

New Beginnings and Finding My Voice

CSR in Israel

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I grew up in a New York secular, middle class, American family. There are many of pieces of my upbringing that I find hard to remember the sequence properly, yet there is so much I do remember. I used to think these were memories I'd prefer to forget, but after years of growth I know now it's precisely those memories that make me who I am today.

My mother doesn't show up much on my radar until she served my father with divorce papers and I lived with only her and my sister. My father was an alcoholic. He was out of the house most of the time, leaving for work before the sun came up and only coming home late in the afternoon. He was a tough man, spoke with regular vulgarities, kept his head down and did his work and I think I was in 5th grade the first time I recognized I didn't want to grow up to be like him.

I remember feeling numb and alone in my home growing up. Feeling a lot of anger and constantly very scared. I'd sit on the floor in my bedroom listening to music waiting for someone to knock on the door or just walk in. It rarely happened. I barely slept at night and I was always sick. I thought in order to be noticed I had to perform. I was a good student and came home with good grades. I acted in school plays, took part in the chorus, played in the band, played soccer after school, and entered the science fairs. I played with the kids in the area but didn't feel like a part of the group. I did everything last. I was heavy and though I played, I was not as good as they were at sports. I rode my bike last, and never graduated from roller skates to roller blades. I'd spend extra time after school speaking with my teachers just not wanting to go home, but I never really knew why.

I was probably about 7 or 8 the first time my father really hit me and I realized there was something not right in my home. I had been doing homework with my grandfather and when he checked my work he noted that I had gotten a problem wrong. One. Instinctively I looked at my father across the room. I remember him looking back at me and what I felt. I was angry and scared of him judging me so harshly. I was sure he thought I was an idiot for getting one problem carelessly wrong. I threw the pencil down at the ground and ran upstairs to my bedroom crying. He came after me. He grabbed me, threw me down on the ground and started to kick me. I remember his work boots and how much they hurt with each blow. He was shouting at me what I'd done wrong but I couldn't even hear. Finally he stopped and just left. No one came to see if I was alright. I can't imagine my grandfather, mother or even my sister hadn't heard my crying, but no one came. I think that was the day I learned I needed to care for

myself. For the first time I felt that all my worth was dependent on what I did and no one was going to be there for me unless I was perfect.

My father used to take me with him to work a lot. Probably from the ages of 8-11. That's when I became very aware of his alcohol problem. I'd find bottles of gin in the truck. He'd leave me in the supermarket to pack shelves with bread and go to the corner store to buy more gin. He'd pull over to the side of the road and vomit out the window. I remember standing in that back of the truck while he drove pouring out his bottles. I wanted to care for him and didn't want him to drink anymore. I remember the holes in walls and doors in my childhood home. The ones he'd made with his fists rather than hitting my mother. But I do remember seeing him push her once. I knew a man wasn't allowed to push his wife so I stepped in between them and told him that he wasn't allowed to do that. If he needed to push someone I let him push me instead. He picked me up and threw me into a wall. But he left her alone. I'd won.

The police were at my home growing up a total of 9 times that I remember for domestic violence of one sort or another. In addition to that I remember the time I found my father passed out from a motor bike accident in the middle of the street and hauled off by the police and an ambulance and again, sometime later, he was driving with my sister and I jerking the car back and forth, stopping and going, playing along the way. I pleaded with him to stop but he didn't listen and we got pulled over. I watched him get tested, handcuffed and taken away and I had my first ride home in the back of a police car.

I tried so hard to take care of everybody. But when it came to me, I was retreating more and more into myself. I sat alone more in my room and was completely addicted to television. I spent more time with my teachers after school and walked home on my own rather than in my walking group. It was around this time I had my first experience with a bully and though my friends were present, not only didn't they help me, they cheered on the bully. I kept looking more and more for anything to get me away from being physically or emotionally present at home.

When my parents finally sat us down to tell us they were getting divorced I was about 10. I was relieved. I couldn't stand the environment anymore. Little did I know it was just the beginning of my Hell. I was already very afraid of my father and his behavior and moods, but living alone with my mother was eye opening. My parents would complain to me about one another and I didn't know where I wanted to be or was welcome anymore.

