



In the Garden with Adam and Steve

By Robin Schwartz

Somehow they just knew. The kids in Joe Kort's class at Oak Park High School seemed to see right through him — and they were brutal. The year was 1979 and Joe, then 15, was the eldest of two children growing up in a Reform Jewish household where the word "gay" was never uttered. He was very much "in the closet," careful to avoid the openly gay students at his school who were seen as "misfits" or social outcasts; but his classmates could tell he wasn't straight. "I was bullied a lot. I was spit on; I was beaten up," Joe recalls. "It was a very hostile environment. I didn't play sports, I was around girls all the time and [the kids] used it against me as much as they could. It was awful."

Joe says he first started to become aware of his sexuality at the young age of 8, when he consciously found himself more attracted to boys than girls. As a teen, he was ashamed and depressed, carrying around this monumental secret and trying to find a way to blend in. His mother sent him to Jewish Family Service for outpatient psychotherapy.

"My mom was afraid I was going to harm myself," he says. "I think she knew I was gay, but she didn't know what to do about it. The therapist tried to talk me out of it. I tried dating girls, but it didn't help. When I went away to college, I was finally able to come out. But when I did, all of my Jewish friends abandoned me."

Now a Ph.D. who is a board certified sexologist and psychotherapist, with a private practice in Royal Oak, Kort, 47, says he intimately understands the pain that's led to a recent series of gay teen suicides. In one of the many cases that made national headlines, a Rutgers University freshman (who was not Jewish) jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge after his roommate allegedly

videotaped him with a man in his dorm room and then streamed the footage on the Internet.

GOD'S PLAYBOOK

"A man shall not lie with another man as [he would] with a woman, it is a to'eva (an abomination)."

— *Leviticus 18:22*



Rabbi Jason Miller, spiritual leader of the Reconstructionist synagogue Congregation T'chayah in Oak Park, calls for respect and inclusion.

"It's incumbent upon rabbis and Jewish communal leaders to treat gays and lesbians with dignity and as full-fledged members of our synagogues and institutions," he says.

While Miller believes the aforementioned passage from *Leviticus* is open to interpretation, most members of the Orthodox community do not. In the 2001 documentary *Trembling Before G-d*, the audience follows several gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews and their struggle to reconcile faith and sexuality.

Rabbi Michael Cohen, the pulpit rabbi at Young Israel of Oak Park, an Orthodox synagogue on the same block as Miller's, believes the argument for gay marriage is inherently flawed.

"Orthodox Judaism does not provide for the marriage of two men or two women," Cohen says. "The Torah definitely does not read that one can have what we call today a gay lifestyle."

Young Israel of Oak Park was confronted with a related issue when a gay couple from Huntington Woods applied for a family membership. The application went to both the synagogue's board and the Young Israel national council; the request was denied. Cohen says the men were offered membership as individuals, not as a couple; they declined.

"All synagogues want to be welcoming to every Jew," he says. "At the same time, the Torah deals with the issue of two men cohabitating together and having a sexual relationship — and it's not an accepted lifestyle."

In a March 2009 *Detroit News* article, Rabbi Alon Tolwin, founder of Aish HaTorah Detroit, was more direct: "It's a prohibition like any other prohibition," Tolwin is quoted as saying. "It's dangerous because as a banner issue, it attacks the essence of the morality we're trying to maintain."

Rabbi Miller, however, believes because our understanding of homosexuality in the 21st century is different from previous generations, we must yield to the value of human dignity.

GAY MARRIAGE

According to advocates, the Reform movement has worked for years to include and embrace the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. The ordination of gays and lesbians as rabbis and cantors is permitted in the Reform movement, and many clergy members officiate at same-sex unions.

Rabbi Daniel Nevins, former spiritual leader of Adat Shalom synagogue in Farmington Hills and the current dean of the Rabbinical School of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, co-authored a legal opinion that paved the way for both same-sex commitment ceremonies as well as ordination of gay rabbis within the Conservative movement.

That opinion may have removed technical roadblocks for clerics to officiate at marriage-like commitment ceremonies, but support for actual marriage within the movement is tacit, at best.

The 2006 decision by the Committee of Jewish Law and Standards, which determines the official positions of Conservative Judaism, allowed rabbis permission to officiate at commitment ceremonies for same-sex couples with sole discretion left to either the seminary or the individual rabbi.

In 2000, Joe Kort married his long-time partner, Mike Cramer, in a Reform wedding ceremony at Congregation Shir Tikvah in Troy (they later got married in Massachusetts, one of the few states where gay marriage is legal).

But when Joe and Mike submitted a wedding announcement to the *Detroit Jewish News*, the announcement was returned without being published. That sparked a debate and discussion that ultimately led to the *JN's* decision in September 2004 to print same-sex engagement, union, anniversary and birth announcements.



"We felt this step made sense," *JN* Editor Robert Sklar said at the time. "The gay and lesbian community is not asking us to do anything differently or more; they just want to be treated like any other. If we're really going to be the mirror of the Jewish community, we have to reflect what's going on. To ignore it seems wrong."

Detroit, not known for its progressive social stance on much, was actually years ahead of other large communities when it came to running same-sex announcements in its Jewish newspaper.

Larger, more stable communities across the country have just started to grapple with that particular issue. New Jersey's oldest Jewish newspaper, the *New Jersey Jewish Standard*, found itself at the center of a firestorm several months ago when it published a gay wedding announcement — and quickly issued an apology after receiving criticism from the Orthodox community.

The paper then apologized for apologizing when hundreds of readers expressed outrage over the way it folded under pressure; it's still trying to figure out what the policy will be in the future.

