

Unsung Heroes *by Adam Jessel*

Jewish men struggling with homosexual attractions must battle on two fronts—their own desires and a culture that devalues their struggle.

In recent years, attitudes towards homosexuality have changed dramatically. Not only is being gay increasingly considered avant-garde, but anyone who suggests there is anything wrong with homosexual activity is likely to be condemned as a bigot.

The media has been flooded with gay material. On television, for example, there are currently two-dozen gay characters, all portrayed in a positive light. The reason for this, says well-known film critic Michael Medved, is that in Hollywood one is required to be gay approving or else be labeled homophobic, and the burden of proof that one is not homophobic rests with each individual, forcing producers to promote gay characters that are almost uniformly—and unrealistically—positive.

On college campuses across North America, Jewish student organizations routinely include gay contingents, and speakers at Holocaust-awareness events denounce anti-Semitism, racism and homophobia in the same breath. In these so-called enlightened environments any suggestion that homosexual activity is problematic is either dis-

missed as unworthy of serious consideration or pounced upon as further evidence of heterosexist oppression. Therefore, while major corporations in the United States provide grants to gay-affirming campus programs in the interest of “tolerance, diversity and inclusion,” these same companies refuse to fund programs that provide information about the options available to those who don’t want to be gay.

Gay activists have strived to normalize homosexuality and promote gay culture. Their success is evident in the many legislative efforts underway to grant homosexual union the same legal status as heterosexual marriage. That gay activists have made inroads in the Jewish world is evident in the Reform movement’s ordination of open homosexuals and sanction of same-sex unions. While the Conservative movement is still debating whether to ordain open homosexuals, some of its rabbis officiate at same-sex commitment ceremonies and the former rector of one of its rabbinic seminaries has openly endorsed gay “marriages.”

Seemingly, these movements embrace the contemporary view that homosexual inclinations are innate, irreversible and morally neutral. Effectively promoted by gay activists, this view leaves no room for the people with whom I work—in individual and group-therapy sessions—who do not consider homosexual activity to be a viable alternative.

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Mark

The struggle to overcome homosexuality has been long and difficult. In my desperation, I tried many things that didn't work, including [converting to] Christianity and marriage. Only during the past couple of years have things really started to come together.

Looking back, what proved most helpful was a twelve-step program, a good therapist, intensive, specially-tailored therapy weekends and the [support of] other strugglers I met through JONAH [Jews Offering New Alternatives to Homosexuality].

Gradually, I developed a significant attraction to women. Now, at age thirty-nine, I'm remarried—happily so—and feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude for my wife, for my kids and for all the ways in which I've grown.

These “strugglers” must battle on two fronts; not only must they fight against their own attractions, they must struggle against a zeitgeist that disparages their efforts as being futile at best, misguided and harmful at worst.

Dissembling Before God

Within the Jewish world, the gay-affirmative view has gained considerable credence from *Trembling Before*

G-d, a documentary by gay activist Sandi DuBowski, about Jews from Orthodox backgrounds who have homosexual attractions. The subject of a major international promotional campaign, the film has aroused considerable controversy not only because of its subject matter but also because many of the rabbis interviewed feel they were misrepresented by DuBowski’s selective editing.¹

To its credit, the film poignantly captures the torment of those torn between their religious beliefs and their same-sex attractions (SSA). One cannot help but feel compassion for DuBowski’s interviewees who desperately miss the lifestyle, community and close family ties of the Orthodox world. Unfortunately, DuBowski’s film goes further. Implicit in the film is the message that a homosexual lifestyle is desirable, and that the interviewees’ only struggle is having their choices accepted and validated by the community.

The problem with *Trembling* is not so much what it shows as what it leaves out. Where are the stories of those who don’t act on their homosexual attractions, those who feel that sexual desire is not a license to violate a Divine imperative? Aren’t their struggles powerful and inspiring as well? Seemingly the liberal mantra of “diversity and inclusion” does not apply to those who strive to adhere to the *halachah*.

“Orthodox” Rabbi?

