

MEMO



To: Rabbi Linzer
From: David Pernick, Director of LGBTQ+ Community Initiatives
Date: May 5, 2023
Re: LGBTQ+ Community Initiatives Report: Findings and Recommendations

In mid-December, YCT launched its LGBTQ+ Community Initiatives with a listening and community-building tour, which I led. From the outset, we recognized that before beginning any initiatives geared towards rabbis and LGBTQ+ people, it would first be crucial to build relationships with, and get direct input from, exactly those rabbis, communities, and individuals whom we are seeking to help. As such, I conducted a tour this past winter of various Orthodox communities from across the country: Los Angeles, the Bay Area, Boston, Detroit and St. Louis. I met with rabbis from both YCT and YU, lay leaders and members of Orthodox LGBT communities. Over the coming months, I will continue the tour and visit locations closer to home, including NY and the tri-state area, MD and D.C. and more. Here are my key findings to date:

LGBTQ+ Individuals

- Clear policies, even if they are not fully inclusive, are always preferred to unclear or unstated ones.
- In the absence of clear signals or policies from their shuls on LGBTQ+-related matters, LGBTQ+ individuals, like rabbis, often have no idea what to expect when they walk into that environment. Put together, queer people, rabbis and school leaders are scared, even resentful, of having to walk through an emotional minefield in the dark. They would prefer to avoid these interactions altogether. Many institutional leaders' choice to default to a "Don't Ask Don't Tell" approach thus has the effect of silently pushing out queer Jews.
- Some Orthodox queer Jews who have felt mistreated or unwelcome in Orthodox institutions will remain Orthodox / Torah-observant but avoid Orthodox institutional life.
- It often seems that parents of LGBTQ+ Orthodox Jews are more invested in creating welcoming Orthodox spaces than LGBTQ individuals themselves, who may be more resigned to the current realities.
- Orthodox LGBTQ+ people, particularly those who are trans and gender-nonconforming, were - sometimes self-admittedly - highly sensitive to slights. They were more likely to have experienced frequent past marginalization and trauma over the course of their lives.

Shul Rabbis

- Most rabbis had met few, if any, gay or trans people in their own personal lives, hindering their knowledge and pastoral abilities.

- A major priority for all rabbis was maintaining the strength and unity of their communities. This framing, however, sometimes prioritized the continued buy-in of older, more traditional members who had been invested in the synagogue for decades. It did not tend to recognize the unity that is being lost by alienating existing LGBTQ+ members.
- The shuls that did have a more open approach (e.g., letting people choose their side of the mechitza, be open about their partners, etc.) tended to be very small. This is likely because such shuls are able to serve a niche, more progressive element of the community without having to worry about making everybody in a large, diverse congregation happy.
- Rabbis who were perceived to be relatively liberal in their communities were more resistant to policies and other changes than ones who were not on the “progressive radar.”
- Even the rabbis who want to do the right thing don’t have networks of community support. As such, they are entirely beholden to the politics of their shul.
- Rabbis expressed a strong desire for more pastoral training in these areas, as well as for resources, sample policies, and examples of best practices.
- In some cases, rabbis have asked for more *psak* on matters big and small. In the absence of halakhic rulings, rabbis – particularly those who are relatively young or don’t feel strong job security - feel they don’t have broad enough shoulders to make bold, inclusive decisions.

Schools

- Politics are very intense in Orthodox day schools, even more than in shuls. High schools rely on feeder networks from other schools and being branded as overly-progressive can be detrimental to their admissions. Even a school that had taken a leadership stance in the past, has stepped back in recent years due to backlash.
- A Sephardi / Ashkenazi cultural divide regarding LGBTQ acceptance plays out on school level, and teachers are often unable to effectively control those conversations.
- Teachers have expressed a strong desire for classroom training to navigate difficult, contentious conversations around these issues. Principals and Heads of School said that they could significantly benefit from examples of policies and best practices in other schools.

Initiatives/Next Steps

1. *Developing the Network*

One of the clearest takeaways of this trip is how essential it is to strengthen our on-the-ground connection with these and similar communities. For any initiative or program of ours to get sufficient traction and buy-in to succeed, there needs to be strong relationships to build on; rabbis, communities, and individuals must see us as partners who listen, understand, and are invested.

