

My Story of Change

Written by David in New York area

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My name is David and I'm going to tell you my personal story because it's important for the Jewish community, and for society at large, to understand how the normalization of homosexuality in our society adversely affects men and women of all ages who struggle with same-sex attractions (SSA), and the families that love them.

Society tells us that those with a homosexual orientation are born that way. Also, that those with such an orientation need to accept that they have no choice of sexual orientation because that is the way Hashem (G-d) created them.

I'm living proof that this is simply not true! After 22 1/2 years living an active homosexual life, I am happy to say that I am finally comfortable owning my masculinity and living a normal heterosexual life. People can change their SSA and we, as Jewish people, have a responsibility to spread the word of hope and healing that organizations like JONAH bring to our community.

I'm going to share with you a part of my struggle and my pain in order to show you that tremendous joy can be experienced when you free yourself from SSA.

First, I wish to emphasize that all of us need to become more proactive on this issue in order to counter the myths and untruths being spread by the gay rights activists who want to make it illegal for people like me to seek help to change from homosexual to heterosexual. Consistent with an understanding that SSA arises because of emotional difficulties encountered in early childhood, I recognize that my SSA was caused by many factors including sexual molestation, first at age 4, again at age 8 and subsequently at age 11.

My SSA also arose from the following causes:

- (1) defensive detachment from my father: a man who I love but who was very difficult to get close to.
- (2) same-sex peer wounds: I did not have many male friends as I was growing up;
- (3) my physical disability: part of the reason for my lack of childhood friends was that I was born with a deformed arm and this led to what SSA professionals call body image wounds.

To summarize the process of growing up, I always felt different from the other boys. Subsequently, I felt different from other men. This led me to a classic SSA behavior: attempting to be the "good little boy" in my effort to achieve male affirmation. As an adult, it led me to seek out other men, men with whom I could have a sexual relationship, which was an inappropriate way to absorb their masculinity. I so desperately wanted to be a man. But I never understood

why I was attracted to other men, until recently, when I began my bibliotherapy, which involved reading about others who journeyed out of the lifestyle and also began experiencing other elements of the JONAH program.

By the time I was 14 years old, I began the process of looking for older men to pay attention to me. I also began hanging out in public places where men congregated so that older men would notice me, pay attention to me, and make me feel that I was a somebody.

As time went on, I decided I should tell my father that I was attracted to men. His response was simple and straightforward: "I'll cure it for you. I'll arrange for you to get married." It always amazes me how so many people believe that the "cure" for homosexuality is marriage. Guess what? It is not true. Thus, at age 17, my father arranged a "shiddach" (arranged marriage) for me and assumed that would take away the SSA, but, you know what, it didn't!

When I was 19 years old, I had my first child. (I now have 5 and am a grandfather.) My wife and I decided to move to the Sephardic community in Brooklyn. I soon learned the ropes in New York City - the gay capital of America - and began to hang out in all the gay spots. As I cruised for anonymous sex. I would often tell my wife that I'd be home in 45 minutes when in truth I knew it would be more like 3 hours.

My wife always knew something was wrong but she had no idea what it was. My dysfunctional life went on and on and on. It lasted for 22 and a half years. So did the lies and deceit. (As I think about it now, I'm mortified by my behavior.) I would start cruising for men from early in the morning before "tifila" (prayer) and would run back to "shul" (synagogue) to pray. Sometimes on "Shabbat," I would skip "shul," go to the bookstore around the corner to meet someone for sex, then return home.

When a friend of mine got caught nearly a year ago and lost his wife and family because of it, I realized that I was going nowhere and the same thing would probably happen to me. I wanted help, and needed it so desperately, but had nowhere to turn.

Having heard about the gay orthodox movie Trembling Before G-d, I figured maybe they could help me. So, I looked up the website of the movie and sent an E-mail telling them I NEEDED help because I was not happy in that lifestyle - perhaps better described as that death style. In response, someone called me who referred to himself as a psychologist. I told him that I'm not happy in the lifestyle and want out. The therapist, whose name is Shlomo Ashkenazi (who also is featured in the Trembling film) then did what I believe is totally unethical, particularly for a professional. He invited me to his apartment for a Hanukkah gathering.