To make sure you get the message, whenever the film debuts in a new city, it is often accompanied by a panel discussion that includes both DuBowski and a man who bills himself as the “first openly gay Orthodox rabbi.” This “rabbi” made headlines when he publicly announced his homosexual orientation. He did this, he says, “in order to help the great number of people who are in distress while dealing with their sexuality.” Besides, “being in the closet was getting in the way of finding a partner.”²

While flaunting his ordination from a known Orthodox institution, he condones a range of non-Orthodox

Yisrael

I became observant as a teenager. At the same time, I was becoming increasingly aware that my strong attraction to men was not a passing phase. Still, for me there was no question about the halachah. ... When I became observant, I accepted 613 mitzvot, not 612.

Hashem gave me this challenge. Why he did so, I don't know, and in a sense it's irrelevant. Hashem gave some people the desire to steal, but He also said don't do it. He gave some people a desire for bloodshed, but expects them to elevate it. Hashem gave me this challenge. So I ask myself, "What am I supposed to do with it?"

The hardest part is the isolation, the loneliness that I feel... having this dark secret and not being able to tell anyone because of the awful fear of rejection. That's what prevents me, and others like myself, from seeking advice from rabbis and mentors. I'd like to get married, and am working toward that. I realize that this is not always possible... but having no family, no children... would leave an empty void.

causes as well as intermarriage. Indeed, assimilationists draw inspiration for their agenda from this Orthodox “rabbi” who proposed creating a “new category between Jew and Gentile that will welcome a non-Jewish spouse without insisting on conversion.”³

Justifying his indulgence in homosexual activity, he maintains that *halachah* is subject to change. “I have chosen to accept a certain risk and violate the *halachah* as it is presently articulated in the hope of a subsequent, more accepting halachic expression,” he once stated.

The Traditional Response

Similar to the “rabbi,” a lot of “Orthodox” support groups for Jews with SSA are not exactly Orthodox. Promoting the view that “you are gay just as you are Jewish,” they encourage members to achieve fulfillment by

developing both identities. What’s more, many of these groups distort sources to advocate “homosexual activity within the framework of *halachah*.” A number of my clients have found that these groups—which include a variety of social networks and online resources—serve as entries into the wider gay culture, which is even more gay-identified and gay-affirmative.⁴

When one denies the validity of a particular prohibition, or its applicability to him, by what measure can he call himself Torah-observant—especially if he proudly and publicly proclaims that he engages in forbidden activities? True, growth in Torah is a lifelong process, and people will invariably be at different levels, but one must strive to observe *all* the facets of the Torah. While we may not hear about them as much, there are people with homosexual attractions who put in considerable and constant effort to resist the lure of gay culture and behavior. Do they not deserve our compassion, support and respect?

The Myth of the “Gay Identity”

It’s natural for one to want to identify with a group. (This is especially true for those who, for a variety of reasons, may have felt different than, or rejected by, peers and significant others during early childhood.) For someone with SSA, adopting a gay identity helps fill this deep and legitimate need.

However, the Torah does not define a person by his sexual orientation. As Rabbi Barry Freundel of Keshet Israel Congregation in Washington, DC, points out, nowhere does the Torah speak of homosexuals, only homosexual behavior.⁵ There is no word in traditional Hebrew for a homosexual. Thus, in the Torah view, a person may be defined as many things (i.e., a Jew, a Kohen, a minor, a *mamzer*, etcetera) but there is no separate category for homosexual.

Rabbi Joel Beasley elaborates on this in *Jewish Spectorator*:

As far as the Jewish religion goes, there are no homosexuals in the world, nor have

there ever been. There are no heterosexuals either... From the Jewish perspective, identifying existentially as a homosexual or a heterosexual is irrelevant... The words may describe predilections or behavior, but they hardly capture the essence of the person.⁶

When the so-called Orthodox rabbi traveled to Israel to be at last year's gay parade, he pronounced the blessing, "Who has made me according to His will." Our answer to him and his ilk is that He also created you to do according to His will. The Torah addresses all of a human being's desires, even those that are most difficult to control, for the purpose of making one into a true *eved Hashem* (servant of God).

A Hostile Climate

In 1973, as a result of changing mores and an extremely effective gay lobby, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), its diagnostic list of mental disorders. Unfortunately, this resulted in funds for research on treatment drying up. More recently, there has been an intense effort to discredit and even eliminate therapies to assist clients in reducing their homosexual attractions. The climate in the mental health community has become so hostile to such treatment that even mentioning it can lead to therapists being ostracized or blacklisted.

