

Good morning everyone. Thank you for hosting me here today. I am honoured to be welcomed into your community. Thank you to Chana & Steph for instigating this and for the community as a whole for welcoming me and having this conversation.

13 Years ago I ascended the bimah to lein Kedoshim, part of the parsha we read today, and the parsha that contains one of the verses prohibiting homosexual relations. As a 13 year old, I was acutely aware of this and it made me extremely anxious. I remember sitting at my barmitzvah party and my brother giving a dvar torah mentioning these 'forbidden relationships' within the week's portion. I never thought that 13 years later I would be speaking about this publicly on Shabbat Aharei Mot Kedoshim to raise awareness of the struggles of being Gay & Orthodox.

I would like to share my personal story with you in an attempt to give you an insight into growing up gay in our community. I hope in sharing it I can highlight the issues I have faced while growing up and how we can help others to avoid the pain that I and many others endured.

I realised I was different at a very young age. It was not until primary school that I heard the word gay and not until secondary school that I realised that the difference I felt all was that I was gay. It took me almost seven years from that point to come out to my parents and another four years to accept myself and

come out to my family and friends. My life followed the trajectory of most young Orthodox Jews, going to Jewish primary and secondary schools, getting involved in Bnei Akiva and spending a year in Israel studying at Yeshiva, but the outside didn't match the inside. Below this façade of normality, I was constantly battling with these feelings and my desire to have a family and be accepted by my community.

This fear of being rejected by my family and community led me to an organisation offering therapy to change people's sexuality. I read through every article on their website and was convinced that this was the solution to all these years of feeling different and uncomfortable. It made sense to a young Jewish teenager who loved his religion but felt he had to change to align with its teachings. This therapy didn't achieve its goal and left me feeling apathetic, repressed and hopeless, and I was one of the lucky ones. Many young people who go through this kind of therapy are abused and become depressed. There are Rabbis and professionals in our community still suggesting this to young adults and this must be stopped.

The years after my failed attempt at changing my sexuality were difficult. The feeling of discomfort became not just a symptom of how I felt but my whole existence. This is what it felt like to *live a life that wasn't authentic*. It took me three years from this point to finally start my journey to acceptance. Once I did share my sexuality with the rest of my family and friends it felt like I could

breathe again. Thank G-d, I am blessed with a family that loved me and a group of friends that supported me but this is by no means the norm.

I have spent time talking about my life so far and I would like to take a moment more of your time to share with you a picture of the hopes I have for my future and how we can create this future for gay Jews in our community.

I want to see a world where the word gay is descriptive not pejorative. A world where a young boy on his Israel tour trip needn't worry about people calling him 'gay' in case he goes red and unwillingly shares his secret through his embarrassment. A world that sees a person struggling to live a life in service of G-d, not just an abomination.

I want to live in a community that gives me an Aliyah when I have a family simcha. I want to live in a community where my relationship isn't just seen as a prohibited sexual act but as a commitment between two people trying to connect to their tradition and each other. A community that allows me to pay membership as a couple. A community that will stand up for me and others when I am attacked for speaking out in support of compassion and acceptance. A community that doesn't conflate Halacha with Homophobia. A community that sees me and other LGBT Jews as people and not just prohibitions. A community that doesn't expect its vulnerable members to fight for a chance to be accepted.

I want to attend a shul where the Rabbi shows love for the other because they realise that all are created in the image of G-d. A shul where the Rabbi seeks to understand the difficulties their congregants face and not ignore them. A shul where the Rabbi is open and transparent and uses that to connect with their community. I want to attend a shul where the Rabbi is the one who stands up and speaks about welcoming LGBT Jews into their community.

Steps like these taken by Rabbis, lay leaders and congregants would create a space that Jews struggling with their sexuality would feel comfortable in and in turn allow a generation of Jews that are leaving our community to return home.

It is no longer acceptable to talk about 'them', this is about 'us' The Torah will now be read. Two verses will be read that weigh on me each and every day. Read them, listen to them. Take them to your Shabbat lunch table and grapple with them. Perhaps sharing that weight between a whole community will be the first step in creating a place where LGBT Jews feel part of the 'us' and not the 'them'.