

# ADVANCING CHERUT: A JEWISH GUIDE TO LGBTQ+ RIGHTS IN MICHIGAN

**CLOSE-UP**



Detroit area gay and lesbian Jews want to find their place in the Jewish community.

**ELIZABETH APPELBACH**  
Detroit Office

## True Colors



Sandy Harris: "If people get to know me first as an individual, then when they learn that I'm gay, they understand that it is just another part of who I am."

24 FRIDAY, AUGUST 18, 1995

**R**achel, a 40-year-old lesbian in Detroit, is straight, friendly and gracious. And terrified. She has the anatomy, build, that, if she's had, she would be fond of her job.

Most gay and lesbian Jews are one of an estimated 1 million homosexual Jews worldwide. They represent the extremes of how gay and lesbian Jews in the Detroit area deal with their sexuality. Some would like to see a gay Jewish synagogue in Detroit. Others would prefer gay-oriented programming within mainstream synagogues and temples.

All agree that they want to find their place in the Jewish community, and that they want to be accepted as they are.

Most Jewish lesbians and gays believe the Jewish community knows little of them — who they are, how "normal" their lives are in some respects, how different in others. "I get up in the morning I go to work, I cook dinner, I go to bed," a Jewish lesbian says. "I'm just like everyone else. I wish people understood that."

For the lives of gays and lesbians are not so different from those of most heterosexuals. When their spouses or sexual partners are homosexual, they face any number of problems, they say.

"I've been a high school teacher for more than 12 years," one local Jewish man says. "I'm a good teacher; the kids and parents like me. Imagine if people found out I was gay. I'm sure the school would suddenly find some reason to let me go, even though my sexuality has nothing to do with my job capability. My career would be ruined."

Others cite cases in which gays and lesbians open about their sexual preferences have returned home to find hate slogans spray painted across their windows and doors. Some have been beaten or killed.

Their rights are limited. They cannot be legally married, and therefore cannot take advantage of insurance and tax benefits afforded most couples. They may not be listed as dependent family members on insurance policies. Often, gay and lesbian couples may have trouble adopting children. Some organizations will not consider them a married couple for family membership.

Still another hurdle exists for Jewish gays and lesbians: Finding

This informational zine was created by Sari Bovitz as a part of their internship with Keshet, a 501(c)(3) organization which seeks to support and fight for the equality of LGBTQ+ Jews. See the QR code below for a link to the Keshet website to learn more.



# CHERUT (FREEDOM) AND LGBTQ+ RIGHTS

How do we reach collective freedom?



This question is woven into the fabric of the Jewish people. There are several Hebrew words for “freedom” in our tradition. One of these words, which has particularly diverse connotations in Judaism, is *חרות* (*cherut*). We call Passover *זמן חרותנו* (*z'man cheruteinu*), the time of our freedom. The Talmud tells us to think of ourselves as though we ourselves were liberated from enslavement in Egypt, so that we can connect with the liberation our ancestors experienced. Rabbi Elliott Dorff sums up a key idea about the concept of *cherut* in the Exodus story. He writes that this freedom “is not intended to enable me to do whatever I want; it is instead to enable me, along with all Jews, to fulfill the commandments we received at Sinai.”

This idea has numerous implications for how we experience American politics. First, it allows us to understand that in order to do *mitzvot* (righteous deeds), we must first be free from what binds us. Also, it teaches us that access to political freedoms (such as the right to vote) obligates us to utilize those freedoms for good.

As a Jewish member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) community, I am drawn to these conceptualizations of freedom. Because I have civil freedoms as an American, I have a responsibility to make this country a more inclusive place for other LGBTQ+ folks. This is how I connect *cherut* and my Jewishness to my belief that we must fight to protect LGBTQ+ rights in our country and in the state of Michigan in particular, where I attend college. I hope that this informational zine helps you find your own connection between the Jewish value of freedom and the importance of LGBTQ+ rights.

# THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY IN MICHIGAN

There is a long history of LGBTQ+ community and political advocacy in Michigan. LGBTQ+ Michiganders are integral to Michigan; we are your neighbors, peers, professors, and loved ones.



Nationally, as of June 2023, around 17% of American adults younger than 30 identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and 5.1% of adults younger than 30 identified as trans or nonbinary.

While a small percentage of U.S. adults are transgender or nonbinary (around 1.6%), over four in ten American adults say that they know someone who is trans.

4% (373,000) of adult Michigan citizens are LGBTQ+, with 27% of them raising children.



As a Jewish community (1% of the MI population), we frequently advocate for politicians to protect our interests as a minority group. Similarly, we can civically organize for LGBTQ+ interests and rights. And of course, LGBTQ+ Jews are our people, and we have a responsibility to stick up for them. In recent years, particularly with the election of Governor Gretchen Whitmer in 2019 and allies with similar positions of power, there have been beneficial developments in LGBTQ+ rights law here in Michigan.

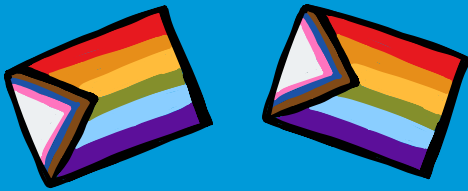
# SPOTLIGHT ON LGBTQ+ RIGHTS

## LEGISLATION IN MICHIGAN:

### THE ELLIOTT LARSEN CIVIL RIGHTS ACT

In 2023, Governor Whitmer signed into law a historic, bipartisan expansion of the Elliott Larsen Civil Rights Act (ELCRA), which prohibits discrimination on the basis of identity in Michigan and includes provisions that protect from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.