When I asked "why", he suggested that the cure for my emptiness was to meet another Orthodox married man with SSA. If I did that, then, according to Ashkenazi, I could have an affair with a man without getting caught. His logic was simple. We would both be careful because we would be the same - "frum" (observant) and married. I tried to explain to him that I wasn't looking for a male partner. It was not what I wanted, I wanted out!!!

He kept on talking for another 20 minutes, trying to convince me that this was the answer to my problems, that I was born this way, that G-d created me this way and that I should accept the gay lifestyle. I asked him whether any therapists could help me change. Not only did he say "no" but he said such practices were damaging, unethical and banned by the American Psychological Association.

Of course, he did not tell me anything about the thousands of individuals who were able to heal their emotional wounds through reparative therapy and thus live normal, healthy heterosexual lives nor did he say anything about JONAH's existence. Still desperate to find help, I called a Sephardic Rabbi in Deal, NJ. I told the Rabbi my life was a mess, that I was attracted to men. He responded that "hakodosh barochu" (the Holy One, Blessed be He) loves me and suggested that I pray hard and have "emmouna" (faith); further, that everything would be OK if I sincerely desired change.

The rabbi told me to call a "frum" therapist in Brooklyn, with whom he went to school and who handled these kinds of cases. When I found out he wanted \$220 for the first visit and \$120 for each subsequent visit, I went into a panic. I said I did not want to spend that kind of money. (Little did I realize that good therapy is worth a lot more than that. And, in fact, I would end up spending double that amount of money each week as I work through my issues with two different therapists, one for marriage counseling, the other for SSA and masculinity issues.)

The therapist in turn sent me to Jonah. I called Arthur Goldberg, Co-Director of JONAH, who in turn has spent countless hours with me. It hasn't been easy but I can stand here and say, "ble ein hara" (in the eyes of the enemy), I did it. When I first went to JONAH, I really had mixed feelings. In some ways, I had hoped I would meet a new man and thus proudly wore my tee shirt to the meeting that said "catcher" (a phrase used in the gay community to indicate a role in sexual activity).

Soon, however, I realized the seriousness of JONAH, the opportunity they were providing for me to clean myself up, change my outward appearance, my identity as a person, my sexual behavior patterns, my sexual arousal triggers, and my sexual fantasies - basically my whole life! I am a totally different person today than the individual who called JONAH looking for help.

JONAH, through Arthur and Martin Henry, has given me a whole new outlook on life. I attend the bi-weekly support meetings held at the JONAH office in New Jersey, which Arthur and Martin facilitate.

I am on the E-mail list serve for JONAH where I communicate daily with other Jewish strugglers throughout the world. We offer support and counsel to each other. I also speak regularly on the phone with numerous strugglers and straight people as well, all of whom are part of the JONAH network.

JONAH has provided me with books and tapes of others who have healed and these resources are an inspiration to me. JONAH believes in a program of healing which touches the head, the heart, the body, and the soul or, phrased another way, the cognitive, the emotional, the experiential, and the spiritual.

I have two weekly therapy meetings. I go to a marriage therapist with my wife - who now knows all about my SSA - and to a masculinity wholeness-oriented therapist to improve my self-image and to dig out the roots of my emotional wounds. The anguish, fear and shame of admitting to my wife and other members of my family about my SSA is a separate story which I can speak about at another time.

I now help others as part of my recovery process and, most importantly, am out of the closet of shame and isolation. I am clean, live life without lies and deceit, and am truly engaged in the process of change.

G-d challenged me to understand, by personal experience, the depths of despair which a person can go through and yet come out whole. He challenged me to understand the differences between sexual brokenness and sexual wholeness. The fact that I am so successful is a testimony to "Hashem's" (the Name) wisdom and the resiliency with which he endowed me. I hope others of you who are aware of people conflicted with SSA take to heart my story that change is possible - but only if the person seeking change really wants to and is motivated.