A case in point: A therapist I know asked members of an online discussion group of mental health professionals for ideas to help a client reduce his SSA. The reaction against him was so virulent that the moderator had to step in and end the discussion (although the offending therapist did get a number of private replies with suggestions and ideas). And yet this was a message board that claimed to be devoted to therapy techniques that "honor the client's wishes."⁷

In today's climate, if Bill tells me that he is attracted to his neighbor Fred's young child and he wants to reduce these attractions, I, as a therapist, can try to help him. If Bill has an unwanted attraction to Fred's wife, this too is

something I am permitted to help him with. But if Bill has an unwanted attraction to Fred himself, then it's regarded as unethical for me to help.

What's more, the gay-affirmative

...nowhere does the Torah speak of homosexuals, only homosexual

Yosef

I'm seventy years old and have been married a long time. I just celebrated the marriage of my grandchild. I kept Shabbat when it was difficult. I moved to Israel when it was difficult.

So despite the difficulty, I wasn't about to give in to this challenge either.

I come to the support group because I want to get a greater understanding of this lifelong struggle. I've also discovered that I can play a role in counseling others. I think it's much harder for young people now. The temptations are more open, more accessible.

view permeates graduate schools. Thus, most mental health professionals who graduated in the past fifteen years or so have never been exposed to the documented successes of those who have sought to change their sexual orientation; many such professionals therefore tend to dismiss the notion of change, responding in an almost reflexive manner. In *Trembling Before G-d*, the therapies to reduce SSA mentioned range from the ridiculous to the draconian—snapping oneself with a rubber band, eating figs, electric shock treatments and libido-controlling drugs. All the conventional tools of psychotherapy are ignored. Moreover, nothing worked. There are no success stories, an omission the filmmaker justifies by claiming they were too hard to find.

I run a group for men who want to reduce their SSA, one of three such groups in Jerusalem. It consists of people from diverse backgrounds—some single, some married—ranging in age from twenty to seventy. One of the

most powerful experiences for participants is witnessing the successes of other group members. While success may be defined in different ways, inspiring stories of resistance, growth and change are not hard to find.

Why did DuBowski fail to see any success stories? Might it have diminished the sense of an inevitable gay destiny? Might it have punctured the mystique of homosexuality, making his film less compelling?

Suicide and the Homosexual

Often those who are not accepting of homosexual behavior are accused of endangering the lives of people with SSA. The widespread belief is that by not accepting homosexuality, society contributes to feelings of depression, self-hatred and guilt in the homosexual, which in extreme cases can lead to suicide. While there is a certain irony that in the age of AIDS discouraging homosexuality is considered to be endangering lives, this is a concern that needs to be addressed.

Studies do, in fact, indicate that there is higher risk of suicidality, major depression, anxiety disorder, substance abuse and other mental illnesses in the gay population.⁸ However, this in no way proves the "homophobia theory" mentioned above since the rate of these mental illnesses is higher for gay people even in societies considered gay-friendly.⁹ Yet even if we were to accept that homophobia can cause death, does that mean that we as a community should sanction an outright Torah prohibition? People may be driven to depression, violence or suicide as a result of being unable to fulfill a forbidden sexual desire, but does that mean we must condone the act and abandon values and conscience?

Making the Problem into the Person

An effective therapist will help her clients see themselves as being distinct from their particular problems. Thus, a client who initially says, "I'm depressed," "I'm a wife abuser" or "I'm a worrier," will come to regard

himself not as a wife abuser or a worrier but rather as a person with a problem. By regarding himself as such, he can become more self-confident, assume greater responsibility for his behavior and come up with more effective techniques for change.

But in recent years, GAT (Gay Affirmative Therapy)—which focuses on helping clients become more affirming of their homosexual feelings and identity—has become the dominant model within the psychological community.¹⁰ In the American Psychological Association's *Handbook of Counseling and Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients*,¹¹ there are a multitude of articles on how to help clients become more openly gay, deal with homophobic parents, etcetera, but articles on helping one overcome homosexuality are conspicuously absent and would probably never be considered for inclusion. The notion that someone with SSA would want to change is considered the inevitable result of societal pressure and never that of personal choice.