JEWISH GAY NETWORK

"I think people are trying very hard to become open to the possibilities of welcoming people," says Judy Lewis, executive director of the Jewish Gay Network of Michigan. "Jewish people have a sense of social action and know excluding an entire segment of our population just isn't right."

The JGN has offices at the Jewish Community Centers in West Bloomfield and Oak Park. Created in 2004, it provides education, resources and advocacy, including anti-bullying and inclusion programs presented to secular and religious organizations.

The group's website says it envisions a world without closets: "Instead of hidden identities and values, JGN members contribute to an environment of inclusiveness and positive action. We believe in exploring the ways our sexuality, faith, tradition and society intersect."

As the Jewish mother of a gay son, Karen Fenwick of Bloomfield Hills, an artist and an outdoor educator for the Bloomfield Hills School District, couldn't agree more. Her son, now 35, married and an electrical engineer, came out on the bimah of his family's Reform temple during Shabbat services in the 1990s.

Regrettably, the family felt rejected and ultimately left the Bloomfield Township synagogue where their son had been raised — they remain unaffiliated.

"We probably should have stayed and fought the good fight, but we were just beaten down at that point," Fenwick says. "I wish rabbis and congregations would educate themselves and be more open. Of all people, the Jewish people, who've been persecuted throughout history and have had a hard time being accepted in many venues, should know what it feels like." **RT**

EDITOR'S NOTE: JGN Family & Friends group meets 7-9 p.m. the first Thursday of every month in the library at the Jewish Community Center in West Bloomfield, 6600 West Maple Road. For more information, go to www.jgnmi.org.

Gay Rights: Where Do We Stand?

With a great deal of fanfare back in December, President Barack Obama signed the bill repealing the military's controversial "don't ask, don't tell" policy. That brought an end to the 17-year-old ban on openly gay men and women serving in the armed forces.

On the state level, a Republican landslide during the November election left leaders of Michigan's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community wondering what will become of the pro-equality legislation they've been pushing for.

"Our civil rights laws don't cover sexual orientation or gender identity or expression," explains Jay Kaplan, staff attorney for the LGBT project for the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan. He and other attorneys handle litigation, legal education and lobbying. "Generally, it's legal for LGBT people to be discriminated against in employment, housing and public accommodations. Michigan may seem progressive in some areas, but we're in the lowest rung when it comes to LGBT rights." Here's where we stand on the key issues:



Marriage Rights: Like a majority of states, Michigan law bans same-sex marriage. But we also have a constitutional amendment that denies gay people the right to marry. "The Michigan Supreme Court has broadly interpreted that amendment so it bans any form of recognition for same-sex relationships," says Kaplan. "No right to marry, no same-sex unions, no domestic partner benefits; we have one of the most restrictive amendments in the country." Even if a couple is married in a state where gay marriage is legal, the marriage is not recognized in Michigan.

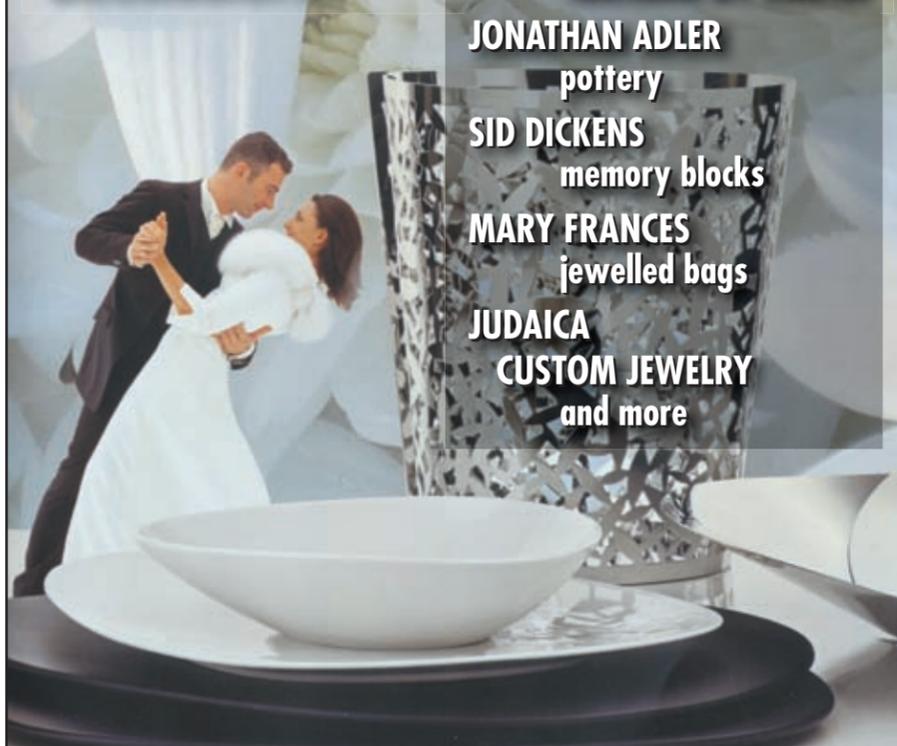
Employment/Housing: Michigan landlords can refuse to rent to a person just because of their sexual orientation. Michigan employers can fire someone for being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender and refuse to hire a homosexual worker, regardless of qualifications or job performance. For this reason, many members of the LGBT community say they hide their sexual orientation when applying for a job. This applies statewide except in communities like Huntington Woods, Ferndale and Detroit, which have local human rights ordinances that prohibit this form of discrimination.

Anti-Bullying: Legislation is pending; it has been approved by the state House and sent to the state Senate. "We are one of only six states that do not have a law requiring school districts to have anti-bullying policies," Kaplan points out. "We have to work to educate our legislators and the public about these issues."

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