

REALITIES

There are proportionately more Jewish homosexuals in San Francisco than in any other community in the world. One educated guess is that about 15 per cent of the Jewish population in this city are homosexual. It is a reality which the Jewish community has not yet confronted.

Perhaps the most problematic edge of that reality are those homosexuals who are intent on maintaining their Jewish identity. Some of them remain "in the closet," and are scattered throughout the various congregations of the city. But an increasing number find it intolerable to hide their homosexuality -- and difficult to remain as open homosexuals in a mainstream congregation.

That is why there is now a Congregation Sha'ar Zahav in San Francisco, specifically "reaching out to the gay community." It meets on Friday nights at the Dovre Hall, although it is anxiously looking for more fitting quarters.

The religious backgrounds of Sha'ar Zahav's leadership form a familiar pattern. One, a homosexual woman, was raised in a strictly Orthodox home and attended Hebrew Day School. Another grew up in what he described as a "modern Orthodox" home, and attended both Hebrew Day School and Yeshiva University. Another attended a "high reform" synagogue in the Midwest, with parents who were "religious but non-observant." And so on.

Some of the congregants "broke" from formal affiliation during their late youth, and just recently returned. Others maintained their affiliation continuously and just shifted from other congregations to Sha'ar Zahav, or maintain a double affiliation. Some are experiencing their first formal affiliation. That is also a familiar pattern.

Earl Raab
"Realities"
page 2

But why a "gay synagogue?" Says one: "A synagogue should be more than a place to pray, it should be a place where you can also find community. If we hide our homosexuality, we don't feel comfortable or part of the community. And if we don't hide our homosexuality, we are made to feel uncomfortable."

Most of them would support this evaluation by Hershel J. Matt in the Winter 1978 edition of *Judaism*: "It would be far preferable for homosexuals to be welcome and feel welcome in existing congregations rather than to feel a need to form their own synagogues. Since the present reality, however, is that such a welcome is not assured and is perhaps even unlikely, the formation of gay synagogues is legitimate." The Union of American Hebrew Congregations has indeed accepted the affiliation of gay synagogues.

What would make them feel more welcome, more comfortable, more part of the community in mainstream congregations? There are three levels of answers from the congregants. One is at the level of "sheer bigotry," which might not seem to be such an impediment since about 80 per cent of the Jewish community voted against the Briggs measure. Another is at the "culture shock" level, e.g., tolerance for the sight of men embracing after a ceremony, just as men and women often do. The third is more directly theological: e.g., the sanctification of homosexual marriages.

But, Hershel J. Matt, a sympathetic observer, points out that "it is hardly conceivable that a homosexual departure from the Torah's heterosexual norm would ever be accepted" by mainstream Judaism. Homosexual Jews may have to face that reality, he suggests, and say, with some pain: "Then in this one regard we must live non-halakhically; but we are Jews and we insist on avowing our homosexual condition openly within the Covenant Community of the People of Israel."

Earl Raab
"Realities"
page 3

Meanwhile, there are now a significant number of homosexuals who feel so strongly about their Jewish identity that they refuse to relinquish that identity even in the face of adversity and rejection. That is a reality for the Jewish community to face.