Even men who are married are advised that the only path to true self-fulfillment is through homosexuality. Typical is the book *Just Tell the Truth*, in which Dr. Terry Norman¹² asserts that all married men with same-sex desires *must* leave their wives and families and go through a prescribed series of steps (gay sexual exploration, an intimate relationship with another man, affiliation with the gay community and spiritual integration) in order to achieve "orientational authenticity" and maturity.

The APA maintains that therapy that aims to reduce SSA bears "great" psychological risks since a therapist who is prejudiced against homosexuality "may reinforce self-hatred already experienced by the patient." Along with its counterpart, the American Psychological Association, the APA has proposed declaring it unethical for psychiatrists to participate in such therapy irrespective of what the client wants. This proposal has been criticized by, among others, Dr. Robert Perloff, a past APA president,¹³ who argues that psychologists

have an obligation to "listen to the client," and that the proposed policy would stifle further research.¹⁴

Recent studies have demonstrated that many individuals have benefited greatly from therapy to reduce their SSA. In a paper presented at last year's APA convention, Dr. Robert Spitzer, professor of psychiatry and chief of biometrics research at Columbia University,

Shlomo

I am a single male who works for the local Jewish community. My many commitments keep me busy, and I do not have much opportunity to socialize during the week. I therefore look forward to going to friends' homes for the Shabbat meals. Yet, Shabbat is also a day when I feel most alone. On some level, I sense that Shabbat is best experienced with one's spouse and children.

It's not that I prefer to remain single. It's just that I have never been physically attracted to women, only to men. I always wanted, however, to bring children into the world, and my strong sense of Jewish identity contributed to this desire. I grew up in a secular Jewish home, but my parents felt a love and responsibility for the Jewish people and encouraged me to learn about Jewish history and culture. When I discovered in my teens that I was gay, I went through a period of depression and withdrew from Jewish activities.

As an adult I reconnected with the Jewish community through a religious study group. I also tried, unsuccessfully, to change my sexual orientation through therapy. I was disappointed that I would not be able

presented a study of 200 men and women who had experienced a significant shift from homosexual to heterosexual attraction and sustained that shift for more than five years.¹⁵ At the time of the study, three-quarters of the men and half of the women were married. Dr. Spitzer's conclusion: "Contrary to conventional wisdom, some highly motivated individuals, using a variety of change efforts, can make substantial

change in multiple indicators of sexual orientation." Lest Spitzer be suspected of being a homophobe, it was he who spearheaded the 1973 removal of homosexuality from the DSM.

Research such as this is important to strugglers because whether people manage to control or even eliminate their unwanted SSA depends on many factors, including the extent to

to have a family. My disappointment grew when a gay friend succeeded in changing his orientation and getting married.

At some point I decided to live a celibate life. Being celibate has not been easy, but it has helped me develop deeper relationships with men—both straight and gay—on the soul level; these relationships are most meaningful on Shabbat. There is something about Shabbat that helps a person become more aware of the spiritual energy of those around him.

Given my life situation, Shabbat isn't always easy for me. Yet I realize that I cannot live without it. And I find comfort in the words of Isaiah:

"Let not the stranger who has joined himself to Hashem speak, saying, 'Hashem will utterly separate me from His people,' and let not the barren one say, 'Behold I am a shriveled tree.' For thus said Hashem to the barren ones who observe My Sabbaths and choose what I desire, and grasp My Covenant tightly: In My house and within My walls I will give them a place of honor and renown, which is better than sons and daughters; eternal renown will I give them, which will never be terminated" (Isaiah 56: 3-5).

which they regard change as possible. Dutch psychiatrist Gerard van den Aardweg puts it bluntly, "Since relatively few homosexuals seriously try to change and few therapists encourage them to do so, the notion that homosexuality is irreversible is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If nobody tries, nobody will succeed.... Working on one's self, let alone fighting one's undesirable, self-cen-

tered habits and attachments is not a popular issue in our permissive and overindulgent age.... The specious exhortation 'accept yourself' becomes tantamount to surrender to immaturity on the one hand and repression of one's 'better me' on the other.... The alternative—to work on yourself—is more difficult, but it is the only way to inner happiness and peace of mind."¹⁶

Several studies have been carried out to try to determine whether there might indeed be a genetic component to homosexuality. The media, not known for its thorough understanding of genetics, has, at times, misrepresented the findings of these studies.

