Coming out of the parents’ closet

Eshel retreat for Orthodox parents of LGBT children creates community, brings hard issues to light

JOANNE PALMER

It’s not easy being Orthodox and gay. Nor is it easy being the Orthodox parent of a gay man, a lesbian, a bisexual, a transgender person, or a self-identified queer.

(See! Even the language is hard; “queer” seems harsh, judgmental, and out-of-bounds, as well as hard to define, although it’s used comfortably by people who apply that label to themselves.)

In May, for the fourth time, the organization Eshel, which primarily is a support system for LGBTQ Orthodox Jews, is offering its yearly retreat for that community’s parents.

It also hosts a monthly conference call for parents, along with many other resources and referrals; see the box for more information.

It attracts many parents, who find the nonjudgmental community it offers a balm. As many of them say, “When your kids come out of the closet, you go right inside it.” And the closet is a dark, airless, stifling place.

Among those parents who go to the Eshel retreat every year are at least two couples from Englewood’s Congregation Ahavath Torah. One of those couples, Jeannie and Dr. Kenneth Prager, have been public about their daughter, Tamar, who is lesbian, whom they love, and of whom they are deeply proud (as they are of their three other children).

The other couple, Leah and Steven, as we will call them, are equally proud of their daughter, but they do not feel free to use their names. That’s not because they are ashamed, they say fiercely, and it’s not because they feel that their own community would not accept them, but because they worry about their former son-in-law’s community, which is farther to the right than theirs.

They still are fond of their former son-in-law, whom they suspect has not been able to be open about why his marriage died, and they do not want to cause him any more pain. They assume that the details of their story will make their identity clear off the radar and that many people know that sexuality is a spectrum. They didn’t — until I had to.

Her daughter “met a very lovely fellow, and they were married for four years before they separated and she moved back home.”

“Her husband knew that she identified as bisexual, so it wasn’t as much a surprise to him,” Leah continued. “I’m not sure that most people know that sexuality is a spectrum. I didn’t — until I had to.”

Her daughter also had been diagnosed with major depression, which “derailed her life, and was a much bigger issue than the bisexuality, but was not necessarily connected” to her sexuality, Leah said.

Her daughter is now studying at Pardes, in Israel, recovered from the depression, full of hope for her next move. “It’s been a hard slog, though, and her parents hope that community support will make it easier both for them and for other parents at the beginning of what might be a long road.

“Our daughter was eager to help us understand this part of her life,” Leah said. “They assume that the details of their story will make their identity clear off the radar and that many people know that sexuality is a spectrum. I didn’t — until I had to.”

Jeannie and Dr. Kenneth Prager of Englewood talk to another parent at the retreat.

Everyone sang, full throated, full voiced, and you could just feel the fellowship.

STEVEN

Her daughter “met a very lovely fellow, and they were married for four years before they separated and she moved back home.”

“Her husband knew that she identified as bisexual, so it wasn’t as much a surprise to him,” Leah continued. “I’m not sure that most people know that sexuality is a spectrum. I didn’t — until I had to.”

Her daughter also had been diagnosed with major depression, which “derailed her life, and was a much bigger issue than the bisexuality, but was not necessarily connected” to her sexuality, Leah said.

Her daughter is now studying at Pardes, in Israel, recovered from the depression, full of hope for her next move. “It’s been a hard slog, though, and her parents hope that community support will make it easier both for them and for other parents at the beginning of what might be a long road.

“Our daughter was eager to help us understand this part of her life,” Leah said. “They assume that the details of their story will make their identity clear off the radar and that many people know that sexuality is a spectrum. I didn’t — until I had to.”

“Her husband knew that she identified as bisexual, so it wasn’t as much a surprise to him,” Leah continued. “I’m not sure that most people know that sexuality is a spectrum. I didn’t — until I had to.”

