnbaum whispered to his friends Sarah Spitzer and Bill Steinberg, "Don't you think that a rabbi needs a wife?"

"He's so handsome," Sarah whispered back, " I wonder if he's dating anyone? I should give him my niece Karen's phone number. Don't you think so, Bill? " "Oy! I think that you two should try to stay out of other people's business", Bill replied.

But Mr. Birnbaum was curious. " Is he divorced? Does he have a girlfriend?" Mr. Birnbaum was suspicious. So he came up with a plan.

That night, he called Sarah Spitzer. Together they drove to the Rabbi's new house. But they did



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not go into the driveway or ring the Rabbi's doorbell. Instead, they parked around the corner from the Rabbi's house, behind some bushes. Then Mr. Birnbaum and Sarah Spitzer crouched down low so that no one would see them.

From the car, they spied into the Rabbi's house. They did not see the Rabbi. What they saw was a tall man, lying on a green sofa, reading a book.

"Who is that tall man?" Mr. Birnbaum asked Sarah. "And why is he in the Rabbi's house?"

"Shhh! Keep quiet," Sarah said, "the Rabbi's car just pulled into the driveway!" Mr. Birnbaum and Sarah Spitzer watched through the window as the Rabbi walked into his new house.

The tall man got up. He put down his book and gave the Rabbi a long hug and a kiss. A long kiss.

"Oy vey!" Mr. Birnbaum exclaimed, "the Rabbi is gay!"

"Well, I guess I won't be giving him my niece Karen's phone number!" Sarah joked.

"This is not a time for jokes," Mr. Birnbaum said, "This is serious! I don't want our synagogue to have a gay rabbi. This is a family congregation!"

"Why didn't he tell us that he is gay?" Sarah asked. Mr. Birnbaum was upset. "I don't know." He said, "I'm going to call the board members right now!"

The next night, the board members had a secret meeting to discuss what they would do. Mr. Birnbaum suggested that they should fire the new rabbi and get someone who isn't gay. Bill Steinberg said "There is nothing wrong with being gay, he's a great Rabbi." Sarah Spitzer said: "I'm not sure what we should do."

Soon everyone in the congregation heard the rumor that the Rabbi was gay. The Rabbi noticed that people were not as friendly to him as they were before. Sarah Spitzer used to stop by his office to drink coffee and tell jokes. But now the office was quiet. The Rabbi asked Bill Steinberg what was wrong. Bill said "there are many rumors going around about your private life." The Rabbi was upset. He spent many nights worrying about what he should do about the rumors.

The next week in synagogue, the Rabbi said, "I have a special announcement to make."

The congregation was dead quiet. "What will he say about the rumors?" they thought.

"I want everyone to know that I am a gay Jew," the Rabbi said, "and that I am proud to be gay.

When I first came here, I was afraid to tell everyone because I thought that you would not understand. I know that it can be hard to welcome someone who is different into your community. But in this community everyone should have a place, every type of person and every kind of family. I feel that it is time for you to meet my partner, Michael."

The crowd turned as a tall man stood up and said "Shabbat Shalom" to everyone. No one moved. Many people felt uncomfortable. Then Sarah Spitzer stood up and said "Shabbat



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Shalom!” to Michael. Michael smiled and everyone in the congregation came up to him, wishing him “Shabbat Shalom!”

Everyone except Mr. Birnbaum. Mr. Birnbaum marched out of the synagogue.

Sarah followed him out. “Why are you leaving?” she asked Mr. Birnbaum, “I think that the Rabbi was brave to say what he said.”

“Sarah,” Mr. Birnbaum said, “this synagogue is changing too fast for me. I’m leaving!”

Weeks passed. Mr. Birnbaum never came back to the synagogue. Instead of talking with his friends in the back row, he stayed at home and looked through his old photo albums. One album he looked through again and again. It was from his wedding. It was a small wedding. Mr. Birnbaum’s parents refused to attend. They did not want him to marry Mrs. Birnbaum because she wasn’t from America. She was born in Egypt. But Mr. Birnbaum was in love. He married her and they were very happy together.

Sarah Spitzer and Bill Steinberg missed seeing Mr. Birnbaum in synagogue. His seat in the back row was empty. They spoke about him when they drank coffee with the Rabbi and his partner, Michael. “Someone should try to talk to Mr. Birnbaum,” Sarah Spitzer told the Rabbi.

But who would try to talk to Mr. Birnbaum?

The Rabbi decided that he would try. He drove to Mr. Birnbaum’s house.

He rang the doorbell. Mr. Birnbaum opened the door just a crack to see who it was.

“Hello, Mr. Birnbaum!” the Rabbi said. But Mr. Birnbaum shut the door. The Rabbi rang the doorbell again. “Mr. Birnbaum, I want to talk to you!” the Rabbi exclaimed, “I know that you are still upset!”

This time Mr. Birnbaum opened the door. He waved his finger in the rabbi’s face. “I don’t want to talk.” Mr. Birnbaum said. “I don’t want to have anything to do with you people!” “Why?” the Rabbi asked. “A man should be with a woman! Isn’t that the way that God meant it to be? How could you, a rabbi, live with a man?”

“I believe that God wants people to be with the people that they love,” the Rabbi said, “and I love Michael. I was all alone before I met him. But Michael changed my life and I love him with all my heart and he loves me. That is what God wants.”

Mr. Birnbaum turned his head and closed the door. He sat down in his chair and looked through his photo albums. As he looked through the pictures, he thought about some of the words that the Rabbi had said—“God wants people to be with the people that they love.” Mr. Birnbaum thought about his wife. He had once said those exact words to her. He said them on their wedding day.

The next week at services, as the Rabbi sang “Oseh Shalom,” he looked out to the back row of the synagogue.



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Just then, Mr. Birnbaum walked in the door. He found his old seat, sat down and whispered “hello” to Sarah Spitzer and Bill Steinberg.

As soon as the the service was over, Mr. Birnbaum walked up to the Rabbi.

He looked into the Rabbi’s eyes. “Shabbat Shalom!” he said. They shook hands.

This made the Rabbi very happy.

THE END



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