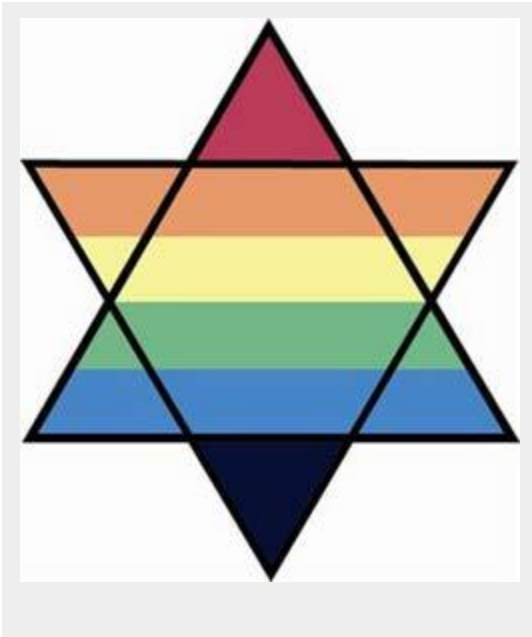


## Gay Synagogues: Has Their Time Come and Gone?

by Kilian Melloy  
EDGE Contributor  
Friday Mar 21, 2008



Gay synagogues once represented a sanctuary for GLBT Jews. Now, with less hostility toward gays and lesbians in the Jewish mainstream, are they still necessary?

That's the question examined in an [article](#) posted March 20 by the Jewish Daily Forward.

The Forward article recounts that gay synagogues started opening in the 1970s, as a place for GLBT Jews to congregate, worship, and be themselves in an atmosphere of safety and acceptance.

As mainstream synagogues have grown more accepting of gay and lesbian members, however, gay synagogues have had to ask whether it might be time to open their own doors--to their straight fellow Jews.

The Forward story cited Gayanne Weiss and her husband, who liked what they found at Atlanta's Congregation Bet Haverim, a gay synagogue founded in 1985, near the end of a wave of gay synagogue openings that started in Los Angeles and New York and made its way to other urban centers around the country.

In 1984, the article recounted, the idea of gay rabbis was officially accepted by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College; the Union for Reform Judaism adopted a policy welcoming to gay and lesbian Jews in 1990, declaring GLBT Jews to share in equal and unrestricted membership in the faith, and said that it would accept gay-oriented synagogues if they would also accept straight members.

The article said that not all gay synagogues were entirely welcoming of straight members; in 1992, The Forward reported, a group splintered away from gay L.A. synagogue Beit Chayim Chadashim over the issue, going on to establish Kol Ami. The new synagogue was still meant mostly as a place for GLBT Jews to congregate, but straights were also, pointedly, welcome.

Said Rabbi Denise Eger, one of the group who started Kol Ami, "If the world is going to change, we have to model that change," the article reported.

The article quoted Rabbi Eger further as saying, "Gay and straight people need to build community together as Jews."

Continued Eger, "We didn't want to be a gay ghetto."

Bet Haverim, too, accepts straight members.

Said Bet Haverim founding member Jeri Kagel, "We felt disenfranchised when we wanted a place, so if there were straight people who felt disenfranchised, who were we not to welcome them?"

Now, reported The Forward, over 50 percent of Bet Haverim's 300 members are straight.

While the adult members could mingle freely and without friction, however, the fact that straight members brought children into the synagogue, which responded by creating a Sunday School program to accommodate them, led to new complications. The congregation, which was growing as more straight families joined, drawn in part by the Sunday school, started to split along gay/straight lines due to the school becoming, as Kagel put it, a "straight ghetto."

Then, as gay and lesbian parents began to have their own children and to adopt, the tension along that fault line began to disappear. An estimated 20 percent of the children attending Bet Haverim's Sunday school have same-sex parents. (At Kol Ami's school the numbers are about equal.)

By the time of the national gay marriage debate, with GA lawmakers setting about to put a ballot referendum before voters to ban marriage equality, the congregation was unified in opposition, even giving rise to a pro-marriage equality organization. The congregation had become a community of gay and straight families.

However, that opened the question: with straight synagogues now accepting gay members, and gay synagogues making a point of not turning away straight members, is it necessary to have separate synagogues at all any longer?

The article quoted Rabbi Ayelet Cohen of New York's Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, the world's largest gay synagogue, "We're really in the process of figuring out what our tagline is."

Continued Rabbi Cohen, "Initially we were the gay synagogue; then we were the lesbian and gay synagogue; then we were the GLBT synagogue; then we were the synagogue for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Jews, our families and friends."

Now, said Cohen, "We're struggling to find the right language to describe who we are that retains and honors our history and identity, that also speaks to welcoming everyone as a part of the community."

The issue no longer is even confined to that of sexuality. The article said that Jews of color, Jews who had married across religious lines, converts to Judaism, and those who simply felt that they did not fit in elsewhere have all started to come to gay-founded synagogues.

One gay congregation, Chevrei Tikvah in Cleveland, simply integrated into the larger, mainstream Fairmont Temple in 2005, *The Forward* recounted; could a similar outcome await other gay-founded synagogues?

President of the URJ Rabbi Eric Yoffie thinks it likely, but adds a caveat: not until gays and lesbians no longer face legal and social discrimination in society at large, as well as from Jewish sects such as the Ultra-Orthodox, will separate and distinct gay-founded synagogues no longer be needed.

Echoes Rabbi Cohen, "There are people who reach out to us from all over the world, from phone booths in Boro Park (an Ultra-Orthodox area in Brooklyn), [to] e-mails from Kansas and Pakistan."

Added Rabbi Cohen, "The fact that there is a gay synagogue gives people hope in an incredible and lifesaving way," *The Daily Forward* reported.

*Kilian Melloy reviews media, conducts interviews, and writes commentary for EDGEBoston, where he also serves as Assistant Arts Editor.*

**Web article** <http://www.edgeboston.com/index.php?ch=news&sc=glbt&sc2=news&sc3=&id=72018>