Her daughter also had been diagnosed with major depression, which “derailed her life, and was a much bigger issue than the bisexuality, but was not necessarily connected” to her sexuality, Leah said.

Her daughter is now studying at Pardes, in Israel, recovered from the depression, full of hope for her next move. “It’s been a hard slog, though, and her parents hope that community support will make it easier both for them and for other parents at the beginning of what might be a long road.

“Our daughter was eager to help us understand this part of her life,” Leah said. “They assume that the details of their story will make their identity clear off the radar and that many people know that sexuality is a spectrum. I didn’t — until I had to.”

“Her husband knew that she identified as bisexual, so it wasn’t as much a surprise to him,” Leah continued. “I’m not sure that most people know that sexuality is a spectrum. I didn’t — until I had to.”

Her daughter also had been diagnosed with major depression, which “derailed her life, and was a much bigger issue than the bisexuality, but was not necessarily connected” to her sexuality, Leah said.

Her daughter is now studying at Pardes, in Israel, recovered from the depression, full of hope for her next move. “It’s been a hard slog, though, and her parents hope that community support will make it easier both for them and for other parents at the beginning of what might be a long road.

“Our daughter was eager to help us understand this part of her life,” Leah said. “They assume that the details of their story will make their identity clear off the radar and that many people know that sexuality is a spectrum. I didn’t — until I had to.”

“Her husband knew that she identified as bisexual, so it wasn’t as much a surprise to him,” Leah continued. “I’m not sure that most people know that sexuality is a spectrum. I didn’t — until I had to.”

Her daughter also had been diagnosed with major depression, which “derailed her life, and was a much bigger issue than the bisexuality, but was not necessarily connected” to her sexuality, Leah said.

Her daughter is now studying at Pardes, in Israel, recovered from the depression, full of hope for her next move. “It’s been a hard slog, though, and her parents hope that community support will make it easier both for them and for other parents at the beginning of what might be a long road.

“Our daughter was eager to help us understand this part of her life,” Leah said. “They assume that the details of their story will make their identity clear off the radar and that many people know that sexuality is a spectrum. I didn’t — until I had to.”
To be continued...

CELEBRATE PASSOVER

We have the Area’s Largest Selection of Kosher Wines!

WINE SAVINGS COUPON
Valid 4/15/2016 - 5/1/2016

$15 OFF WINE
Save $15 on your purchase of 750ml and/or 1.5L WINE totaling $100 or more. (Maximum discount savings $15 with this coupon.)


KOSHER SWEET 750ML
Manischewitz-Cranberry .......................... 4.99
Manischewitz-Grape ............................... 4.99
Manischewitz-Orange .............................. 4.99
Manischewitz-Peach ............................... 4.99
Manischewitz-Strawberry ........................ 4.99

KOSHER ALTERNATIVE 750ML
Alfasi Merlot ........................................ 8.99
Baron Herzog Chardonnay ....................... 8.49
Baron Herzog Chardonnay ....................... 8.49
Baron Herzog Merlot .............................. 12.99
Baron Herzog Reserve Cabernet ................ 21.99

KOSHER AMERICAN 750ML
Baron Herzog-Chardonnay ....................... 13.99
Baron Herzog-Blanc ................................ 8.49
Baron Herzog-Merlot .............................. 12.99

KOSHER JERUSALEM 750ML
Barkan-Reserve Chardonnay .................... 14.99
Gama-Merlot ........................................ 14.99
Manischewitz-Orin-White Concord .......... 7.99
Manischewitz-Unicorn Gin ...................... 7.99
Manischewitz-Orin-RedConcord ............. 7.99

AMERICA’S WINE SUPERSTORE®
OVER 8,000 WINES

America’s Best Value Wine
Pacific Peak Chardonnay, Cabernet, Merlot California, 750ml $2.67

Bogle Merlot California, 750ml $6.37
Cavit Pinot Grigio Italy, 750ml $17.17
Apothic Red California, 750ml $9.47
3 Lohr Cabernet Seven Oaks California, 750ml $13.07
Santa Margherita Pinot Grigio Italy, 750ml $20.17

