

Feeling Different plus Sexual Abuse Led to my SSA

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I was born into a Jewish Modern Orthodox family. It was loving, but also was a rather dysfunctional triadic-narcissistic family. The oldest child of two, I was the male; my sister is 4 years years younger than me. I grew up thinking my family was typical, believing an abnormal family meant that someone had to be clinically insane and/or mentally ill. I had developmental issues growing up. Because I was sexually abused as a child and was detached from my Dad, I felt same-sex attractions (SSA) from the age of 6. Most people start to put together all the puzzle pieces of their childhood as teens or young adults, but in my case the above factors only began to make sense after I was 28 and began to receive help from an organization named JONAH.

My Dad and granddad were emotionally distant individuals. Moreover, I suspect my detachment from Dad came from his own detachment from his father. He and his father did not get along well. I recall how my Dad and his father would often argue. As a young 12 year old boy, that scared me. My Grandma on Dad's side was overbearing and ridiculing of others. In spite of these deficiencies, I must admit that although my Dad's parents were difficult people, both my grandparents were loving in their own way. On my mom's side, her Dad was also rather distant and rarely spent time with me. All my grandparents were sickly and had various ailments since prior to my birth. Because they were dealing with their own physical ailments and did not have time for my sister or myself, I felt emotionally abandoned by them. My sister felt this way too. To this day, she laments how our maternal Granddad was unable to interact with her either. My memory of the grandparents is their yelling at me far more than having them actually interact with me. An example comes to mind. As a 7 or 8 year old boy, I got locked out of the house. I was scared and began to cry. My grandpa responded by yelling at me, "Stop crying; it is not the end of the world!" This and many other similar incidents taught me how to stuff my emotions.

My Father rarely interacted with me. Like all boys, I needed to be affirmed by him since he was the dominant male in our home. In particular, I never was affirmed by him for my manliness or for any of my masculine traits. He never discussed sexuality with me. Growing up, I felt lost, often without direction, and very unsure of myself.

While my Mom was certainly more present, she was overbearing, controlling, and worst of all demeaning toward my efforts to be masculine. Since I couldn't ask my dad any questions about sexuality, whenever I asked my mom about things concerning my body or even try to show her certain body parts in an effort to understand something about myself, she would respond by yelling at me and or simply denigrate my masculinity. If I asked her about the "birds and bees", she would provide me with vague puritanical answers. I guess she was embarrassed by my questions.

My school days were not much better. Because I grew up in a religious home, it would have been normal and expected for me to attend a Yeshiva. However, I was born prematurely which in turn caused some early developmental problems. The Yeshiva in my area did not have the appropriate resource rooms. Thus, I wound up in public school. My religiosity made me feel different from the other boys and I had few friends. No one came over to play. In school, I felt more

comfortable being with the girls. This caused confusion to me. I was very unsure about the physical differences between girls and boys, as well as my specific role as a male.

When I went to camp, my experiences were similar. I was never part of the group. For example, at camp, I was never asked to play with my peers. In sports, I was either next to last or the last boy chosen. And, after day camp was over, I was never invited to play afterwards in another boy's home. The only place I was not ignored was in synagogue, particularly in the social minutes after services. Feeling respected and good in that environment, I retreated into hyper-religiosity.

My response to all these experiences was a concerted effort to try and please people in whatever way they would accept me. As a child, I was curious about my peers and their bodies and wanted to play "Doctor," but seldom did.

My attempt to be a people-pleaser made me vulnerable to the desires of others. I was therefore sexually taken advantage of on several occasions. I think my same-sex attraction (SSA) developed both because of the several incidents of sexual abuse which I will relate below and because I didn't know how to relate to the other guys except sexually. The first time it occurred was when I was in the 1st grade.

I vividly remember this first experience. It was the fall and I was coming home on the school bus. I was getting attention from someone I didn't know and who was older than me. He and I were talking about some things ---what was being discussed I don't really recall---but then he said: "Do you want to do something fun with me? It's what guys do together and I promise it won't be anything private!" So, reluctant, uncertain, scared, and even before I could say anything, he took my right hand and put it inside his pants directly over his erect penis! I had never felt so attached to another guy, and yet it felt wrong, even sinful, at the same time. After I took my hand out, he said: "What do you think?"

I didn't know what to say; however, I felt a burning shame for what he made me unknowingly do. I felt that the bottom had fallen out of my world. I felt "dirty" and unconnected to G-d and His commandments. At the same time, I was angry and wanted to snap off his penis (though I never heard about or knew about such things.) I was truly traumatized and from then on I felt scared to grow up. I wanted to remain a little boy. Defensively, I remained in this emotional shell for many years, thinking of myself as a little boy. I never spoke about this incident to anyone until my late 20's.

A second incident of sexual abuse occurred after my Bar Mitzvah. While in camp (I was a 7th grader), the youth leader and I were studying in a camp building where he made it clear that he didn't like how I was reading the Bible. To emphasize his displeasure, he took a pair of scissors and pretended to behead himself. He said the only way to get him whole was to masturbate his penis. I was scared out of my mind. I did in fact pleasure him and did so more than once. What was particularly disturbing was the fact that he was the son of a Rabbi. When he told another peer about what happened and they laughed at me, I felt the same burning shame as the first time I was sexually involved. I also felt like I wanted to destroy his penis (just as I fantasized the first

time it happened), but of course I didn't do anything. Instead, I simply felt victimized and powerless.

When I was in the 9th Grade, I was again approached by a boy who tried to engage me in sex play. Although I was scared, I found the strength to resist. Thank G-d. I escaped from that attempt unharmed.

When I became a teenager, I began to really envy the bodies of other boys, boys who carried themselves with maturity. This envy become more intense than the envy I felt of others during my childhood and it became sexualized in my fantasies. I kept repressing those feelings.

Finally, in my late 20s, I realized that if I was to lead a normal life, I had to do something to get my self together, to actually grow up emotionally while simultaneously protecting the inner child that was so hurt as a young child. I was 28 before I realized that my life up to that point was abnormal and that I would not be happy if I did not take action to bring together my emotional, intellectual, and chronological ages.

The first therapist to whom I went and explained myself was from my own religious community. Regrettably, he was what is called a "gay affirmative" therapist. He said I would have to accept my same-sex attractions and sexualized feelings for other boys as "normal." That didn't sit well with me; it went against my strong religious and moral beliefs. It also was inconsistent with what I wanted out of life. I also realized that I was hurt by those who took sexual advantage of me and did not think he gave recognition to my pain. I also believed that his advice was totally insensitive to what I wanted out of life. He was simply providing me with what seemed to me to be the dominant view of secular society.

I therefore began searching for other alternatives, something that would enable me to live the kind of life I desired and would at the same time enable me to bring my chronological age and my emotional and intellectual age into harmony. In reading one of the Jewish newspapers, I found out about JONAH and called their phone number. I spoke with their co-director and he recommended several books and web sites for me to review. After doing so, I knew I was finally on a path to healing. I called him back after completing the reading and in turn, he gave me a choice of several potential counselors with whom to work, almost all of who had themselves overcome same-sex attraction. I chose a rabbi-life coach with whom to work and have ever since strengthened my self esteem and have slowly but surely increased my self-esteem and self-confidence.

I also found a "chevra"--a group of men who could provide me with a sense of community and provide me with support in my healing work.

I bless Arthur, his colleagues, and other similar programs (such as People Can Change and their Journey into Manhood program and the JONAH Shabbatons) which I've benefited from. I don't know where I'd be without JONAH or the mentors (both male and female) I've met through their programs! Little by little, I'm getting better and one day, with G-d's help, I hope to have a normal life and family.