Although biology does play a role, as it does in all behavior, no gay gene has been discovered. It is revealing, however, that some gay advocates still peddle the gay-gene myth, just as they persist in promoting Alfred Kinsey's far-fetched and long discredited statistic that "ten percent of men are homosexual." Of course even if a biological predisposition to homosexuality is discovered, it would not preclude efforts to change any more than the presence of an organic component would dissuade one from seeking to overcome depression, alcoholism or attention deficit disorder.

Interestingly, some influential gay personalities have disagreed with the dogged insistence on defining homosexuality as innate or immutable. These include author Camille Paglia¹⁷ and biologist Dr. Anne Fausto-Sterling of Brown University. Referring to the biological argument for the development of homosexuality, Dr. Fausto-Sterling states: "It provides a legal argument that is, at the moment, actually having some sway in court. For me, it's in a very shaky place. It's bad science."¹⁸ Furthermore, some gay advocates, including noted researcher Simon LeVay and psychologist Douglas Haldeman have acknowledged that there is no valid reason to deny reorientation therapy to those who want it.¹⁹ Their stance seems to be influencing the mental health

establishment. Last year several articles on the subject appeared in American Psychological Association publications. One article argued in favor of providing reorientation therapy,²⁰ while another—a study of former gays—found that not only is changing sexual orientation quite realistic for many people, but also that a majority of those who participated in reorientation therapy felt that their experiences were positive and helpful.²¹

Therapists (and knowledgeable *rabbanim*) do not necessarily aim for a cure but rather for control. There are urges, even overwhelming ones, that are never cured; people learn to cope

Keeping halachah was never said to be easy, only right.

with them. Keeping *halachah* was never said to be easy, only right.

Because of the obstacles they face, I consider my clients to be heroic. I emerge from our weekly group meetings inspired. The participants at these meetings are struggling against powerful sexual urges, and while it is true that most men have to struggle against sexual inclinations, for these men it is more difficult. Their desires cannot readily be channeled into something permissible. Nevertheless, all of the men in our group are making progress not just in dealing with SSA but also in developing self-esteem, becoming more assertive and improving communication. These individuals are among the finest people I know. I believe that they are very lofty souls, and I suspect that is why God has given them this challenge.

One of my former clients recently got married. He had been abstinent for about five years and for the past two years has worked hard to develop an attraction to women. Had he gone to a therapist who bought into the myth that homosexuality is irreversible, he probably would never have reached this stage. Being a halachic

Jew, he would have seen no choice but to remain celibate. Given that I have met men with SSA who have been in good marriages for decades, it would have been misguided to deny my client the option to marry.

At the same time, we should be wary of building false hopes, and we must be sympathetic to those who feel that change is too difficult. In the words of Rabbi Sam Rosenberg, a New Jersey-based family therapist who has worked with dozens of individuals to help diminish homosexual attractions, "While there's no question that Judaism prohibits homosexual acts, we must be mindful that it can be a very painful struggle, one that you can't judge if you've never been there."

The Wave of the Future

Increasingly, the trend among strugglers is to rely on support from those facing similar challenges as well as from other concerned individuals. For example, Richard Wyler, founder of **www.peoplecanchange.com**, organizes weekend retreats in which groups of strugglers engage in intensive therapy and self-discovery. Opines Wyler, "You psychologists have largely turned your backs on us; we've come to realize that if we're going to get help, it's got to come from each other."

In the Jewish world, the most active organization assisting strugglers is JONAH. Staffed entirely by volunteers, the non-profit organization provides support, information and referrals. Through its hotline and web site,²² JONAH fields hundreds of inquiries per week from around the world, and members share their experiences through online discussions and group meetings.²³

Providing members with a sense of community, JONAH introduced one of my clients in London (with whom I work on the phone) to three other strugglers in the United Kingdom, and they now meet regularly to encourage each other. This sort of informal therapy and support—grass-roots initiatives by former and cur-

rent strugglers—can not only enable people to overcome their SSA but can ultimately become a force in helping to defy the societal enthusiasm towards homosexuality.

