

The 2013 Morton E. Ruderman Memorial Lecture

The Jewish Studies Program and the Northeastern Humanities Center Present:

A Reading and Conversation with
Nathan Englander

Free and open to the public; reception and book signing to follow.



20 West Village F, 40A Leon Street, Boston, MA
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Student Retreat Will Celebrate the Local LGBTQ Community

Weekend event will be hosted by Boston University Hillel

By Ian thai
Advocate Staff

The Jewish people, though a small community, is a diverse community with different cultures, traditions and opinions. That will be made fully clear this weekend, when Boston University Hillel hosts a retreat for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and queer (LGBTQ) Jewish students.

“Queer,” once used as a pejorative term, is now readily used within the community as a catch-all for the full diversity within the LGBTQ community.

The event is presented by Nehirim in partnership with the National Union of Jewish LGBTQ Students (NUJLS) and Keshet.

Though all three groups have common goals of inclusion, Nehirim is focused on integrating the spiritual and cultural lives of LGBTQ Jews in terms of celebrating the diversity of the Jewish and queer identities of this small community within a small community.

Nehirim was founded in 2004 by activist and scholar Jay Michaelson. The name means “lights” and is a term used in both the Talmud and the Zohar to refer to the radiance of the sky and rainbows, recalling not just the rainbow flag used by the LGBTQ movement, but the spiritual lives of queer Jews.

“When we began,” said Michaelson, “most of our participants were looking for a safe space to be both gay and Jewish. Now there are many such spaces. So, we’ve moved from a place of consolation to one of celebration.”

Michaelson is the author of “G-d Vs. Gay? The Religious Case for Equality” in which he argues that both Jewish and Christian Scripture support the equality and dignity of gay and lesbian people. Michaelson recently completed his Ph.D. in Jewish thought from Hebrew University.

The retreat is expected to host 100 students from all over the spectrum of queerness and Jewish life. Therefore, the retreat has been planned to be welcoming to all.

Consequently, there will be Friday night and Shabbat-morning services for Reform, Conservative and Orthodox attendees. Orthodox services will include a mechitza separating male and female worshippers. There will also be alternative services, including meditation sessions. All meals will be glatt kosher.

“We are multid denominational,” said Michaelson.

While Michaelson leads the national organization, the retreat was organized by local students.

“I’m very passionate about owning who I am,” Ethan Sobel, a graduate student in public relations at Boston University, said during a telephone interview. Sobel noted that only a couple of years ago, while he was openly gay with his family and friends, and actively involved in both the cultural and religious aspects of Jewish life – attending services, traveling to Israel on Birthright and engaging in charitable work – he had not integrated those two aspects of his identity.

“I wasn’t seeking my acceptance in the Jewish community,” he said.

That changed after he attended an NUJLS conference. Once he returned to UMass Amherst, where he was still an undergrad, Sobel cofounded the student group LGBT Jews and Allies. He became involved with Nehirim after inviting Michaelson to speak at Amherst.

“I have a lot of Orthodox friends [and] I was living with two Orthodox guys last year and [they] were accepting,” said Sobel, who identifies with the Conservative movement. “I think that speaks to the power of knowing someone.”

Since coming to Boston University, Sobel founded JewQ and began working with BU Hillel.

One of his retreat co-organizers, Alex Kaufman, is a junior at Tufts University, majoring in sociology and minoring in drama and communication and media studies. He works at Tufts Hillel, as well as Jewish and Queer Students at Tufts (JQUEST.) It was in that capacity that he invited Michaelson to speak.

“I was so jazzed by his talk that I asked if I could work for him over the summer, and I guess I just haven’t stopped since!” he wrote in an email.

While some workshops will be oriented toward activism, such as Mordechai Levovitz’s talk on advocacy within the Orthodox community, others will be more focused on cultural explorations, such as Karla Goldman’s discussion of the history of LGBTQ inclusion within the American Jewish community.



Participants will also attend the Keshet Cabaret at the Westin Copley Place this Friday. The event will honor the founding members of the Keshet Family and Parent Connection, a national mentoring and leadership program for Jewish parents with LGBTQ and queer children, and former Rep. Barney Frank, the first openly gay member of Congress.

On Sunday morning, there will be a brunch with a keynote address by author Lesléa Newman, best known for the children's book "Heather has Two Mommies."

"Being part of a community is essential to being Jewish," noted Kaufman. "There's a notion of kehilla mentioned many times in the Torah and in other Jewish texts. I can't imagine being Jewish and not having a community to go to, and being gay or lesbian or trans should never prohibit that."

The retreat will be held at the Boston University Hillel. Onsite registration starts at 3 p.m. on March 1, and the event runs through the afternoon of March 3. Visit nehirim.org/studentretreat or contact info@nehirim.org for more information.