AMERICA’S BEER SUPERSTORE®
OVER 2,500 BEERS

Coors Light ........................................... $21.49
Corona Extra, Corona Light ..................... $26.49
Heineken, Amstel Light ........................... $26.49
Menziesy VS 750ml ................................. $31.09
Dewar’s 1.75L ................................. $32.09
Jose Cuervo Gold 1.75L ...................... $32.09
Tangray Gin 1.75L .............................. $37.09
Jack Daniel’s Black 1.75L ...................... $43.09

Total Wine
Spirits, Beer & More

Prices and coupon good thru 5/1/2016. The specific prices and products in this ad are set by EG Holding Corp., Inc., and may not be available at other stores. Total Wine & More is not responsible for typographical errors, human error or supplier price increases. Same Price Cash or Credit. Products while supplies last. We reserve the right to limit quantities. Total Wine & More is a trademarked business of Retail Services & Systems, Inc. All rights reserved. Please drink responsibly. Use a designated driver.

TotalWine.com / TotalWineAndMore / Totalwine.com

RIVER EDGE
New bridge Landing at River edge
1651 Main St, River Edge, NJ 07661 • (201) 960-1777
Mon-Sat 9am-10pm, Sun 12noon-8pm

UNION
Thumlevin Shopping Center
100 Springfield Road, Union, New Jersey 07083
908-888-2663 • Mon-Sat 9am-10pm, Sun 12noon-8pm

WEST ORANGE
Essex Green Shopping Center
450 Preparred Ave, West Orange, New Jersey 07052
732-324-0060 • Mon-Sat 9am-10pm, Sun 12noon-8pm

Enjoy the Total Wine & More Experience in 18 States. Find them at TotalWine.com

JEWISH STANDARD APRIL 15, 2016 13
Parents
FROM PAGE 12

So, with all his preconceptions about his own state of advanced acceptance, Steven got to the retreat, “and Friday night, Kabalat Shabbat was one of the most moving religious services I have ever experienced. Everyone sang, full throated, full voiced, and you could just feel the fellowship, even though you’d never met most of them before. It was so moving.”

“Eshel is very discreet. There are parents we met at the first retreat who are still not out in their community. As the parents of gay children, it really did provide a safe space. The feeling of fellowship was very powerful.”

He can bring some of that feeling home. “I occasionally lead services at Ahavat Torah, and I occasionally read from the Torah,” he said. “I was afraid that they might not let me any more, if they knew. But everyone was very open and understanding. “There are parents at Eshel who say when they come out” — as parents of LGBT children, that is, not as themselves gay or lesbian — “they are shunned by their community. We didn’t have any of that.”

Jeanie Prager, who has been going to the Eshel retreat with her husband since it began, stressed the importance of community. “One of the best things about being Orthodox is getting the community as part of your life,” she said. “You are part of the community, and it is there for you. And then you have a gay child, and you lose that. It’s just ripped away from you. Instantly you feel that you can’t talk to your friends, that there is no one you can talk to because you don’t know who will listen to you.”

Eshel just completed a survey of 100 Orthodox parents of LGBT children, she said. “Nine percent of them said they went first to their rabbi when they discovered that they have a gay child. That is shockingly low for people who go to the rabbi for family problems, and it shows that they are afraid of the response they might get. “They were afraid that they’d lose their community. Eshel gives them a community.”

It took them years to be able to tell their friends that their daughter Tamar was lesbian. “Kenny couldn’t tell the people he learned with once a week for 20 years,” she said. “He just could not say it to them. Finally, the day before her wedding, I said to him, ‘It’s now or never.’ He finally got the words out.” That was in September 2005. Tamar has been happily married ever since then, and her parents have shed their reticence.

