

Israel sees slow but growing acceptance for gay Orthodox

by [Michele Chabin](#)

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TEL AVIV, Israel (RNS) Though never short on spectacle, this year's annual gay pride festival was even more colorful with a parade float, sponsored by Google, representing the country's religious gay and lesbian communities.

Dressed in shorts and T-shirts bearing the words "Religious Pride Community," the 20- and 30-somethings who accompanied the float on Friday (June 10) smiled proudly if even a bit self-consciously when onlookers did a double take or shouted, "Good for you!"

While Israeli law forbids discrimination based on sexual orientation in most areas of life, and gay soldiers can serve openly in the military, the public at large is only beginning to accept the notion that observant Jews can be both openly religious and openly gay.

Religious Jews who are gay or lesbian have traditionally hidden their sexual orientation from their rabbis and others because traditional interpretations of the Torah consider same-gender sexuality an "abomination."

Within Orthodox communities, the Modern Orthodox are much more open-minded than the ultra-Orthodox, many of whom still view homosexuality as an unspeakable sin.

The irony, activists say, is that gay religious Jews don't just remain in the closet; many simply stop living a religious life altogether.

"Many religious people who realize they're gay feel rejected by the society they grew up in and decide to become secular," explained Talya

Lev, a spokeswoman for Bat Kol, an Israeli-based Orthodox lesbian organization. "Yet there is a growing number of gay religious people for whom religion is an integral part of who they are, and they won't give it up."

Activists say there are thousands of religious gays and lesbians in Israel, the majority of them still in the closet. But in the past five or six years, she said, more have summoned the courage to "come out" as Orthodox and gay.

"They're no longer running away, and some communities are even embracing them," she said.

A few mainstream Jewish institutions are also reaching out. Last year, the U.S.-based ROI Community of Young Jewish Innovators gave Bat Kol a \$10,000 grant to develop an English-language website that is now accessible to observant lesbians.

While conceding that "there's still a long way to go," Lev said Orthodox Jews are at least "beginning to acknowledge that (we) exist." Part of the shift can be traced to "Trembling Before God," a groundbreaking 2001 documentary that followed American and Israeli Orthodox gays and lesbians as they struggled to reconcile their religion and sexuality.

Daniel Jonas, spokesman of Havruta, an Orthodox gay men's association that also belongs to the Religious Pride Community coalition, said the film "had a strong impact on religious society."

"Some of those interviewed were kicked out of their homes, their communities, committed suicide," he said, putting the religious community's exile of gays and lesbians on full display.

He also credited -- of all things -- Israel's 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip for changing attitudes. He said many Orthodox Jews began to question their faith after the Israeli military forcibly uprooted religious settlers from Gaza, despite rabbis' assurances that God would not let this happen.

"Suddenly, perhaps for the first time, people realized they cannot put all their trust in the leadership of their rabbis," he said. "They had to think for themselves. It gave space for the individual in modern Orthodox society."

Even so, many Orthodox Jews and institutions stick with tradition, believing that homosexuality is a preference, not an orientation, that can be unlearned with the help of "conversion" therapy.

Gidi Grunberg's father told a family therapist that his son was ill.

"The therapist asked my father whether he could change his height or his eye color. When he said `no,' the therapist said, `That's how it is with being homosexual. Your son is who he is.'"

As a teenager, Grunberg said he quit his religious youth group "because I knew they wouldn't accept me if I came out of the closet." Today, he coordinates three groups for Orthodox gay and lesbian teens and young adults that draw about 100 participants to "discreet" locations.

"It's a place where they can be themselves," Grunberg said, "both religious and homosexual."

Lev, the lesbian activist, remains convinced that familiarity will breed acceptance, however slowly. As religious Jews realize that gays "are not strangers, but are in fact their friends, students, neighbors, and children," people will be "more willing to accept the person, even if they have issues with the act of homosexuality itself."

That's how it's been for Daniel Jonas, a spokesman for Havruta, the gay men's Orthodox group, who lives in a quiet Jerusalem neighborhood with his partner, Uri Erman.

"Our neighbors figured out that we're gay and they're cordial," said Jonas, who prays every day. "But I think the religious girls downstairs are still trying to come to grips with it."

Erman, who is no longer Orthodox, and Jonas keep a kosher home and they attend traditional Shabbat-eve dinners together at their Orthodox

parents' homes. While they could find more acceptance in more secular Tel Aviv, they plan to stay in conservative Jerusalem.

"It would be very easy to leave," Jonas said, "but I love this city and feel committed to fight to make it a more tolerant place."