

**In Our Own Words: Quotes from Gay,
Lesbian, and Bisexual Jewish Youth**

“It’s really hard to transmit to people how isolating it can be. To them they can’t imagine what’s it’s like to be gay in a straight setting. Someone told me once that they didn’t want to come to a party, a sleepover party that I was going to be at, because they didn’t want to change in the same room as me. And that really hurt. I would watch friends hugging and being close, and being very touchy, and I wished I could be a part of it, but I didn’t want them to think that I love them. Which means that for ninth and tenth grade I didn’t hug my friends.”

- Shulamit, *Hineini: Coming Out in a Jewish High School*

“I guess having out teachers at New Jew was helpful in a lot of ways. I mean, for example Ms. Tanchel was the first person I’d ever even come out to. So, I mean, I think if she hadn’t been gay and out, to me at least, I don’t think I would’ve been able to do that. I’d never come out to anyone before. Ever. People knew, I guess, but I’d never said it to anyone. And I was so terrified ... But, it was a really good conversation. I think the reason that it had such a big impact on me, was because ... she said, “Mazel Tov!” She said, “That’s awesome, and I think that’s great.” And that was shocking, because I didn’t really think that was a possibility to get as a response like, oh that’s a good thing.”

- Elana, *Hineini: Coming Out in a Jewish High School*

“Coming from an ultra orthodox black hat yeshiva in Brooklyn, I really didn’t expect my best friend to react well when I told him I was attracted to other guys. Still, I felt I had to tell him because I was sick of making excuses about who my new friends were, where I was going, what I was doing, etc., etc. When I finally told him, he was initially shocked and had no idea how to react. We didn’t speak for a few days. Later that week he came over to my house and told me he would always be there for me, no matter what. It’s a moment I’ll never forget. I now feel closer to him than ever before.”

- Anonymous, from JQyouth

“I have a lot of respect for what Shula did. I look at it and I see that I saw a situation that I didn’t like, regarding my own sexuality, and how it would be accepted or not accepted at New Jew. And Shula saw a very similar situation and she did everything she could to try to change it. And that takes guts.”

- Ben, *Hineini: Coming Out in a Jewish High School*

“I was at my temple youth group and other kids kept using ‘gay’ and ‘fag’ as insults. Our advisor never said anything.” So Michelle stopped attending services and felt “that maybe there wasn’t a place for me in the community that I loved so much.”

- Michelle, former member of Keshet’s queer Jewish youth group

“I feel like if I were to come out to the kids in my chapter, they would think I was hitting on them every second. I feel like with fraternal things, like kids sleeping on the same sofa, or during good and welfare with leaning up against each other, I would get treated differently. But with good and welfare, I don’t lean on guys because I’m attracted to them. It’s because good and welfare is long and we are all on the floor and it’s usually at night...we’re tired. If I came out, I would get treated differently. Plus, how can I even begin to consider coming out with so many people making gay jokes all the time? I’ve managed to look past little things but when my friends say stuff like fag, and cocksucker, or fudge packer, that well, offends me because I think to myself, they are talking about me in rude ways; they just don’t know it.”

- Gay member of BBYO

“I’m usually pretty okay with letting people know that I’m gay ... but I’m pretty scared to let my council know. I don’t want my strong sisterhood ties to go away because girls are weird around me. I subtly came out to my dorm at ILTC, and no one judged me for it or acted weird around me for it ... and that felt amazing. We were sisters and the fact that I am attracted to women didn’t interfere with our bond. I think it was easier for me to come out to people at ILTC because I was able to start out to them as a gay person ... while at home, they don’t initially see me like that and so I don’t think they would accept me as much. I’m not embarrassed about being gay ... but definitely nervous about how my sisterhood bonds will change because of my coming out.”

- Regional youth leader of BBYO

“The atmosphere at my pluralistic Jewish day school was not unaccepting, but it was by no means accepting. The silence on GLBT issues, of coming out, and of fostering acceptance, made being a gay, Jewish student seemingly impossible. It is difficult for me to express, or really even understand how that affected me as a teenager and beyond. I wish that I had felt that I could have come out at an earlier age, and been able to know what that meant. Without a community that I felt safe in, I had to hide a part of my being not only from my friends and family, but from myself. I cut myself off. I hid. And that is something I wish I hadn’t felt compelled to do.”