I was around 10-11 years old when I started feeling attracted to men. I wasn't struggling with it then but it was apparent enough to me that I confided in some friends about it. They told me I was still young and it was probably just a phase I was going through as a boy. I should ignore it and it would pass. I accepted their wisdom and advice. For the second time in my life I started

thinking about suicide (at 6 years old I'd tried), but I suppressed everything as much as I could, kept my head down, and moved on.

My fear of men and groups of boys continued to get worse. I started to associate more with girls and stayed away from boys in school or anywhere they congregated in groups.

My mother started to date before the divorce was even final and the first man was a drug addict. He had long hair, rotten teeth and a disposition even worse than my father's. I couldn't stand knowing that he was sitting in my father's chair at our table and taking his place in my mother's bed. The next man was "the one." My mother made it very clear to me she wasn't letting me ruin it for her. When he hit my sister my mother took the phones with her to work the next day so I couldn't call to tell anyone. When I ran away (I was about 13) and the police found me and brought me home they told my mother she could either take me in or I'd go to a boys' home in the Bronx for the night. They made it clear to her it was a very violent place and I probably wouldn't make it through the night. She went in her room to think about it. I never felt so unloved and unwanted as in that moment. I thought I could die and no one would care. I don't know how long it was but I felt like I was standing there with that officer holding me forever.

She kicked me out of her home not long after that. She brought me to a mental institution and tried to have me admitted. When they didn't admit me she dropped me off with strangers she managed to arrange on short notice through a Jewish organization. Later I lived with my father for a year and when that didn't work she told me it was ok for me to move in with her (and now her boyfriend) again. Not long after she made me leave again.

I thought I wasn't worth anything. I had no sense of worth and no self esteem. I thought I could disappear or even die and I didn't want to be alive. I thought I needed to take care of myself and no one could or would ever be there for me.

I found G-d in my life and became religious. I left home when I was 15 and went to a private religious school in Florida. But being the only "out of town" boy in a school where everyone lived locally and went home on weekends just perpetuated the loneliness and the sense of being the only one who could care for me.

It wasn't until I was married with children and in my mid twenties that I couldn't suppress the same sex attraction anymore. It started to come out sideways and in shady ways I wasn't comfortable with. I asked an anonymous question from a counseling website about what resources were out there for me and I was directed to JONAH and Arthur Goldberg. Arthur, was the first person I'd told about my attractions to men since those boys in the attic all those years beforehand. He was encouraging and understanding and directed me on who I could see for counseling and what resources were available to me.

In 2009 I attended the Journey into Manhood workshop run by People can Change. Alan Downing ran that workshop. There, under Mr. Goldberg's care I was helped to really feel the burden of taking care of so many others, and being alone to care for myself in a brand new way. Until that point I'd only felt it emotionally and my body and soul didn't know what to do with it. Here, a man represented the burdens of others and rested his weight on my shoulders. When that felt comfortable and familiar they wrapped us both in a blanket and secured it closed around us. I felt trapped. Trapped by my own beliefs, trapped by staying alone, and trapped by this wall that I had around me keeping others from coming in. They'd provided me with something to represent all those old messages to fight against. This wall was my own prison, it kept me alone and from asking others to help me, and I fought in that experiential space to remove it. When I did, it was clear to me that I had the ability to choose my beliefs. I could either continue to live as I had and struggle alone or I could begin to let down my walls and open up to a new beginning. I chose the latter. The next day, Enrique Roman, another JONAH affiliated coach helped me step further out of my old stories and into a new way of being. Alan Downing was the one who taught me about holding on that same workshop. He gently invited me to try and remember what it was to be a little boy who was open to being supported by his father. When I didn't remember a boy who was innocent like he was speaking of he asked me if I could try to imagine such a boy. When an imaginary little me came to mind he asked if the boy wanted to receive support from our circle. It was made clear to me that I had the option to receive support in a number of ways, some involving touch and others not. I was given the option of choosing who I wanted to hold me and how, as long as it followed the safety guidelines set down by the staff keeping the experience clean and healthy. When I chose Alan to hold me, I showed him how I wanted to be held and gave him the words I wanted him to say. He was caring and respectful of my requests and my physical boundaries. I cried and he comforted me as a father would, filling a void I never knew I had. For me, it was an invaluable piece of the experience. It taught me I can be vulnerable and cared for in a safe ritual space and soothe the pain the little boy inside me still feels sometimes even today. The pain of having no one to care for and support me and the pain of having to go through life alone. (Alan and Arthur have since been leaders and staff men on other events I've attended and staffed. They have become two of my mentors, have always respected my input and requests, and opened me up to further self exploration and avenues of growth. I'm very grateful for their presence in my life and my journey.)

