

An Open Letter to Rabbis from an Ex-Gay Jewish Man

Written by Ryan in New York

I belong to a group of men and women who very much need your help. We are a large group, but few know anything about us or even believe we exist. Who are we? We are Jewish men and women who feel homosexual attractions (and which many of us may have acted upon), but are very unhappy about having these feelings AND have come to understand that we were not "born that way."

Some background: I am an observant Orthodox Jewish male, 36 years old, who gives a "shiur" (a Talmud class) in my spare time. I went to an out of town yeshiva (I live in New York City) and look just like everyone else in my community.

No one knew I was sexually attracted to men. I have SSA - known as Same-Sex Attraction. In the common vernacular, I identified as gay. However, I actually got married 10 years ago, at the behest of Rabbis who I had consulted. G-d granted me a fantastic wife, and we have raised 4 amazing children. Considered very fine contributors to our community. My wife and I have received awards

from religious institutions as well.

During these years of marriage, I never addressed my attraction to other men and the behavior patterns it brought about. The attraction didn't go away just because I got married. Unfortunately, contrary to the belief of some, it doesn't work that way.

For about 25 years, I kept secret these issues and was forced to carry this tremendous burden alone. Then, in January of 2004, I heard about a group which most people within my observant Jewish community never either heard or talk about. It is named JONAH. Out of total desperation, I went to their web site (www.jonahweb.org) and what I read both angered and encouraged me.

I was angered because I realized, for the first time, that this horrible situation was not my fault. Moreover, I learned that others with similar issues did not simply repress their homosexual behavior but actually overcame their homosexual fantasy, arousal, and identity. I was encouraged because I understood, for the first time, that the problems which confronted me were not the result of some biological or genetic component over which I had no control but rather the result of emotional wounds received during early childhood. I was encouraged that I fit the profile for most of the root causes of homosexuality which were listed on the web site. Why? Because I felt empowered. I saw that it was within my power and free will to leave

behind this adolescent emotional state and resume my growth into full-fledged maturity as a man.

Candidly, at first, I was totally skeptical, because I had never heard anyone claim to change this "aberration"; moreover, the current world view is such that being gay is considered a state of being, with gay rights and marriages becoming totally acceptable. On the other hand, as an Orthodox individual, I was impressed by what I read, in particular, the words of Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetzky's approbation that the Torah would not forbid anything that the human being could not control and the Lubavitcher Rebbe's discourse on homosexuality indicating that homosexuality is a pathology that can be healed. I figured if noted Orthodox rabbis whom I respect talk about SSA as a Torah prohibition which is a healable pathology, then I needed to try and get involved.

I called JONAH and received numerous suggestions for a plan of treatment. I went to private therapy, a weekly men's support group, and read tremendous amounts of literature on the subject. My therapist is a recovered homosexual himself. Through this process, I met many others who either changed or are in the process of changing. While I am still in the process, I am full of hope and optimism. I finally believe that it is a reality that change is possible. I became a different person but I also found that the work of changing was difficult. I had to face my fears.

So, after a year of hard work, I rationalized to myself that I had done enough. And, I stopped doing my work! That was a mistake. When I joined this amazing group of individuals over a year ago and did my work, I witnessed incredible changes within me. I learned about myself, and used that knowledge to heal and continue healing. People saw it in me. I felt it on a moment-to-moment basis. My life had changed drastically, from a constantly paranoid, self-absorbed person to a more confident, purposeful one. Before my journey from SSA began, I was afraid to feel how important my life, marriage, and family had become. Why? Because I felt I was living a very enduring lie and could be exposed at any moment and lose everything I cared about.

Why did I stop my work? Probably because the particular men's group that I attended with regularity came to the end of a cycle. I would have had to start up with a different group so I rationalized that I had healed enough. Not attending a group meant that I did not replace the male affirmation and bonding that I had received from my original group and which I realized I needed so much on a constant basis. Also, I used a temporary physical ailment as an excuse to stop my private therapy. However, even though I stopped doing my work, I knew in my inner being that I had begun walking on the track that I wanted to be on. By not completing the process, I had some setbacks. Nevertheless, my recent failings have not deterred me one iota from recapturing the peace

and inner tranquility I experienced in 2004. I now know how important it is to complete the journey.

My resolution: to maintain more contact with my fellow strugglers. We learn so much from each other. I make it a point to have male friends who are straight, and I do, (for example, I play on my company's baseball team, and I belong to a daily Daf Yomi, where I lecture) but the necessity of having a buddy who knows exactly what I am going through, who is also in recovery, and can see me with all my foibles, makes it imperative to have and keep the friends I made.

Why am I writing this open letter to the Jewish community and including potentially damaging information about myself? Because I now realize how important it is to educate the Jewish public that homosexuality is neither a genetic nor immutable condition. The men and women involved in JONAH are struggling to get the word out to the public so they can help save lives, families and neshomos (souls).

The primary piece of knowledge is this: being gay is not a state of being; no one is born gay. Same-sex attractions themselves are symptoms of underlying childhood wounds which are the result of an incomplete identification with your same-sex parent, same-sex peers, and your gender identity of birth. Those who identify as gay found themselves in what my therapist calls a "gender double bind." I

was not ok with masculinity but certainly not ok without it.

The contemporary world has a strange view of what it means to be gay. The timeless Torah, on the other hand, has a more direct view. There is no such thing as a homosexual in the Torah. No person can be categorized that way. Mishkav Zochor - the way the Torah refers to gay sexual intercourse - is an act, not a state of being. Homosexuality involves an act. It does not define the person. That means it can be corrected. And it can! I, and the many men and women in JONAH, are living proof that people can change.

We need the rabbinical community to get involved in this issue because lives are at stake. Personally, I am quite certain I would have contracted a severe illness, died of a disease or been divorced had I not found the truth. There are so many more like me because 2-3 % of the population has feelings of same sex attraction. And without the hope that people can indeed change, people have committed suicide, contracted AIDS or other Sexually Transmitted Diseases due to involvement with this dreaded affliction. Yes, there are physiological and neurological needs associated with SSA, but the basis of the condition is an emotional disorder that this generation has decided to reinterpret in its own way. Homosexuality has never before been treated this way in mankind's history and today's cultural understandings are inconsistent with a broad

historical understanding of how homosexuality can be overcome.

Please get involved. There are countless numbers of Jewish men and women, and their families, who need your help.