- Sam, Jewish day school graduate

In Our Own Words: Quotes from Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Jews and Allies

“At a recent community interfaith workshop for family members, I listened to a woman ask in a very open, heartfelt manner for advice about her relationship with her youngest daughter, married to a non-Jewish man, who had recently given birth to her first child. Her daughter was not planning to raise her son with any Jewish traditions or practices – a source of tremendous sadness and grief for this participant. She felt unsure how to be her Jewish self with her new grandchild, and had come to the workshop seeking support and guidance.

“She explained that her oldest daughter had come out as a lesbian several years ago. The new grandmother shared her story about the many responses and challenges she experienced as a result of her daughter’s coming out. As she talked, she realized and explained that as a result of the growth and closeness that ensued between them, her daughter “taught me the true meaning of unconditional love.” With that insight, she then went on to say that she believed she could begin to understand and accept her other daughter’s interfaith marriage.

“By the end of the workshop, this woman said that her oldest daughter’s courage to come out as a lesbian had inspired her to invite her children and grandchildren to witness and be part of her life as a practicing and proud Jew.”

- Karen L. Erlichman, *Lessons from the Margins: What Interfaith Couples and Families Can Learn from Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Activism*

“One time, I was crossing Sixth Avenue heading toward Macy’s, lost in thought. A young boy in a yarmulke and payes shot through the crowd, homing toward me like a heat-seeking missile.

“‘Are you Jewish?’ he asked, in what sounded like a hopeful tone of voice. Knowing a simple ‘yes’ would lead to an invitation to go into the tank to say a prayer or perform a holiday ritual, like the blessing over the *etrog* and the *lulav* (the citron and palm frond that mark the fall festival Sukkot), I never knew how to answer the question. These are the responses I’ve rehearsed but never used:

“Yes, but not in a way you’d approve of.

“Yes, but my boyfriend isn’t.

“No. (This last one would end the whole transaction quickly, but short of a life-threatening situation, I can’t imagine using it.)”

- Bruce Shenitz, “Hasidism and Drag Queens (Or, Memoirs of a Contrary Son)” in *Mentsh*, ed. Angela Brown

“Sometimes it happens before you even know it. You find yourself passing through life quietly, politely not ‘flaunting’ those differences about yourself that the other person may not easily understand, integrate, or like. To pass through, quietly whenever possible, without making noise, is more often thought of as ‘appropriate’ rather than as ‘giving up.’ But I think it comes close to being just that. I know that when I don’t expect to be understood, I am quiet. And if being seen feels dangerous, sometimes I hide.

“When I wear my Shaddai, my star of David, I am visible as a Jew. And the gold band on my finger indicates that I am ‘married.’ Both symbols concretely represent primary identities that are very important to me. Most people recognize my star of David for what it is: a Jewish identity symbol. With my ring, the assumption is that I am married to a man.

“The parallels between being a Jew and a lesbian are obvious. We struggle against prejudice and for civil rights, and we struggle for the right to be visible without fear. We strive to preserve self-respect and maintain self-esteem in the face of bigotry and ignorance. As lesbians, gays, and Jews, we face issues of assimilating, ‘passing,’ or coming out.”

- Rachel Wahba, “Hiding is Unhealthy for the Soul,”
in *Twice Blessed*, Christie Balka and Andy Rose, eds.

“Once, David came home from school and told me that a friend had taunted him with the words, ‘You’re such a girl!’ My heart hurt. Did David yet sense that he was gay? He certainly knew what homosexuality meant. I had made a point of bringing up the subject occasionally at home. I had told him, for example, that one of my best friends at college was a gay man.

“I consulted a psychologist. Yes, she said, kids who are gay know it when quite young. At least, they know that they are different from their peers. ‘How can I help him?’ I asked her.

“‘Wait until he tells you,’ she said. I sat on my hands, and began to notice how casually people tossed off anti-gay slurs. One day, in a liquor store, I overheard a conversation between two men. One of them said ‘faggot,’ upon which both broke out in guffaws. My throat tightened. I stood still for a moment. Then I walked over to them and stuck my face right into theirs. They turned to me, startled. Who, they were doubtless wondering, was this crazy woman?