When I returned home I was in it for the long haul battle. SSA or not, this work meant a new beginning for me. One where I could live more fully and healthily. It became apparent to me that my homosexuality was just a symptom of other issues and self restricting beliefs. I knew there was no such thing as working on the homosexuality as an entity and I just wanted to be healthier in the way I treated myself and to begin to show up in the world again.

JONAH helped me find a facilitator and start a support group in Jerusalem. It was there that my journey continued, but I knew I needed professional help as well. I started seeing Baxter Peffer, a part of JONAH's network of recommended counselors, at the advice of others in this community. He challenged me week after week, and belief by shrinking belief it became harder for me to understand how I'd lived this way for so long. More than anything he challenged my belief that I wasn't good enough or man enough to be confident. I'd share with him my accomplishments and he'd celebrate them with me. I was grateful to him not just for his services as a dedicated counselor but for being willing to see me for the small amount of money I was able to pay him and trusting me when I wasn't able to pay him on time that I would when I could.

I started to participate in other workshops and quickly became a facilitator of this work. I started working with another organization that runs a very similar experience and has nothing to do with homosexuality. I learned and saw more and more how people can transform through these principles and ideas and how we all carry baggage with us. None of this has anything to do with treating homosexuality or dealing with it as a disease. As a leader I started to help others release some of the baggage. I helped a man on medication struggling with depression, I worked with a woman with cerebral palsy who'd been trying to get pregnant for years (and did soon after the sessions), I counseled an addictions counselor who was stepping into working with a broader clientele, and countless others I can recall. All the while I grew in my own work and learned that the more I showed up as myself and believed in myself, the more real, present and just fine I could feel. With all that came the ability to better help others.

My friends see a difference in me. After only a year they started to tell me about it. I'm more self assured and productive today. I can do simple things like recognize a job well done and ask for a raise at work. I can better care for my wife and our 5 children. I can glean from my experience and all the principles I teach others and use it in my parenting. Learning about touch and how necessary it's been for me, I've made it a point to give that to my children more often and I know how to recognize who needs it more often or less. I'm a better listener and can give that gift to my wife and children without going into my own head and deciding I know what they're really thinking.

Today I'm a chef and kitchen manager by profession and I can stand my ground and do things my way at work. I know generally when I do that and trust myself, things will work out just fine, and everyone involved will be happy. I'm a leader in this healing community and I've staffed 5 different workshops for 3 organizations stepping up and making a difference in countless men's lives. I run two support groups weekly on an introductory and advanced level and I've started distributing my processes, teachings, and exercises internationally to other groups and organizations.

The last time I staffed a workshop as it came to a close I cried. I'm making a real difference in the lives of others. My want is for no one to suffer and disappear into themselves the way I did. I know without JONAH, People can Change and other organizations that helped me I'd still be that trapped little boy, scared of men, struggling to just exist. I've said "no" in the context of these processes and workshops. It's been made clear to me, and I know ultimately, I'm in the driver's seat in my life and I take responsibility for what I do, don't to, and it's outcome. It would be a shame and a travesty to take these opportunities away from others because of a few boys that aren't taking responsibility for their actions. I've worked with many mental health professionals throughout my life and never have I made any progress until I came to JONAH and started this modality. Every step has been my decision and each of my decisions has been received and respected. As have my boundaries. To take that away from me would be a violation of my freedom. My right as a religious man to choose to live happily and comfortably within my value system would be stripped away. This community and ones like it are vital for myself and my family. Please don't take away my right, or anyone else's to choose how they want to live their life. Without this organization and this work, I'm not certain I'd still be here to share my story or to ask for this. My life. My choice.