

## northwest

# Wrestling with God and Men

First openly gay Orthodox rabbi comes to Portland

by Malka Geffen

As revealed by the groundbreaking 2001 film *Trembling Before G-d*, gay Orthodox Jews— anomalies in more than 3,000 years of Jewish society and abominations according to Scripture—do exist. What the film also depicts is their struggle with conflicting realities and the pain they face whether living in or out of the closet in their Orthodox communities. Among the few in the world who have come out and maintained their strict religious observance is a lone rabbi.

When dealing with a conflict, Rabbi Steven Greenberg goes back to the roots. As the first openly gay Orthodox rabbi, he looks to the foundation of Jewish law to reconcile his disparate identities. According to Greenberg, the first code of Jewish law, the Mishna, completed in the year 200, is grounded in dialogic exploration.

"The Mishna and Talmud express minority and majority opinions, without clarity about which opinion we should go by," he explained. The law is originally presented as a series of questions, dialogues and possibilities, which end up as legal practice as communities narrow down and choose from interpretations.

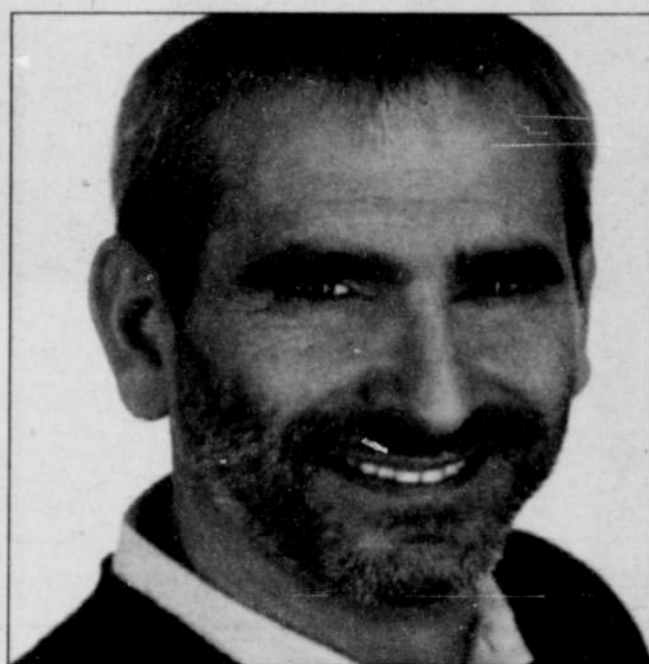
"Clearly the root of Jewish law is that of multiple possibilities, and when we have a problem, we have to confront it from the primary position of inquiry," Greenberg said. He argues that Orthodox communities must open up dialogue and discussion alongside serious learning to truly deal with the issue of same-sex love.

Greenberg grew up in Columbus, Ohio, in a "middle-of-the-road Conservative Jewish family." So he surprised his parents when, at age 15, he announced his intention to become an observant Orthodox Jew. "I ended up pretty accidentally at an Orthodox synagogue and met an English rabbi who rocked my world and introduced me to traditional Judaism by studying with me," Greenberg said. He continued his studies at Yeshiva University in New York. "I was so excited by the potential inside the material I was learning that I decided I wanted to be a rabbi and a teacher."

After working as a religious teacher, a rabbi of a congregation and a chaplain in a hospital for many years, Greenberg looked for work that is "more culturally and socially at the center of things." He now works as a senior teaching fellow at the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, which is a think tank, leadership training institute and resource center.

In 1993, the rabbi, while still closeted, caught the Jewish world unaware with his article "Gayness and God: Wrestling of a Gay Orthodox Rabbi." In 1996, he went to Jerusalem to further study biblical and rabbinic attitudes toward sexuality. There, he started a gay men's study group through which he met filmmaker Sandi Simcha Dubowski as she began her work on *Trembling Before G-d*. He came out publicly in 1999.

"Realizing I was gay was like a dawning awareness that both grew in clarity and disappeared," Greenberg said. "It was a long and rather painful process I likely began in my teens, repressing things



Steven Greenberg challenges millennia of prohibition as a gay Orthodox rabbi.

through my 20s when I was able to talk to people but not use the word 'gay,' to my early 30s when I was acting upon it but also trying to get married." The rabbi explained that when coming from a traditional religious environment like Orthodox Judaism, the difficulty with coming out is exacerbated, as every fantasy of the future is not only heterosexual but positively celebratory of an ordinary life structure.

"To say 'I am gay' has the sound of a certain kind of death sentence, so it's resisted in the extreme because no one wants to articulate the end of life as you've known it and to construct a new trajectory when there are no familiar models or they're somewhat threatening or unpleasant," Greenberg said. "In my view there was a lot of meaningless sex and early death, and it took me quite a while to construct a different picture."

In his book, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition*, Greenberg discusses the challenge to integrate gays not only into larger society but into religious communities of all kinds. "It's the move away from the ghetto to solution—a full-fledged imagination of gay and lesbian belonging," he said. In line with tradition, the rabbi asks questions rather than demanding change in his quest for resolution. "We usually ask others to merely be inclusive, but a different kind of self-acceptance would lead to that question. We should ask, 'Is there a wisdom in our unique experience that we need to nourish and offer to the world?'"

RABBI STEVEN GREENBERG will speak as part of the Gus and Libby Solomon lecture series and the Harold Schnitzer Family Program in Judaic Studies at 7 p.m. Jan. 17 in Portland State University's Smith Memorial Student Union Ballroom, 1825 S.W. Broadway. Admission is free.

He will also speak 7:30 p.m. Jan. 18 in the Knight Library Browsing Room at Oregon State University and after a Jewish Film Festival screening of the documentary *Trembling Across America* 9 p.m. Jan. 20 at Whisell Auditorium, 1219 S.W. Park Ave. Tickets are \$7 from 503-246-8831.

He will speak at a branch with Keshet members at 11 a.m. Jan. 21 on a topic relating to Judaism and sexual minorities. RSVP to [mike@seeingresults.com](mailto:mike@seeingresults.com) for the address and more information.

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