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*Tamar and Arielle*

# coming out in the ORTHODOX WORLD

by Tamar A. Prager

I never could have imagined a commitment ceremony for me and my partner, or dreamt that our parents would willingly and lovingly host a magnificent celebration for 165 relatives and friends. This would have been, sadly, only a fantasy. Six years earlier I'd thought of ending my life because I was in love with a woman and could not tell a soul. I felt my only other option was to hide, so I reigned in all of my emotions. Arielle and I shut out all family and close friends, trapping ourselves in a tiny world closed off from our Jewish communities.

Between that narrow darkness and our day of celebration, we and our Modern Orthodox families took a journey that brought us back to the center of a Jewish universe and—most importantly—to ourselves. Last September 25th I stood next to my beloved, Arielle, in the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, listening to our parents read the wedding blessings that we had written, under our *huppah*. We faced each other, in front of a rabbi and a community of loving, supportive people, and recited our vows, one woman to another.

How did we arrive at a destination marked by acceptance and celebration when we began on a road of aversion and shame? Coming out has been a challenging journey through our own psyches and our communities' strictures, but we've been rewarded with a surprising belief in people's ability to evolve into more accepting souls.


I grew up in a modern Orthodox community whose members shared a belief system which dictated the norms of education, marriage, family life and career. Some people held socially conservative opinions and some were more liberal, but when it came to relationships and marriage, there was no dispute: the heterosexual model reigned supreme, with its single archetype for lovers. These mores were the social canon, fixed and resistant to change, never publicly

  
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challenged. As a child, I too never questioned these beliefs, feeling completely at home with its customs and traditions—keeping kosher, observing Shabbat, and more. I saw loving and supportive families, whose heterosexual-couple model showed me the capacity for love and stability. In particular, I drew comfort from the security of my parents' and my grandparents' obviously loving marriages. The pact between the partners seemed to buoy up the wife and husband

as well as the community as a whole. As a child I imagined my own future and the man I would marry—Where did he grow up? What would he look like?—never dreaming of a woman as my life partner.

But then came adolescence, and I began to wonder why I never fawned over boys. Women intrigued me, but I didn't permit myself to explore my desire; what I wanted seemed wrong and absolutely unthinkable. Everyone in my family's shul, and in my Hebrew day school, was straight. Year after year, the hetero-normative model implanted itself deeper and deeper into my consciousness, cutting off the circulation to my budding feelings that charted a different path.

rielle and I first met in high school. We were one grade apart, and although we overlapped in sports, theater and chorus, we lived through our teen years in separate spheres. Then, at Barnard, we found ourselves performing together in a troupe of singers. Hours of rehearsals and performances gave us time to become close friends. Each of us had men in our lives, but our pull toward closeness pushed away any prospects these other relationships might represent.

Soon we were calling each other at night leaving incons-

quential messages, with coy laughter and excited voices. She invited me to breakfast in the dining hall and I asked her to join me in the library for a night of studying. We proceeded to fall in love, and with each step we took towards each other, we stepped away from those closest to us. I had fallen in love with a gorgeous, tender-hearted, exciting woman, but was not bold enough to tell anyone. I repeated to myself that I was not gay, but that I had fallen for a person who just happened to be female. I couldn't stomach the truth; the thought that I could be gay flooded me with guilt, shame, and self loathing. I assured myself that this relationship was just an exception. After all, I had found men physically desirable in the past; they just hadn't excited me in the ways that my girlfriend did. I justified our relationship by telling myself that I was following my heart, and by doing so acting in a noble manner that somehow excused the gay "part." I continued to feed myself this mantra of self-denial which only served to push away what I knew deep down to be true: that I *was* gay and thus undeniably different from everyone around me.

Our days were a mix of needing each other feverishly but being unable to help one another ease the mounting confusion and loneliness that had taken control of our lives. When in public together, we pushed our emotional selves so deep into the closet that we had to remind ourselves to acknowledge one another at all, bringing me the greatest loneliness, despair and anger that I have ever known. I longed to be close to Arielle, holding her hand and kissing her freely just as our straight peers were doing all around us. Intense desire pulled us together at the same time that a fear of being found out pushed us far apart. This cycle repeated itself countless times a day as we shifted roles back and forth between being lovers and being "just" roommates. We exhausted ourselves by our endless posing and dishonest socializing. I simply watched as others—men—clamored for her attention and coveted her gaze. I desperately wanted the whole world to know that she loved *me*, needed *me*, had chosen *me* as her beloved. That she was mine and no one else's. I became angry at my male friends who unwittingly tortured me with their advances to her and I avoided my three siblings and my parents because I hated the cold death my relationship endured each time I was in the presence of my closest relatives.

