

Welcoming Lesbian and Gay Jews Into Our Synagogues

Truly welcoming lesbian and gay Jews into our synagogues means allowing them and their concerns to be visible, and eliminating heterosexual bias.

To do so, ask yourselves the following questions:

Publicity:

1. Is the presence of lesbian and gay Jews in our community/congregation visible in our publicity?

Look at your synagogue's flyers, posters, listing of community events in the town newspaper, newspaper ads, newspaper articles, press releases, brochure, monthly newsletter, journal, photo displays in community room or lobby...

2. Do notice of events for "couples" make explicit that lesbian/gay couples are welcome?

3. Do notices of events for "families" make explicit that lesbians and gay men (as single-parents or as co-parents) are welcome with their children?

(Or is our parent-toddler group called "Mommy, Daddy and Me"?)

4. In which publications does our synagogue advertise its activities? Could we list our activities in publications read by lesbians and gay men (such as The Native, Outweek, or travel guides such as Places of Interest and The Women's Traveler, both of which list places of worship)?

Leadership:

1. Are lesbian and gay Jews in position of leadership in our congregation as Trustees, committee chairs, lay service-leaders (Torah readers, shofar blowers...), teachers, youth advisors, administrative staff, clergy...?

2. Are lesbians and gay men ever invited to speak to the congregation as guest lecturers, scholars in residence, key note speakers, etc.? Or do we give the impression that all "experts in their field", all politicians, historians, psychologists, educators, etc., are heterosexual?

3. Has our congregation ever given an award to, or testimonial dinner for, a lesbian or gay man?

Employment:

1. Does our congregation have a policy of non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation?

Do search committees make that policy explicit when seeking placement assistance from the NATE, NATA, CCAR, or ACC and when interviewing applicants?

Or do employees or prospective employees feel they must remain in the closet?

2. Does our congregation extend "spousal benefits" to the partners of our employees? (e.g. Is the health insurance we provide for a gay/lesbian employee, who has a partner, an individual or a family policy?)

Does our congregation provide paid leave days for an employee to care for a sick "partner" or to mourn his/her death?

3. Does our congregation invite "partners" to events for employees and their families (e.g. Teacher Appreciation Sabbath...)?

Membership:

Do our membership conditions/materials presume heterosexuality or discriminate against lesbians and gay men?

1. If we have family membership, is that afforded to gay lesbian couples?

2. Does our application use the word "spouse" and never lover/friend/partner?

3. Do we ask about "marital status" on our membership application? (Remember lesbian and gay couples are not allowed to marry.)

Do you list another category other than "married" or "single"?)

4. When we ask, "Would you like the name of a family member included on our Yahrzeit list?", do we also invite lesbian and gay members to name deceased partners/lovers and close friends (who may have been the emotional equivalent of a brother/sister)?

Social Events:

Would a lesbian/gay couple or single lesbian/gay members or prospective members feel welcome at our social events?

1. Could people of the same sex dance together?
2. Could gay folks dance with straight folks?
3. Can lesbians and gay men talk freely about their work/lives at the dinner table or over cocktails?

If, in our community, there is no lesbian and gay community center, no lesbian or gay bars, restaurants, or places to met, talk and dance, then:

1. Could our synagogue rent space to lesbians and gay men for social or communal events (as synagogues often rent space to AA or Scouts or other groups)?
2. Could our synagogue sponsor social events for single lesbian and gay Jews (e.g. dances, pot-luck suppers, etc.)?

Liturgy:

1. Do we include people with AIDS, "whose names we are not free to mention" in our Mi sheberach prayer for those who are since - along with those names we can mention?
2. Do we invite people to add names of lovers and close friends to the mi sheberach list, and do we say, "xxxxxxxx, lover of our member yyyyyyyyyy"?
3. Do gay/lesbian couples receive joint aliyot and anniversary blessings?
4. Do gay/lesbian couples celebrate Kiddushin (Jewish holy union) in our

sanctuary? Will our rabbi officiate?

