



## Jewish and queer on campus

*Resource guide helps Hillels navigate challenges*

by Eric Fingerhut

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For Lauryn, who has not come out to her family as gay, being able to find "queer Jewish friends ... has been a blessing & it's an incredible experience to be able to spend a holiday with people who understand your sexual identity as well as your religious one." For Melodee, there are so many other Jewish lesbians that she's become tired of the same old feminist sedarim and hopes for something new.

Both Lauryn, a student at Concordia University, and Melodee, who attends the University of San Francisco, tell their stories in the early pages of Hillel's new LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) resource guide. The book contains information that should assist them both & everything from advice on how to help a gay or lesbian student come out on campus to an example of a Hebrew blessing that can be used for a post-surgery transgender student declaring a new name.

Unveiled last week at Hillel International's annual staff conference in the District, the extensively detailed 163-page book contains a glossary of LGBTQ terms, information on LGBTQ Jewish history, a variety of articles providing "helping skills" for welcoming LGBTQ students & from "Being an Ally" to "Queer Jewish Ritual on Campus" to "Challenging the Myth of Biblical Homophobia" & as well as dozens of pages of programming and networking resources.

"If Torah values are relevant to our lives today, we have to fully embrace all of our children and do so in a way that is visible, practical and that deals with real issues people are going through," Hillel president Wayne Firestone said in an interview last week.

He views the guide as a prime example of how Hillel is recognizing that today's college students don't want "one-size-fits-all Judaism," but to "understand things personally."

"We've got to go to places where there's meaning in their lives and meaning in the world and show them how Jewish tradition, Jewish values, Jewish resources can help enrich their journeys," adding that if that effort is successful, "they'll have an enduring commitment to Jewish life."

The guide is the brainchild of editor-in-chief D'ror Chankin-Gould, senior Jewish Campus Service Corps fellow at Columbia/Barnard Hillel, and includes the writings and input of about 25 people, nearly all of them Hillel professionals. Chankin-Gould, at the time a recent college grad who had worked for Hillel for three months, had suggested at last year's staff conference that such a guide was necessary.

"People were desperate for this resource. ... It was overdue," said Chankin-Gould, himself gay. He recalled his own recent college experience, when a Hillel group would visit the local LGBTQ synagogue, but didn't have many other fresh ideas for programming.

Hillel professionals understand that "people need to bring all their identities to our door if we're going to be effectively reaching them as Jewish students," he said.



Both he and Firestone said they have not received any negative feedback from more traditional elements of the Jewish community.

"This is about helping us do our jobs better," said Chankin-Gould. "Our job is to reach all students."

He acknowledged the book's numerous details < including tips on how to set up a gender-neutral bathroom at a Hillel and prayers on a student's coming out < won't apply to every campus. He points out that a Hillel director, for instance, at Boston University is living in a much different environment for the LGBTQ community than one at the University of Oklahoma.

But even if there are only a few members of the LGBTQ community on a given campus, it is essential that "people are safe to be who they are," said Beth Cousens, Hillel director for organizational learning.

As for possible problems with students who may not be as welcoming of the LGBTQ community as others, Chankin-Gould said navigating such things should be no different than the daily challenges Hillel directors face in getting students of various levels of Jewish observance to coexist and work together.

Chankin-Gould pointed out that the guide also includes some specific advice on potential conflicts due to varying levels of observance. For example, one section deals with a hypothetical man who observes shomer negiah, restrictions on contact with the opposite sex, and doesn't feel comfortable shaking hands with a "female who has transitioned into a male" and now identifies as a man.

"We have to find a way to honor both of those students," Chankin-Gould said, by reiterating to the latter student that he is a man and "our community is not going to treat you any differently," while respecting the shomer negiah student's feeling that he is "not in a place where you feel comfortable touching [and] you don't have to."

"We don't expect our students to agree with each other all the time," he said. But "we demand that they respect each other."

Local Hillel directors are excited to see such a useful resource made available to them.

"It's a fabulous new development within the Hillel world," said Scott Bailey, Hillel director at George Mason University in Fairfax. He said GMU Hillel already has a relationship with LGBTQ students, but that the book is a "helpful tool" that will "help to open the door even more" to such students.

At George Washington University in the District, Hillel director Rob Fishman said he was thrilled to see the publication of a resource that "finally addresses the needs of [the LGBTQ] community," anticipating that it would help to draw more students from that community to Hillel.

Fishman said he was impressed with the book's level of detail and said he would be happy to work with a student on, for instance, incorporating a queer Jewish ritual into a religious service if there were interest.

"There's not one of us that can't be more educated" in this area, he said.

