

# All the colours of the Keshet

What it's like for gay and lesbian students who come out at Jewish day schools

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High school can be hard for adolescents. For LGBTQ students who come out in a Jewish school, there can be additional minefields, from insensitive peers to dogmatic teachers, but they may also find support, sometimes when they least expect it.

Sarah Jacobsohn, a Grade 11 student at Winnipeg's Gray Academy of Jewish Education, said coming out is not an easy process, but it wasn't more difficult because she attends a Jewish school.

"For me, when I was in the process of coming out and realizing who I was, I had never really thought of it as an issue, in terms of the Jewish community. I just thought of it for me as a big deal coming out in general," she said. "The community here (at Gray Academy) is so accepting and diverse, not only in terms of sexual orientation, but in race, in culture."

Jacobsohn is president of Gray Academy's gay-straight alliance (GSA) club,

called Keshet (rainbow in Hebrew), which won a human rights award a few years ago for its pioneering work at a faith-based school. But Jacobsohn is also the first to admit that her high school still has a way to travel to become a supportive place for gay teens. She's frustrated that in a Jewish studies class, the assumption is that all families include a husband and wife. Sometimes, when walking the halls of her high school, she will hear students use words like "fag," not directed at anyone in particular, but she attributes it to ignorance among younger students, not homophobia or malice.

"In general, the language used in our school is pretty dated. I think it's more of an issue about not being educated about it," she said.

Despite that, she still finds her pluralistic Jewish high school to be an accepting place. She is currently trying to fix up a male friend with a same-sex date for the Grade 12 grad dance and the plan has met with approval from her classmates. "There's been no pushback, there's a lot of



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support," she said.

Jacobsohn's experiences, in a place where the idea of a same-sex couple attending the grad dance doesn't raise an eyebrow, could not be more different than English teacher Andrew Kaplan's, the staff advisor for the Keshet club, who graduated from Gray Academy two decades ago.

He sums up his time in high school in one word: "toxic."

But it wasn't just Gray Academy in particular, it was all schools, he said. "I didn't even know that I was gay.... That wasn't even an option for me identity-wise, because of all the negative stigma surrounding it."

Today, Gray Academy is "a completely different place," he said.

"For me, coming to the school, I saw it as my responsibility to create the safe spaces that I didn't have."

The approaches Jewish schools have taken toward sexual orientation have changed at a dizzying pace, especially in non-Orthodox institutions, said Justin Rosen Smolen, national director of youth programs at Keshet, a U.S.-based LGBTQ advocacy and education group.

Gay students, who are coming out at ever earlier ages, find that Jewish high schools offer both advantages and challenges, he said.

Jewish schools – where staff and students share a common culture, religion and ethnicity – can give students a sense of community and make it easier for them

to be accepted. But young people can also find it challenging to reinvent themselves in a small community where everyone has known them for years, he said.

Smolen said that gay students in Orthodox institutions have a variety of experiences, depending on the school's philosophy. "I hear often that socially, some of the experiences of our Orthodox LGBTQ students is neutral or even positive, and then depending on the ideology of their teachers or administrators, they can have moments where they feel jarred, or question their emotional or psychological safety because of their teachers' stance on LGBTQ students," he said.

Although all of the people *The CJN* interviewed for this story have come out to their friends and immediate family members, a number asked not to be identified, a sign that sexual orientation remains a sensitive subject in the Jewish community.

About five years ago, Rebecca (who asked that her real name not be used) graduated from an all-girls modern Orthodox high school, where sexual orientation was never discussed. "It was non-existent," she said.

"There was no such thing as being modern Orthodox and gay. I didn't know anyone like that. There were no family friends like that. It just wasn't existent, so it seemed like you had to choose between the identities."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28

# ‘Realizing I was gay made me question everything’

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

She came out in university and no longer describes herself as Orthodox. “Realizing I was gay, and that’s such a big part of who I am, and not acknowledging that for so many years, it shook my whole understanding of myself and my belief and made me question everything I believe,” she said.