Once, my twin brother politely inquired whether Arielle and I were "together," but after I denied this with vehemence, he knew enough to leave the topic alone. My whole family sensed that I was wholly different from the open, loving Tamar they all knew. I kept them

all at a distance, but I yearned to be honest with them. Most of all I craved their advice. What was I to do with a love that would never be accepted by my Jewish community? How could we walk hand in hand to shul—in Arielle's community or my own—without causing a scandal and upsetting the very balance of the universe? I wondered if it would ever be possible to exist as the only openly gay couple in a community of hundreds. Would I be forced to choose between a gay relationship and Judaism?

There were opportunities that screamed, "This is it, Tamar. It's time to out yourself." Occasionally there were women who wanted to introduce me to their handsome sons, and nephews with Harvard MBAs. I was so beautiful, they insisted, why was I not yet dating anyone? I was simply too afraid to tell them the truth. I'd even leave shul before services were finished to avoid socializing. My alternatives seemed pretty limited: tell the truth and risk shame and embarrassment, or lie and feel awash in anger and unhappiness.

Arielle and I argued incessantly over when and how we would ever come out. I explained that I had reached my breaking point, and was no longer interested in preserving an image of myself as straight and "normal." She was not ready to take on people's reactions. I posed these questions to her as well as to myself: How could we ever live whole, fulfilling lives when we were so ashamed of our own desires and behaviors? Why were we still together if it was causing such awful discord between us, not to mention weakening the relationships that were most dear to us?

I started the confessions with my twin during Shavuot, while at my parents' house. I knew he had suspected for years that I was gay, and I could no longer stomach lying to someone so close to me who seemed to be begging for the truth. I approached him at night and asked him to come talk with me

in the family room. I soon felt the need for more privacy so we went outdoors and began talking in the driveway—he leaning against the hood of my father's Buick and I standing.

"Ben, there's something I want to talk to you about."

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No. I just want to tell you something important. Ben, I'm dating Arielle. We've been together for a year and nobody knows. You're the first person I've told. You can't tell anyone. Please."

I remember feeling ashamed as I spoke those words to him, but he didn't flinch. He wasn't shocked. And I'll never forget his response—the most supportive I ever received.

"Tamar, that's not strange at all. I totally understand why you *would* be with a woman; *I'm* in love with a woman!" Ben's equating my love with his love, however simple the line sounds, told me that I was not strange or sick. He did not give gender supreme authority in dictating whom I should be with. Gender was irrelevant. He loved a woman, I loved a woman. There was no difference.



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Months later, after hours of fitful tossing and crying in bed in my childhood bedroom, I told my mother. I felt such tremendous longing for her. Crying desperately, I raced down the stairs and told her my secret. She said everything was alright, and held me close as I buried my face and pushed my body into hers. I explained to her and to the air around us that I loved a woman. My coming out terrified me, but *I was out*. I received the love I needed then, but the path ahead was exceptionally trying.

I told my parents separately, fearing my father's reaction. After all, he held conservative views on most issues and was deeply bonded to Jewish tradition. That his daughter was dating a woman surely did not mesh with his expectations, his view of reality. I asked him to come outside to the backyard so I could speak to him alone. "This is very hard for me, but I need to be honest with you, because our relationship means the world to me. I'm in love with a woman and we've been together for about a year. But—but I'm still attracted to men." This was no surprise to my dad, it turned out; my mother had told him weeks before, while I was still getting up the courage to break the news. He asked surprisingly gentle questions. Did I ever see a life with a man, or would I always be with a woman? I told him I simply did not know. I was with Arielle who had my heart and my devotion, and that was my truth, as near as I could tell.

While my father never spoke to me of disappointment, sadness or anger at my coming out, I can only imagine that my lesbian identity was difficult for him to accept fully. Despite this, he never failed to show me kindness, trying very hard to support me in *my* difficult journey. I watched as he began a process of coming to peace with having a lesbian daughter. He met with community leaders in America and in Israel to discuss the issue. And—true to his usual intellectual thoroughness—he studied texts that dealt with Judaism and homosexuality.

One evening I received a phone message from my father, who sounded happy and relieved. He told me about a meeting that he and my mother had just had with a rabbi whom they deeply respected. They had openly discussed my being gay, and the rabbi told them what mattered most was their love and support for me. Nothing was of greater importance. While Judaism might not accept homosexuality, people must accept homosexuals.


