

Chanukah

Synagogues welcome gay members

by Liz Morrison

Eight years ago Aaron Borovoy was looking to reconnect with Judaism.

Although he was raised Jewish Borovoy did not grow up in what he calls “a temple environment.” But he had a concern. As an openly gay man, Borovoy wanted to find a congregation that would welcome him and his non-Jewish partner, regardless of their sexual orientation.

“I was looking to actually have a real Bar Mitzvah,” Borovoy tells *The Heritage*. “A friend of mine suggested I call Temple Emanu-El. I called them and I was completely up front about my sexuality because I didn’t want that to be an issue. They assured me it wouldn’t be and of course I was skeptical. I then attended a new members’ reception, everybody was really friendly and then the Rabbi (Martin Lawson) walked in wearing an AIDS ribbon.”

The fact that Rabbi Lawson wore the red AIDS ribbon of his own accord, without prior knowledge that a gay man was attending the event, made Borovoy feel that he was in the right place. Borovoy has been a member of Temple Emanu-El for eight years, has chaired the Social Action Committee, and has spent four years on the board.

Rabbi Lawson feels that Temple Emanu-El, a Del Cerro based Reform congregation of 500 families, should be a place where all people are welcome. His outreach efforts date back to the early 80s when he and a few other rabbis met with a group of gay and lesbian Jews in Hillcrest. Since that time he has continued to foster an atmosphere of total acceptance and tolerance at Temple Emanu-El by reaching out to interfaith as well as same-sex couples.

“(Acceptance) has been the belief of Reform Judaism for a number of years now. We acknowledge that a number of our sons and daughters are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. That’s just who they are and that doesn’t make them less

in the image of God than any other human being,” Lawson says.

Because of this level of outreach, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) Jews, who were once almost invisible in traditional Reform synagogue life, have begun to come out of the closet and into the sanctuary. This is also due in part to the acceptance of all Jews, regardless of sexual orientation, by both the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) as well as the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR).

As far back as 1987, the UAHC “reaffirmed its commitment to welcoming gay and lesbian Jews into its congregations and encouraging their participation in all aspects of synagogue and communal life.” And in March of 2000 the CCAR passed a resolution affirming that, “the relationship of a Jewish, same-gender couple is worthy of affirmation through appropriate Jewish ritual.”

Here in San Diego, both Temple Emanu-El and Congregation Beth Israel send contingents of rabbis, board members, and temple members to march in the GLBT Pride Parade held in Hillcrest each July.

Jerry Goldberg is president of the board of Congregation Beth Israel, a La Jolla based synagogue of 1,400 families. He is also the former chair of the temple’s Social Action Committee and spearheaded the idea of marching in the parade. As a Hillcrest resident, Goldberg attended the parade in the past and considered it a good venue for temple outreach. As with Temple Emanu-El, the issue was presented to Congregation Beth Israel’s board by the Social Action Committee and was approved unanimously.

“I actually initiated the idea (of marching in the parade). There has always been an awareness (at Congregation Beth Israel) of the need and the appropriateness of embracing the

(GLBT) community, particularly when we were located at Third and Laurel,” Goldberg tells *The Heritage*.

Goldberg, who is involved in Jewish social action causes at the national level, finds that Beth Israel’s congregation has taken a generally positive attitude towards participating in the GLBT Pride parade. The few who are uncomfortable with the decision feel that it is inappropriate for the temple to make what they term to be “political statements.” Goldberg has not heard any members react negatively from a moral standpoint.

Rabbi Ben Kamin, Senior Rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel welcomes all people, regardless of sexual orientation, to his synagogue.

“As a rabbi with a leading Reform congregation there’s no issue here. Anybody who needs to come and pray here, to have moments of consecration, is welcome here. In the world today there’s so much hate, so much divisiveness that we just have to find ways to bring Jews together. We need to go back to the notion that every human being is made in God’s image,” Kamin says.

Kamin is adamant that Congregation Beth Israel is doing the right thing by participating in the GLBT Pride parade and feels that by doing so, his synagogue is sending a message of welcome to the GLBT community.

Rabbi Rafael Goldstein is the Director of the San Diego Jewish Healing Center and is the community chaplain, serving the spiritual needs of unaffiliated Jews in the San Diego area. Rabbi Tamar Malino is the Assistant Rabbi of Temple Adat Shalom, a Poway based congregation with 645 families. Both Goldstein and Malino are openly gay.

Goldstein feels that the GLBT community needs to become proactive when it comes to being accepted in synagogue life. For him, gay and lesbian Jews should take more responsi-

bility for their spiritual lives.

“The change that I look forward to is the change in gay and lesbian people to see that they can affiliate honestly and openly with the Jewish community and be, in essence, part of the Jewish community.” Goldstein says. “I don’t see it so much as a factor in the Reform movement changing (to accept gays and lesbians) but I see it as a factor of the openness and willingness of (Jewish) gay and lesbian people to see that they need to affiliate.”

Malino feels that her visibility as a lesbian is important but is not her primary concern as a rabbi. She would rather be known for her commitment to Judaism and to her congregation rather than for her sexual orientation. Helping unaffiliated Jews find a congregation that’s right for them is a bigger concern for Malino.

“There are lots of unaffiliated Jews, both gay and straight,” Malino tells *The Heritage*. “But I also think there’s only so much a congregation can do to try and get people in its doors. It’s really up to the people who want to come.”

Borovoy is considering other ways to reach local GLBT Jews. Possible vehicles include the gay community newspapers and the GLBT Center. Other Reform synagogues are mulling over the idea of marching in the Pride Parade. But most of San Diego’s gay and lesbian Jews continue to be unaffiliated whether by choice or because they are unaware of the outreach efforts being made by local synagogues.

The Jewish population is a mixture of all walks of life, all types of orientations, and all levels of participation. Regardless of our differences, the key element is that we’re all Jews and every Jew, gay or straight, should have the opportunity to affiliate with a synagogue.