5. May they name children (born by AID or adopted) in our sanctuary?

6. When a child is named and we say, "ke shem she nichmas le brit, keyn yikanes le Torah, le chuppah ulemaasim tovim" ("Just as he/she has entered the Covenant so may he/she be introduced to Torah, chuppah, and deeds of lovingkindness, ") how is "chuppah" translated? As "marriage?" If so, that presumes that the child will be heterosexual, or it sounds as if we are praying that the child will be heterosexual. How would a lesbian/gay adult attending the ceremony feel upon hearing those words?

Indeed, one might say, "So may he/she be introduced to Torah, and deed of lovingkindness and may he/she someday find her love."

Or, in congregations in which gay/lesbian couples do stand under the chuppah, you might simply leave chuppah untranslated.

7. Does our congregation arrange shiva minyans for members who have lost lovers/partners/long-time companions or sibling-equivalents? (Often lesbian and gay men become like sisters and brothers to each other, especially when they have been estranged from their biological families. One might grieve over an "adopted" sister or brother as over a biological one.)

(For more on death, see below: Pastoral Care)

8. In our Yom Hashoa service, if victims other than Jews are mentioned, are gay men included?
9. In our home and congregational seders and in our printed haggadot, when oppressed groups other than Jews are mentioned, are lesbians and gay men included?
10. If contemporary poetry, readings and musical compositions are ever included in our liturgy, are works by lesbian/gay authors

Beverly / Mimi Ellen
7784882

or composers included?

11. Could our congregation celebrate Lesbian and Gay Pride Shabbat? (Do we celebrate Martin Luther King Day?) Ought our celebrations be Jewish or interfaith?

12. When the Song of Songs is read on the Intermediate Sabbath in Pesach might a woman read/chant passages which speak of love for a woman and a man read/chant passages which speak of love for a man?

13. When the love between God and Israel is described liturgically, is it always put in heterosexual terms? When the love between Israel and the Sabbath is described liturgically, is it always put in heterosexual terms?

Pastoral Care:

1. When a supposedly "single" member is sick or dies, is the rabbi sensitive to the possibility that there may be a surviving long-time companion? Does the rabbi ask the patient? Does the rabbi remain in contact with the companion during the member's illness? Does the rabbi include the companion in the preparations for the funeral and eulogy?

2. If our synagogue ever distributes, or publishes in the monthly bulletin, information about living wills or funeral planning, does that information presume heterosexuality or does it also include information for lesbians and gay men? Does the information explain how to designate a companion as "next of kin" with power of attorney, etc.? Does the information include a list of attorneys who specialize in helping lesbians and gay men prepare wills, etc.?

Sermons:

1. Is the presence of lesbians and gay men in our congregation/community/families ever evident in the word we hear from the pulpit?

2. Do sermons ever address (directly or in passing) events/issues of concern to lesbians and gay men? (e.g.: NY City Council's Lesbian and Gay Rights Bill • U.S. Supreme

Court Hardwick case • Discrimination against homosexuals in armed services • positions of politicians and nominees for judicial appointments • Lesbian and Gay rights march on Washington • AIDS

3. Do the rabbi's sermons presume that all Jews have been, are, or want to be married, or to bear children? (Or are words such as "committed relationship" and "raising children" used instead?)

Social Action:

1. Are there lesbians and gay men on the social action committee?

2. Are lesbian and gay concerns reflected in the work of the social action committee and in the educational programs sponsored by the committee?

3. Remember: fighting for lesbian and gay rights in America is not a one-time project but an ongoing struggle, conducted on numerous fronts, and in response to specific crises as they arise.

Sisterhood:

1. Are lesbians in our Sisterhood invisible? Do they feel welcome, as lesbians, or do they feel that to be involved in Sisterhood they must remain in the closet?

2. Are issues of concern to lesbians on our Sisterhood's agenda?

3. Are our Sisterhood meetings accessible to single and working mothers? Is child care provided?

Brotherhood:

1. Are gay men in our Brotherhood invisible? Do they feel welcome, as gay men, or do they feel that to be involved in Brotherhood they must remain in the closet?

2. Are issues of concern to gay men on our Brotherhood's agenda?

3. Are Brotherhood meetings accessible to single and working fathers? Is child care provided?