“‘Do you know what homophobia is?’ I asked them. They continued to stare at me. ‘It means hating people because they are homosexual. How do you know that there is not somebody in this store who is gay, who can hear you spewing your garbage?’

“Neither man said a word. I turned my back to them and walked away. This crazy woman, I was thinking, is the mother of a gay son. And she’s not just any mother. She’s a Jewish mother.”

- Sarah Epstein (pseudonym), “Jewish Mothers
and Gay Sons,” in *Lilith*, Spring 2001

“About one week after our commitment ceremony, our last official celebration was hosted by my parents’ friends who felt strongly about supporting and celebrating our recent commitment to one another. Although the community as a whole was uncomfortable viewing it as a traditional sheva berakhot, that night marked a historic change in the mindset of some in the room. That night my father gave a dvar Torah that spoke boldly about the very nature of what we were all attending. He acknowledged the obvious departure from the norm that was palpable in the room, but he spoke words that began to change the hearts and minds of many that night.

“*Lo tov heyot adam levado* – it is not good for man to be alone, my father quoted from the Torah portion in Genesis. *Eeseh lo ezer knegdo* – I will make him a ‘helpmate.’ My father went on to explain that the word *ezer* is gender neutral. God did not say I will make Adam a woman, but simply a helpmate. My father spoke deliberately and with passion; perhaps, he said, we can learn from this that the profound need for companionship and love does not need to be fulfilled in someone of the opposite sex. We all have a right to live and love freely with our chosen companion.”

- Tamar Prager, *Lilith*, Summer 2006

“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.

“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.”

- Daniel Belasco, *Lilith*, Summer 1999

“The girl I loved married another man last summer. Their picturesque ceremony was on the lawn of a mansion overlooking the Manhattan skyline. I stood by her, as a bridesman.

“Do I have to wear a dress?’ I questioned Sara after she asked me to be in her bridal party. She laughed. Like the groomsmen, I would wear a navy suit, she said, but I would stand on her side.

“Sara’s mom said I looked like I could be the groom. I smiled, but felt my breath catch. Perhaps being a bridesmaid was the closest a gay man could get to the altar. When I came out in college, people stopped asking if I wanted to get married or have children, as if those were no longer options for me.

“During the ceremony, on a cool summer’s day, as the rabbi recited ancient prayers, I vacillated between joy and self-pity. Sitting in the last row of chairs was Brad, my boyfriend of the past two years. Like Sara and Ben, we lived together, merged our finances and wanted kids. Our future, though, didn’t seem as mapped out as theirs did. As the rabbi chanted Hebrew blessings, I remembered my mom’s words the first time I fell in love with another man: This relationship probably won’t last. Gay men in their 20s don’t typically remain in committed partnerships. She wanted me to be a realist instead of a romantic, but her warning left me believing I’d have a life of solitude. Even though Brad and I were happy, I wondered if we would be one of the few gay couples to make it down the aisle.”

- Brett Krutzsch, Special to *The Washington Post*,
Monday, June 30, 2008

“My step-daughter has 2 moms and 2 step-moms. In sixth grade she decided to interview one of her moms and me for a class project on Jewish Identity. My partner and I went to her class presentation of the projects where the kids stood together as a chorus, and took turns asking questions and reading out quotes from their interviews. All of the kids attributed their quotes to someone: ‘my mom said.... my teacher Bob said.... my sister Sue said ... etc.,’ except for my daughter who quoted me a number of times but never attributed my quotes to anyone. I found it surprising, jarring even. Amidst all of these other families, ours felt invisible. When I asked her about it later she said that she didn’t want to draw attention to herself. To which I asked ‘don’t all of the kids in your class know who is in your family?’ She replied, ‘yes, but maybe their parents don’t know.’ There we were – a proud and out family with a very well-integrated and socially adept kid who was ashamed to be seen as ‘different’ in a school which is by all standards progressive and pluralistic. What would it take for her to feel comfortable sharing all of who she is?”

