

BEING OUT AS A JEW in lesbian circles

by Melanie Weiss

The bar is crushed with women ordering vastly overpriced alcohol, but since this is one of the few places I've been to that serves anything other than sour apple vodka and beer, I don't see fit to complain. My friend and I are nursing martinis that may just put me out a week's groceries, talking to an off-duty police officer and her girlfriend, who are both quite drunk and rather affectionate both with each other and with us. When asked what she studies, my friend Mya answers quite proudly that she's a medic student; "I'm in London for Jewish Studies," I shout over the music. There is a pause. (There is always a pause.) "Oh," Off-Duty replies. Drunk Girlfriend leans over, looks me up and down, and says, "So, what, are you Jewish or something?" I grin and shrug. "What, they don't mind that you're here?" she wants to know, leaning over on her barstool precariously. "I didn't think Jewish girls were allowed to...you know."

And, yes, I do. Somewhere along the line, the queer community went totally and righteously secular and forgot to send me the memo. While the experience of coming out as gay in a religious setting is often traumatic, I've found that being a self-proclaimed shul-going, Hillel-leading, holiday-observing, out-and-proud Jew doesn't make other gay people angry so much as it gets them...mighty confused. "Really?" asks an old friend from high school. "But I mean...really?" There are only so many times that I can say "Well, yeah..." only so many times I can explain that my Jewish identity isn't at odds with my queer identity, that while I practice and adore a religion that can be critical of non-heterosexual unions, it is precisely my high level of involvement in Jewish life and learning that gave me the skills to study past that surface criticism. Plus, the *déjà vu* is somewhat alarming: didn't I go through this sort of interrogation already?

I'm zoning out of a lecture from a woman on campus who seems to be threatening to revoke my gay card if I don't snap to my senses about the repression reaped upon our community by organized religion when, finally, I snap. "Look," I say forcefully, "you must get pretty upset when people talk about your homosexuality as a lifestyle or a choice. You must feel like they just don't understand that it's something integral to you, an essential part of who you are. You can't will it away or stuff it down forever, because you know in your heart that it feels right." She nods, confused, missing the parallels that I feel are painted with neon.

I understand why people may feel this way (many religious Jews *do* disapprove of my "lifestyle"), but that doesn't mean they're about to change my mind. And, sometimes, I'm a little miffed on behalf of Jews everywhere: who said there was only one way to be a Jew? I imagine these same conversations a generation ago, slightly re-scripted to replace "gay" with "feminist." How is it possible, people wonder, to care so much about these two things at the same time? How do they both fit inside a single brain? And yet, here we are, proof positive that the trick to holding two things in your heart at once is often just deciding that you will—that you have to. I don't think of my Judaism as any less a part of me than to whom I happen to be attracted. Both things affect my politics, my world view, and my values.

So, yes, I still go out to lesbian bars sometimes, and I still grin a little ruefully into the pause after I explain, for instance, that I'm the world's happiest intern at a Jewish feminist magazine. "Oh, are you...?" But after that pause, while my co-conversationalist searches in her mind for something to say, some query or disarming comment, I like to throw in the zinger: "Yeah, I'm doubly blessed," I say. "Not everyone can be pretty and witty *and* one of God's chosen."

a "deep" friendship. I had fallen for these women while my friends were falling for men. I *am* gay. I said it aloud again and again with a smile on my face, and I felt free.

Today Arielle and I have moved on to find a comfortable place within our parents' communities as well as our own, attending shul, hosting shabbat dinners, and taking part in Jewish Lesbian events. But most importantly...we are.

About one week after our commitment ceremony, our last official celebration was hosted by my parents' friends who felt strongly about supporting and celebrating our recent commitment to one another. Although the community as a whole was uncomfortable viewing it as a traditional *sheva berakhot*, that night marked a historic change in the mindset of some in the room. That night my father gave a *dvar Torah* that spoke boldly about the very nature of what we were all attending. He acknowledged the obvious departure from the norm that was

palpable in the room, but he spoke words that began to change the hearts and minds of many that night.

"*Lo tov heyot adam levado*"—it is not good for man to be alone, my father quoted from the Torah portion in Genesis. "*Eeseh lo ezer knegdo*"—I will make him a "helpmate." My father went on to explain that the word *ezer* is gender neutral. God did not say I will make Adam a woman, but simply a helpmate. My father spoke deliberately and with passion; perhaps, he said, we can learn from this that the profound need for companionship and love does not need to be fulfilled in someone of the opposite sex. We all have a right to live and love freely with our chosen companion. ●

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