The law was originally enacted in 1976, establishing that the right to employment, education, and access to other key resources like housing, cannot be denied on the basis of religion, race, color, national origin, age, sex, or marital status. Since then, advocates have been fighting for (and won) an amendment to this list of categories to include sexual orientation and gender identity.



↳ The signing of the ELCRA, 2023

**Cherut connection:** Civil rights law allows LGBTQ+ folks not just freedom from discrimination, but also, implicitly, freedom to pursue employment, start families, and engage in society without facing as many barriers. Cherut is more accurately characterized as “freedom to” participate in society rather than “freedom from” hardship.

# SPOTLIGHT ON LGBTQ+RIGHTS LEGISLATION IN MICHIGAN: THE MICHIGAN LGBTQ COMMISSION

By executive order in June 2023, Governor Whitmer established an advisory body of the MI Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity in order to provide recommendations to the governor and department regarding policies that impact the LGBTQ+ community in Michigan.

A variety of stakeholders in the LGBTQ+ and ally community are represented on the commission, including representatives from the transgender population, indigenous tribes, rural communities, and various other social and economic categories.

The commission is also required to have “one member who represents a religious institution that welcomes members of the LGBTQ+ community.” Currently, that member is Reverend Bonnie Perry, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan and LGBTQ+ advocate.

**Cherut connection:** To strive toward freedom for all, we must engage in interfaith dialogue with LGBTQ+-supportive clergy from other religious backgrounds, like Rev. Perry. This gives non-Jewish leaders of faith in positions of power in our state the opportunity to learn how to support LGBTQ+ Jews.



## ANTI-LGBTQ+ LAWS IN MI

As of August 2024, 11 bills that would undermine LGBTQ+ rights have been introduced and are pending in the state of Michigan.

One of these bills is House Bill 4345, which was introduced in 2023 and is currently in committee. It tries to exempt religious organizations, including faith-based nonprofits, from adhering to the expansion of the Elliott-Larsen Act protecting the civil rights of LGBTQ+ people.

This bill does not take into account the fact that many religious organizations may not want an exemption from the ELCRA, as they are invested in affirming their LGBTQ+ members!



## HOW NATIONAL POLITICS INFLUENCE LGBTQ+ RIGHTS IN MI

LGBTQ+ rights are currently being negotiated on the national political stage. A policy that is emblematic of these initiatives is the Equality Act, which is currently stalled. This law would expand the 1964 Civil Rights Act to make sexual orientation and gender identity federally protected classes (much like the Elliott-Larsen Act did for Michigan).

The EA has been passed in the House of Representatives twice, in 2021 and 2022. Both times, the bill died in the Senate. It is critical in the next Congress, which the November election will solidify, that there is support behind the act so that it can pass in both the House and Senate.



Advocacy in  
favor of the  
Equality Act,  
Capitol Hill,  
April 2019

Around 48% of undergraduate students at the University of Michigan are from out of state. For these students, it is equally important that Michigan AND their home state have policies that promote LGBTQ+ rights. Codifying these protections nationally can help all Americans experience key freedoms, no matter where in the country they live.



## WAYS YOU CAN TAKE ACTION

Under the Biden-Harris administration, there has been tremendous progress toward LGBTQ+ equality, with over 320 appointments, nominations, statements, and policies supporting this goal. Nonetheless, there is a lot more progress to be made, and during the upcoming election season, LGBTQ+ rights are on the ballot.

It is essential to have a president who is supportive of LGBTQ+ rights. The Executive Branch has the power to either enact incredibly harmful anti-LGBTQ+ legislation or sign bills like the Equality Act into law, which would allow for progress toward a more equitable society. This is something to keep in mind during the upcoming Presidential election on November 5th.

**Check your voter  
registration status at  
this QR code!**



The Equality Act's current stalled status in the Senate emphasizes the importance of electing senators who support LGBTQ+ rights. This is something to keep in mind during the upcoming Michigan Senate race, which will also be on the ballot on November 5th.



## WAYS YOU CAN RAISE YOUR VOICE

There are a number of ways you can remain involved and informed about the status of LGBTQ+ rights in Michigan and on a national level. See the Appendix to access some of the resources listed below.



Keep tabs on LGBTQ+ rights initiatives in the state of Michigan. One easy way to do this is by signing up for the Michigan LGBTQ Commission's email list.



Get involved in local politics. Attend public governmental proceedings, pay attention to who your local elected officials are, and investigate anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination when you see it in your community. Local politicians are more accessible and therefore more likely to be influenced by their constituents. It is their job to listen to what you have to say.



Help your Jewish community or synagogue become part of the fight for LGBTQ+ rights! Keshet offers training opportunities so that Jewish institutions can improve their inclusivity and work towards the goal of LGBTQ+ equality.



Get to know LGBTQ+ initiatives in your area. In Ann Arbor, the Spectrum Center on the U-M campus is a hub for all things LGBTQ community, and offers a myriad of resources and advocacy opportunities.

Thank you for taking the time today to think about the state of LGBTQ+ rights in Michigan! May we all experience more *cherut* in the years to come.

## APPENDIX



Michigan LGBTQ  
Commission Email List



University of  
Michigan  
Spectrum Center  
Website



City of Ann Arbor  
Website- Info on  
LGBTQ+ Equality  
Efforts



ACLU Anti-LGBTQ  
Bill Tracker for  
the State of MI



Works Consulted and  
Further Reading