- Jewish Educator and Lesbian Mom

In Our Own Words: Quotes from Transgender and Genderqueer Jewish Youth

“Being trans has given me a unique perspective on God and Jewish gender roles. The Torah states in Genesis 1:21 that the human being is created in the image of God. Since my body and gender identity are changing, so too must God’s gender be in a state of transition. Being of trans experience, when I pray I see both God and myself as genderless, multi-gendered, or something else entirely. All of the traditional gender roles and boundaries set by traditional Judaism seem to fade when I feel a connection to God. Being trans and Jewish has made me realize that Judaism’s perception of gender is a social construct made and enforced by Jewish culture. The notion that women have to act a certain way and men another seems superficial. Being trans and Jewish has given me an opportunity to connect with God in a non-gender conforming way and to critically evaluate Jewish gender roles.”

- Mark, 15 years old

“As a kid, I went to a Solomon Schechter Day School – a Conservative religious school – with daily prayers and half the day spent studying in Hebrew. Boys were required to wear Kippot, girls were not. As a kid, I generally thought of myself as a boy. I also happened to look like a boy to most of the adults at the school. Very frequently, teachers would approach me and tell me to put my Kippah back on, until they recognized me. Then, they would stop and apologize. No girls wore Kippot. The experience of being told to wear a Kippah until I was read as a girl taught me that, to these teachers, what boys did mattered more; It carried more significance. The experience of this kind of sexism made it feel very dangerous to come out as trans, to start openly identifying as a man. I felt committed to challenging Jewish patriarchy and saw myself in a tradition of Jewish women feminists. Part of transitioning to identifying as male had to do with shifting my response to the Kippah question from whether women could or should wear kippot ‘too,’ to taking issue with privileging religious practices based on the gender of the observer.”

- Jonah Lewis

“Michael was raised as a girl, in a feminist Jewish Revival synagogue. Nobody ever told Michael not to do the things boys did, but still Michael found religious events a source of discomfort. This was because ‘I felt too self-conscious in my own skin to wear the appropriate clothing’ for ceremonies. Michael wanted to dress up, but didn’t feel comfortable. It was only when Michael grew up and transformed from a girl into a man that he discovered a new relationship with Judaism. Instead of being the bane of his existence, dressing up for synagogue became a thrill. ‘When I began identifying as male, I couldn’t wait to put on a tie and yarmulke and enter the community as a young Jewish man,’ says Michael, now a college student.”

- Tikkun article (name changed to protect anonymity)

“I hated going to Day School after I realized that I was trans. The teachers would always separate us into boys and girls, or make funny comments about what girls or boys are like when they talked about the Torah. I felt left out and misunderstood. I wanted to be seen as a boy, but gender was imposed on me everywhere. I couldn’t go to the bathroom, stand in the lunch line, or join the reading group without picking a gender that wasn’t mine. I started to associate Hebrew with oppression. Can you imagine that?”

- Natan

In Our Own Words: Quotes from Transgender, Genderqueer, and Intersex Jews

“Once, I brought my (then) girlfriend to the supposedly gay-friendly shul in my town. At that time I rarely ‘passed’ as male, and I didn’t own a yarmulke. As we entered the shul, the greeter at the door scolded us both for not wearing yarmulkes. I felt thrilled that he recognized me as a guy, and my girlfriend was amused that he mistook her for one. We put on yarmulkes from the basket and went in. During the service, everyone heard us singing, and realized that we were both female. Afterward, the greeter came up to us and apologized profusely for his ‘mistake.’ I felt so crushed that he couldn’t recognize me after all. He was trying to be friendly, but he had no context for recognizing either masculine women or trans guys, and certainly not enough familiarity to distinguish the two!”

- Micah Levi, genderqueer transguy

“I grew up in NYC in the 50’s and 60’s. Everyone knew I was Jewish, but no one knew I wanted to be a girl. This was right after World War II. Mom used to tell me I would never be safe; as a Jew, they could come and take me at any time.