Recently, Leah and Steven and the Pragers met with their rabbi, Shmuel Goldin. Rabbi Goldin has begun a series of what he calls town halls, when he gathers all the minyanim that make up his more than 700-family congregation together after Shabbat services and talks about issues in place of a more standard talk on the Torah portion. First Rabbi Goldin talks, then he answers questions posed by his listeners.

The first town hall was about women, and the third will be about conversion. The second, last Shabbat, was about LGBTQ Jews. Leah, Steven, and the Pragers had some influence over that. First, he allowed the families to post a flyer about the upcoming retreat. Next, at the town hall, he called on Dr. Prager for the first question. “I gave a 10-minute speech, and it was extremely well received,” he said. “One guy told me, three weeks later, that I had really clarified some confusing issues for him. I started out by thanking Rabbi Goldin, and I told him that I wished there were 100 Orthodox rabbis in America today offering people like me a chance to speak. I thanked him for being an exception to the rule. “We are definitely in a better place than we were a few years ago, or even last year,” Dr. Prager said. “I do see progress. Never- theless, [Leah] and [Steve] and Jeannie and I are, I think, the only families that have come out publicly in this huge congregation. We know that there are others. It’s a shonda.”

Rabbi Goldin talks about the issue very carefully, attempting to avoid the many landmines it’s easy to trip over. “I’m not really sure I have changed on this issue, other than that my positions have become more detailed,” he said. There are lines that may not be crossed, “and I know where they are — and those lines are not just mine. I have done a lot of consulting with other rabbis.

It is extremely important for the community to address this issue. The way I shape it for my community is that every Jewish generation has to balance between two competing needs, to encranchise as many Jews within its time as possible, to make sure that our Judaism speaks to as many Jews in our time as we can. At the same time, we must maintain the tradition so that it is recognizable, to maintain the traditional values and laws and rules and regulations that have characterized our tradition across time. “I often say that our Judaism has to be recognizable to our grandparents and at the same time our grandchildren’s Judaism has to be recognizable to us. So how do you balance those needs, deal with changing times and at the same time maintain loyalty to your core values?

“Belonging is one of the critical elements of the Jewish experience,” Rabbi Goldin continued. “If you have a group of people who say they feel unconnected, or that they are not a part of the community, then we have the challenge of dealing with it.

“How do you deal with individuals in our community who are gay, and who at the same time express a keen desire to remain part of the Orthodox community? How do we balance our boundaries with the issue of inclusion? It is a challenge, not something to be ignored.”

“You have to figure out what your approach will be.”

His approach, Rabbi Goldin continued, includes allowing gay men and lesbians to join his community, “with the caveat that it does not become a public statement.” It cannot imply acceptance of anything larger. He does not think it is his business to check on people’s sexuality, any more than he would check on whether they drive on Shabbat. “But if someone asked for an aliyah as a Sabbath desecrator,” as a way to show that Ahavath Torah does not care about how Shabbat is observed, then that aliyah would not be given. “If someone said that I want an aliyah davka as a gay man, that I am making a statement,” then there would be no aliyah forthcoming. “We are not making statements other than welcome to the community,” Rabbi Goldin said.

“Where the rubber hits the road, where you say that everything goes, then there are no limits. That certainly is not consonant with Jewish values. “Rabbi Goldin recently announced that in a year and a half, he will leave his position at Ahavath Torah, after more than 30 years, so that he and his wife, Barbara, can make aliyah. This decision, made with some ambivalence because he is so integral to Ahavath Torah, and Ahavath Torah is so central to his life, is huge news both for his community and for the larger one. And of course it affects his ability to control the direction the community will take. He is aware of that irony as he speaks. Still, that is the future. For now, “people have to understand that one of the reasons I did the town hall is because it is important for them to hear their rabbi struggling with the issues, and to hear what goes into the rabbi’s decision-making process,” he said. “It is not arbitrary. It does take a lot of things into consideration. It is an ongoing struggle.”