

Thank you, Mom, for the warm introduction.

As my mom stated in her introduction, I'm going to talk today about both my personal experiences growing up as both gay and Jewish, and also discuss the work I've done on my dissertation for my doctorate degree. I have been an active participant in the LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community since I first started coming out to friends and family when I was 14 years old. I've also done some professional work helping out this community once I graduated from college.

Before I get into discussing my dissertation, I'd like to talk about my own personal life – especially since my own experiences with being gay and Jewish had a significant impact on why I chose the topic for my dissertation in the first place.

I will always remember the day I realized I might not be straight. Sitting in a top bunk bed at the Prozdor Shabbaton at Camp Yavneh, I realized I had a crush on my female counselor who was only 2 years older than me. It was a huge realization and in some ways a terrifying one. Realizing I wasn't the same as most of my peers, and that my attraction to women could have a significant impact on my family relationships and friendships was quite scary. Who could I trust with this new knowledge about myself? How would my family take the news? My friends? The greater Jewish community?

Suffice to say – I got lucky. The northeast has generally been a more welcoming place for us LGB folks. The first friend I came out to (my best friend) told me she didn't think she was straight either. You would laugh if you had seen me and my friend arguing about who was going to first enter the gay straight alliance room at Lexington High. Just imagine, two woefully shy teens arguing with each other: you go in first, no you go in! We were terrified that we'd be asked what our sexual orientations were, and at that point we weren't 100% sure. Thankfully that of course wasn't the case, and I stayed an active member of the GSA through high school graduation. I even got to wear a rainbow tassel on my graduation cap which I still have to this day.

When it came to family – thankfully my whole immediate family has been hugely supportive and affirming. My extended family has overall been supportive as well. My sisters will ask me when I'll find myself a wife. My mom tells me she would love to have a daughter-in-law some day. I have this great memory of her telling me that she didn't care who I married, whether it was a woman or a man, whether they were black, white, purple! But please, please could they be Jewish?

Overall research has shown that social support is extremely important to the well being of LGB youth. For that reason, not only was it important that I had support from family and friends, but from the greater community as well. So boy was I happy to realize that Temple Emunah was and is a supportive and welcoming community support. This support was especially important after I went to Israel during the summer in high school. My Jewish identity became all that much stronger and important after visiting the Jewish homeland, a second home away from home. As I grew in my Jewish identity it was great to find out that Rabbi Lerner was now willing to marry gay couples, to know I can use him someday when I find a partner to marry. It was also, awesome to have the opportunity to join the *Keruv* committee – working to make the temple a place welcoming for all Jews, LGBT, interfaith and otherwise. I also joined Keshet in high school – a social group for Jews who identify on the LGBT+ spectrum. My gay and Jewish identities are very tightly intertwined – and pretty much fully integrated. I never felt the need to deny one identity in order to have the other.

With all of this in mind, I wondered, how many others had experiences like me? What was it like for other LGB people who had supportive religious communities? I knew of the research that had showed that religion could be a very bad thing for people in the LGBT community. I'd heard of the churches for example that told people that being gay was a sin, unnatural, evil. I knew that hearing that over and over could and did have lasting negative consequences for the LGB community. And by negative consequences I'm talking about increased symptoms of depression, increased suicidality, increased PTSD symptoms, increased likelihood of having substance abuse issues, lowered self-esteem, and more. People living in these unwelcoming communities are more likely to experience homophobia,

bigotry, assault, and discrimination. But I wondered, what about these places of worship and organizations popping up more and more that very intentionally WELCOMED and SUPPORTED the sexual minority community? What impact did that have?

I got the chance to look into that area when it came time to find a dissertation topic for my graduate school. The purpose of my study was to explore with a small sample LGB young adults, their perceptions of how belonging to these supportive religious groups have influenced their feelings of self-acceptance and their ability to integrate their sexual minority and religious identities. I found participants from both the Jewish and Christian faith – interesting everything from reform Jews to an orthodox Jew as well as Christians from liberal churches to one who was Catholic.

All of them were members of religious groups or places of worship that were welcoming and accepting of their sexual orientation. And I found that they perceived that belonging to these welcoming religious groups had a significant positive impact in their lives. They all reported that they felt that their religious and sexual identities were integrated. They were easily able to accept their LGB identities, not having to deny one for the other. The participants told stories about feeling more confident in themselves and loving themselves more. One participant stated it quite well she said: "I've been in a space where, I used to feel like I needed to hide something to be present with people and I don't feel that way anymore. I feel a lot more peace with that."

I had found what I had hoped to find – that people viewed having social support in the form of religious groups and places of worship that accepted their sexual orientation to be very helpful to them and their identity. So, what does this mean? That maybe we should have more places of worship like Temple Emunah, more organizations like Keshet – more continued support and acceptance in the religious community. Wouldn't it be awesome if the LGB youth of tomorrow could have that support, so they never have to pick one identity over the other?

On a closing note, I am currently finishing up the last touches of my dissertation. The hope is that I can graduate with my doctorate degree around August of this year. Thank you all for giving me this lovely opportunity to speak during Pride month. Shabbat shalom!