Looking back at how the silence surrounding sexuality affected her, she said: “You have to make a choice between different parts of yourself and you can’t embrace your whole self. I had major anxiety in school and I think that contributed.”

Modern Orthodox schools have to walk a fine line between caring for adolescents who are at a time in their lives when they may be exploring and questioning their identity, and a religious ideology that does not embrace the homosexual lifestyle.

Some say the issue simply hasn’t arisen at their schools, especially if there are no students who have identified as being gay.

“I’ve been in Jewish education and administration for a lot of years, and for whatever reason, it has not been an issue I have ever had to deal with,” said Kalman Stein, the recently hired head of Hebrew Academy, an Orthodox day school in Montreal.

“I don’t know of any gay or lesbian students in our high school. There might be, but no one’s come out, so it’s an issue we’re not dealing with.”

Rabbi Seth Grauer, head of Toronto’s Bnei Akiva Schools, said that if a student came out to him, he would approach the student with sensitivity and care, but not unconditional acceptance.

“It’s important to understand my reception would not be one of approval, because you’re talking about complicated halachic issues that of course as an Orthodox school, we can’t condone and we can’t support. But if my students came to me,



In March 2017, student council members at TanenbaumCHAT celebrated Keshet Day with CHAT alumni.

I would emphasize that they are a member of our school community and I would approach them from the perspective of sensitivity, of care, of concern for them and for their well-being,” he said.

It’s a complicated line, said Rabbi Grauer, who has spoken with many other heads of schools about how to navigate the issue.

“You do your best to show students that, first and most significant, that you genuinely care about them as people, you genuinely care about their mental health, about their emotional well-being, about their religious growth, about their spiritual well-being, about their relationships with their parents and others,” he said. “But it doesn’t necessarily mean we are able to support their life choices and all of their life decisions.”

Esther, who also asked that her real name not be used, encountered some-

thing similar after asking a teacher to prepare a lesson about homosexuality, when she was a student at the Anne and Max Tanenbaum Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto around five years ago.

The teacher handed out a pamphlet that suggested there were other options to being gay.

“I stood up in class and looked around and said, ‘If any of you guys are gay, completely ignore this.’ It was just a total crap booklet,” she said.

“I really liked that teacher, he was a great teacher, but things at CHAR (the northern branch of TanenbaumCHAT) a lot of times were taught from an Orthodox point of view.”

Esther has since gone back to TanenbaumCHAT to speak to Grade 12 students about the transition to university. She tells them that, “I got a really great education, but not about sensitivity, be it cultural

sensitivity, or sensitivity about people’s sexuality. I had to learn that mostly myself.”

But attitudes are changing. More recently, Jonathan (not his real name) said his rabbinics class at TanenbaumCHAT tackled the issue of gay marriage.

“I was nervous about it,” he said, but in the end, the class was “very, very respectful... It was halachically sound and socially inoffensive.”

Officials from both Gray Academy and TanenbaumCHAT say they have spent professional development time on educating teachers and administrators about how to make their schools inclusive for gay students.

Jonathan said he rarely hears derogatory words at school, and when he does, the comment is shut down almost immediately by another student.

TanenbaumCHAT’s GSA club has also made students feel less isolated. “There are people who before we had meetings, I did not know they were part of the (LGBTQ) community, but they felt comfortable with the club to start telling people, which to me is extremely important, because for me, being in the closet was really hard,” Jonathan said. “The fact that people with the club feel comfortable to come out is amazing.”

Smolen, who hears from dozens of high school students in his job at Keshet, says it’s crucial for young people’s mental health to feel accepted for who they are.

“There’s a significant toll that being in an environment where you feel constantly that you’re not worthy of dignity, that there’s a part of you that is an anathema ... it’s humiliating and demoralizing at such a level there can be severe health challenges that arise,” he said.

“That doesn’t happen in every community, but that is a real experience of LGBTQ people across communities in secular and religious spaces.” ■



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