This charge became the keystone around which my parents built their acceptance. They saw the groundbreaking film about Orthodox gays, "Trembling Before G-d," and read books by Orthodox and non-Orthodox writers dealing with the thorny relationship between Judaism and homosexuality. While at times I was hurt by their need to "come to terms" with my being gay (why couldn't they just be happy that I had found a stable, loving relationship?), ultimately I came to

respect their process and be grateful for it. How could I *not* be grateful that my parents were working on changing themselves in order to be able to accept their daughter fully as she was? I saw my parents' search as their pledge to support me. I was gay but nevertheless deserved the same respect, unconditional love and consideration that my entire family received. In my parents' evolution towards comfort and acceptance of my lesbian identity, culminating in their recitation of our own *Sheva Brachot* at our commitment ceremony and the memorable speeches they gave when we celebrated, I see the potential that lies within us to change. I understood from their evolution why as individuals, and as a Jewish community, we must learn to accept those who are gay.


With my immediate family I had a doable task. The community, on the other hand, was made up of hundreds, each with their own set of exposures and biases. I vowed to hold my head high with each encounter. There was no official announcement made from the bima, but I had faith in the viral spread of gossip. Then I found out that there *was* no gossip train, because my parents had not told their friends immediately. They needed time to process that they had a gay daughter before making themselves vulnerable by sharing the news with others.

The word "partner," my introduction for Arielle, opened a world of confusion and disbelief. "Partner in what?" asked a 60-year-old man at a religious engagement party. Arielle quickly rescued me with her straightforward "partner in life." Uncomprehending, he walked away as if in some kind of stupor. Then there was the *de rigueur* polite exchange while waiting in line at a wedding reception's carving station in our black-tie best. "Tamar, how wonderful to see you. You look great. What have you been up to?" "It's great to see you too; I've been well. Mrs. Levitsky, I'd like to introduce you to my partner, Arielle." Once again, the classic bewildered stare. "Are you music partners? Are you still singing and playing drums in a band?" "Well, yes we are in a band together, but Arielle is ummm....We're a couple." She looks terribly uncomfortable, doing her best with a weak smile. We smile politely back.

Telling people that we were a couple usually elicited a discomfort that would make its way from the gut to the face, as we watched physiognomy change before our eyes. We came to recognize the mixture of disbelief and discomfort. Adding to the social strictures against homosexuality was the misperception triggered by our overt femininity. Being 'femme' acted as a camouflage, keeping almost everyone who wanted to deny the fact from understanding that we were lesbians. Both of us are pretty and well-coiffed, wearing lipstick and jewelry, so how could we possibly be gay? Someone even asked me directly: how I could possibly be gay, because I was so pretty.



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Arielle and I created our ceremony based upon aspects of the traditional Jewish wedding, though ours stood apart from the *halakhic Erusin* and *Kiddushin* of Orthodox marriages. In deference to a body of *halakha* (Jewish law) whose rituals were not intended for gay couples, we agreed early on not to use this traditional model. The basis for our ceremony was the *Brit Ahuvim/Ahuvot* or Lover's Covenant created by Rachel Adler (which appeared in her book *Engendering Judaism*). It relies on the laws of Jewish partnership as a foundation for creating an egalitarian Jewish marriage. Through the reading of the *Brit Ahuvot* and an exchange of rings, we made a joint acquisition of our partnership formed by mutual agreement. The, "seven blessings," alluded to in this article refer to those that we wrote for our ceremony. They incorporate traditional themes of God and humanity, along with themes of great importance to us, namely individuality, acceptance and community. Working tirelessly over the course of a year and a half with Rabbi Ilana C. Garber, we were able to use the beauty of Jewish ritual to honor and celebrate our love and commitment to each other.



I was eager to show people that there was nothing to fear from my loving a woman, nothing to fear by our behaving as a couple. Take dancing for example. Dancing at Jewish weddings. There is nothing as conspicuous as dancing in the center of the room with one's partner. Dancing is what Arielle and I used to gauge our level of comfort in a crowd. A Conservative Jewish wedding...no problem, we thought, they won't bat an eyelash. But many did. From the time we tentatively walked to the dance floor holding hands, eyes were on us, the two femme women who were coupled off. People's stares seemed to ask, "Could it be? Am I understanding this correctly?" They were looks of amazement and interest. While trying to push through the discomfort we could feel many pairs of eyes and their accompanying thoughts fixed on us. And if ever any guests doubted whether we were actually gay, the slow songs gave them their answer. In our early years together we simply left the dance floor; we equated slow music with "We're gay but we don't need to push it in their face."

Whether in private conversations or in public demonstrations on the dance floor, each time I came out I came closer to accepting my gay identity. Not bisexual; gay. One night, resting quietly in bed. I thought about the different times in my life when I had fallen in love with a woman. It wasn't just