“I would see pictures in the paper of men dressed as women being led to paddy wagons and being carted off by the police. So I had to keep secret, but it was the hardest thing to do. I remember thinking over and over I had to share it with someone or I would burst. I finally got up the courage to tell my best friend I wanted to wear a belly dancer’s outfit that was a picture on an album cover of my parent’s. It looked so soft, like something I would like to wear. This was a friend I had played with since we were born. I pointed to the photo, not looking at her and then I said ‘I want to try it on.’ She said ‘What??’ I knew I was lost, she didn’t like what she was hearing, but I repeated it. She didn’t answer. After a few minutes I looked up; she was gone. I never saw her again.

“Being trans we grew up through things like this, being Jewish we endured over centuries. We stood up for one another and said no more; we continue to stand up for what is right.”

- Laurie Wolfe, Trans Activist, Speaker, Educator

“I didn’t have much connection to Jewish faith growing up – I always connected more ‘culturally,’ through food, humor, and art. Part of this was that my family wasn’t very religious, part was that it seemed isolated from social justice work and other oppressed communities, and part was that I didn’t see myself reflected as a queer, gender variant person. As an adult, I find connection to Judaism and Jewish community through activism. Queer and trans Jews have always been a part of radical movements for collective liberation, and I feel proud to be a part of that rich legacy. To be able to have a deep connection to Judaism, I need to feel affirmed and supported in both my sexual-gender identity, and in my political commitments.”

- Stefanie Cohen

“Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha’Olam Ha’Mavir L’Ovrin.

“Blessed are You, Eternal One, our God, Ruler of Time and Space, the Transforming One to those who transform/transition/cross over.”

“I have a needle phobia, but I give myself testosterone injections every Wednesday. The phobia means that if I’m unlucky or not careful, I will pass out or vomit from interacting with the needle. Following a detailed and consistent ritual of filling the syringe, saying a Jewish blessing and then administering the shot, is what makes it possible for me to give myself the shot despite my phobia. I say two blessings from transtorah.org when I give myself the shot. The first one names G-d as the Transforming one. The second, recited after the shot, is a reminder that I am created in G-d’s image. The first time I got a shot of T, I also recited the Shecheyanu, thanking G-d for sustaining me to reach this moment. For me, testosterone is one piece of a process of healing. Not healing as in from an injury or from a place of illness, but healing as in repairing – like Tikkun Olam. Partnering with G-d to complete the act of creation. Saying these blessings is a recognition of the miracle of transition, the amazing holiness of my human body as it is and as it grows and changes. It’s also a recognition of the miracle of community and family, all of the folks who encourage and support and celebrate my decision to actively love myself as I am, who feel invested in my process and help me learn how to be in the world. Time is marked for me by shots and shabbas – two consistent weekly events that mark and divide the days of the week into before and after, that give me a moment to reflect on where I am coming from, where I’m going, and where I am. Taking a moment to express gratitude for these times helps me come to terms with my own agency: my intention and how I direct my efforts are up to me. Beyond that, how things turn out is not up to me. The blessings transform what could be a chore into a ritual that is at once humbling and empowering.”

“Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha’Olam sh’asani b’tzelmo.

“Blessed are You, Eternal One, our God, Ruler of Time and Space who has made me in God’s image.”

- Toby Kramer, Berkeley, California

“Genesis tells us a man is made in the image of G-d.

“Genesis 1:26-27 says that a man who is male and female was created, and that this man was created in the image of G-d. This is a reflection of the fullness of G-d, an integration of male and female in one man. I was born intersexed. The doctors decided I was a female, and wrote that on my birth certificate, although I always thought of myself as a boy. I saw myself as a combination of male and female, created in G-d’s image.

“We are all created in G-d’s image. I am created in G-d’s image as a transgender man who is an Orthodox rabbi and a father. The more I support and guide my children, lead my congregation of elderly Holocaust survivors and serve the community, the more G-d within me is reflected. The more deeply I care, the more passionately committed I become, the more I reveal G-d creating my being—body, mind, and soul.

“‘And God created man in God’s own image... from male through to female God created them.’ (Genesis 1:27)

“For thus saith the LORD unto the eunuchs... ‘I will make them joyful in my house of prayer; for mine house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.’ (Isaiah 56:3-7)

“We are made in the image of G-d who contains all genders. A body is just a garment for the soul. And like any other garment, we can put it on, take it off, alter it, tailor it.”

- Rabbi Levi Alter, FTM International, California