It is also critical to sustain and develop a network of rabbis and organizations who are trying to make a difference. Rabbis can gain significant support – both emotional and practical – from being part of a

network of similarly committed rabbis who meet and talk on a regular basis. Our plan is to convene monthly Zoom Torah learning on LGBTQ+ topics with interested rabbis, taught by our faculty.

There are also a variety of important players, actions and organizations taking shape outside of most people's view. Unfortunately, many rabbis are not even connected to other players within their own cities. As such, it is imperative to continue exploring new communities, maintain our own new contacts and connecting them with potentially relevant partners.

2. *LGBTQ-specific pastoral training for rabbis*

We will be looking to bring LGBTQ+-specific pastoral training to rabbis in our network (both in shuls and schools) with the help of YCT's pastoral team and in partnership of Shoval, an Israeli organization that specializes in training professionals in observant religious communities. Shoval's training provides confidential, cohort style setting and roleplays where rabbis take part in simulated "meetings" with trained Shoval staff playing students or congregants who will pose challenges to rabbis typical to LGBTQ+ Jewish experiences.

This training would provide rabbis an Orthodox, confidential and supportive space to make mistakes, learn and become more adept and confident in handling these challenges. Moreover, it would provide an invaluable chance for rabbis to build local networks of other supportive rabbis and colleagues and develop trusting, local relationships.

These trainings would take place three times in a year, with the first and last session being in-person with Shoval staff from Israel. The cost of Shoval travel would be partially borne by YCT but also the affiliated shuls. We hope to launch this initiative in the Fall/Winter, 2023.

3. *A Guide of Best Practices*

When we consulted the leadership of Eshel many months ago, they advised us to work on a book of "Best Practices" for rabbis. This would be a resource – beyond a network of colleagues – that would provide rabbis and school heads with different models of practices and messaging around creating welcoming communities and guidance as to best processes for getting buy-in from the community, all drawing on rabbis' own experience in these areas. Such a guidebook would also include sample policies that can be adapted by schools and shuls.

There is a strong expressed need for such a guide from shul rabbis and day school leaders. In fact, day school leaders were almost unanimously enthusiastic about such a guide, even more than shul rabbis were.

The plan to develop this guide would have me sit with rabbis who have had successful and not-as successful experiences in this area, and to have them share with me what their process was, what went right and what went wrong, and lessons learned. I would then write up these "case-studies." They would be reviewed and edited and then compiled for a volume. Such a volume would also contain examples of shul policies and other helpful resources.

We are also in the process of collecting general Torah resources on LGBTQ+ issues, which are available on our website at www.yctorah.org/lgbtq.

4. ***Advancing the state of Halacha***

Most of the issues that the rabbis face are of a communal, and not halakhic, nature. We have also learned that many in the queer community feel quite strongly that they do not want halakhic issues regarding their sexuality and sexual life to be the topic of public discussion. Beyond basic, foundational rulings that a person or a person's children may not be excluded from ritual, synagogues, schools, or institutional life on the basis of their identity, what is needed is psak that addresses communal issues, particularly as it relates to gay couples and also to trans individuals, in particular trans men. Also needed is psak that addresses lifecycle-related questions from gay couples or trans individuals, which would have the effect of normalizing their membership in the community and having the halakhic discourse around them being one of *kedusha* and not one of prohibition.

The plan is for Rabbi Linzer to work with his colleagues in Israel (and in the US, if possible) to produce teshuvot and articles on these topics.

Longer-range vision - *Para-clergy support*

Israel has a vibrant community of Torah-involved, openly gay Orthodox Jews, some living there permanently and some just there for a few years. The doors of many Orthodox institutions are closed to them, and once they have completed their regular yeshiva- or gap-year learning, they are left to piece together their own continued Torah education without the support of institutions.

Despite this fact, this community serves as a de facto rabbinate to less learned queer Orthodox Jews looking for halachic guidance. In a sense, this “para-clergy” has begun to fulfill the needs that Israeli rabbis will not answer.

We have a unique opportunity to provide comprehensive quasi-rabbinic/semikha training to this segment of the Israeli Orthodox world. The specific framework of such a program will take time to develop, and this is for a later phase of the Initiatives. However, such a program can develop the qualifications of learned gay Orthodox people to competently serve as community leaders.