Controlling behavior, especially when difficult, is precisely what the Torah asks of its adherents. For a Jew, the struggle to overcome one's drives imbues one's life with meaning.²⁴ **JA**

Notes

1. Several have engaged lawyers to try to get themselves removed from the film, so far without success.

2. Steven Greenberg, "The Roots of Secular Humanistic Judaism," September 2000,

<http://shma.com/sept00/greenberg.htm>.

3. Steven Greenberg, "Between Intermarriage and Conversion: Finding a Middle Way," 4 October 2002,

<http://www.clal.org/ss43.html>.

4. Over time, these so-called Orthodox groups tend to move increasingly further from tradition: the Jewish-lesbian organization, Orthodykes, now marches in gay parades wearing T-shirts that say, "Kiss me, I'm Jewish."

5. "Homosexuality and Judaism," *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, vol. XI (1986).

6. "Why Neither Homosexuality nor Heterosexuality Exist in Judaism," (winter 1998): 26-29.

7. One major therapy center, known for promoting therapeutic approaches that view people as the "experts in their own lives," recently issued a statement condemning therapy that "constructs homosexual desire as in any way less acceptable than heterosexual desire,"

adding that "we celebrate lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender choices and lifestyles."

8. See, e.g., the October 1999 issue of *Archives of General Psychiatry*, which devoted five articles to the subject.

9. For a discussion of possible causes of the high incidence of mental illnesses among homosexuals, see N.E. Whitehead's article, "Homosexuality and Mental Health Problems," available at <http://www.narth.com/docs/whitehead.html>.

10. By urging clients to find only external sources for their discontent (i.e., society), GAT makes a mockery of self-exploration—a major purpose of therapy—and self-determination. Furthermore, the labeling of clients as intrinsically homosexual becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that stymies growth.

11. R. M. Perez, K. DeBord, K. Bieschke eds., 2000.

12. Kansas City, MO, 1998.

13. Not that the APA's opinion should be a determining factor in the debate. After all, it was another former APA president, George Albee, who called on psychologists to help get rid of organized religion. "It doesn't matter which religion, they are all patriarchal...Every major religion puts women down."

14. "Same Office, Different Aspirations," *APA Monitor on Psychology* (December 2001): 20.

15. "Can Some Gay Men and Lesbians Change Their Sexual Orientation? 200 Subjects Reporting a Change from Homosexual to Heterosexual Orientation," Biometrics Research Department, New York State Psychiatric Institute. A preliminary

report of the results of this study was presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association, 9 May 2001 in New Orleans, LA.

16. *Homosexuality and Hope: A Psychologist Talks About Treatment and Change* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1986), 105-6.

17. *Vamps and Tramps: New Essays* (New York, 1994), 70-72.

18. Claudia Dreifus, "Exploring What Makes Us Male or Female," *The New York Times*, 2 January 2001, Science section.

19. Reported in David Nimmons, "Sex and the Brain," *Discover Archives* (March, 1994): 64-71. Haldeman, "Gay Rights: The Implication of Sexual Orientation Conversion Therapy." Paper presented at the 108th Meeting of the American Psychological Association (Washington, DC, 7 August 2000).

20. Mark A. Yarhouse and Warren Throckmorton, "Ethical Issues in Attempts to Ban Reorientation Therapies," *Psychotherapy: Theory/Research/Practice/Training*, vol. 39, no. 1, 66-75.

21. Warren Throckmorton, "Initial Empirical and Clinical Findings Concerning the Change Process for Ex-Gays," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, vol. 33, no. 3 (2002).

22. JONAH hotline is 201-433-3444 or visit **www.jonahweb.org**.

23. Although it stresses the traditional Jewish view of *teshuvah*, JONAH is not an Orthodox organization. Orthodox Jews interested in joining are advised to consult Rabbi Rosenberg at 908-351-5409 on how best to benefit from this important resource.

24. *Even Sheleimah* 1:2.