

Gay-to-straight conversion therapy group committed consumer fraud, jury finds

by [Rachel Delia Benaim](#)

June 25, 2015

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(RNS) A New Jersey jury found a gay-to-straight conversion therapy organization guilty of consumer fraud in state Superior Court on Thursday.

Three gay men and two parents sued JONAH, or Jews Offering New Alternatives for Healing, saying that it made gross misrepresentations in the sale and advertisement of its program and that it constituted an unconscionable commercial practice.

After two-and-a-half hours of deliberations, the seven-person jury awarded the five plaintiffs \$72,400 in damages for individual and group therapy sessions in which clients were asked to undress and touch themselves in their therapists' presence and beat effigies of their mothers with a tennis racket.

The plaintiffs claimed that JONAH; its directors, Arthur Goldberg and Elaine Berk; and one of its counselors, Alan Downing, violated New Jersey consumer fraud law by misrepresenting JONAH as scientifically based.

"My clients needed help," said James Bromley, a lawyer from the Southern Poverty Law Center, which represented the plaintiffs. "They went to JONAH. JONAH lied, and JONAH made it worse."

The defense argued that JONAH's ideology and methods were both scientific and based on Jewish values.

In February, Judge Peter Bariso ruled that it was a violation of the consumer fraud act to call same-sex sexual attraction a mental illness or disorder. This was the first time such a ruling was made in a United States court.

In 2013, New Jersey joined California to outlaw licensed therapists from providing conversion therapy to minors. Oregon and Washington, D.C., have also

passed such legislation. Last month, a bill was introduced in Congress that would classify commercial conversion therapy and advertising that claims to change sexual orientation and gender identity as fraud.

Chaim Levin, one of the gay men who sued, said he was subjected to reliving his sexual abuse as a way to heal his same-sex sexual attraction. Levin was asked to remove his clothes in front of a mirror as a way to rectify “body shame,” while his counselor stood behind him and watched. Downing, his counselor, instructed him to touch “his manhood.”

The defense claimed that their methods—including the “journey into manhood” weekends—were scientific and did in fact help the people who “put in the work.” They brought in witnesses to testify to the success of these exercises.

JONAH lawyers used verses from the Bible to bolster their case. They also evoked their clients’ First Amendment rights to treat same-sex sexual attraction as a spiritual disorder.

The jury was just unconvinced.

While leaving the courtroom, Goldberg said: “We hope to be exonerated upon appeal. This is not justice.”

*Susan K. Livio of The Star-Ledger contributed to this report.*