

Kiss My Assimilation

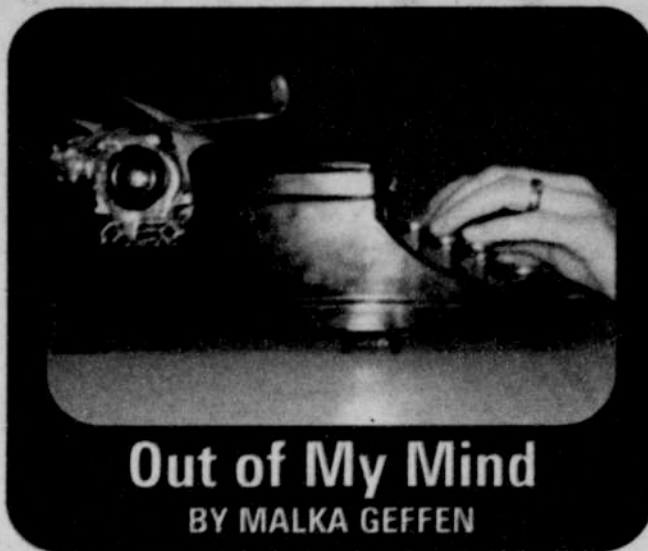
Born (Jewish and gay) in the U.S.A.

Well into January, we are safe to look back and reflect on the holidays. Growing up around a bunch of other Jewish kids, I walked through the mall on December weekends and thought, "None of my friends are in that line to take a picture with Santa, and neither am I." No problem. We had our annual Hanukkah plays at school, and parties of latkes and gifts with our families. If I came across *A Charlie Brown Christmas* on TV, I'd just keep flipping channels until I found something I could identify with. *The Facts of Life* usually did the trick. I loved that Jo.

Nowadays, I feel deemed unpatriotic if I don't return people's Christmas greetings. Ever since Bill O'Reilly decried the "war on Christmas" a few years ago, many American conservatives and progressives alike have jumped on the anti-political-correctness bandwagon, ready to presume everyone celebrates Christmas or should at least pretend to since they love freedom.

In December, someone asked me if I would join her to cut down a tree for my home. "I don't celebrate Christmas," I explained. "Well, that's OK!" she said with charitable glee. "You can still have a tree." Gee, thanks. I overheard another person say: "Hey, Merry Christmas! Did you know we're allowed to say that again?"

Figuring out my hormones and identity in a heterocentric society was a larger battle for me as a kid. I could be close friends with a girl—but not too



close. No matter how much I wanted it to happen, Molly Ringwald and Ally Sheedy would never hook up at the end of *The Breakfast Club* (although, hello, *High Art* helped heal that wound). And no matter how much I liked a girl, she always held her boyfriend's hand during the movie, not mine. I couldn't even consider expressing the desire to do so for fear of becoming the rejected high school freak.

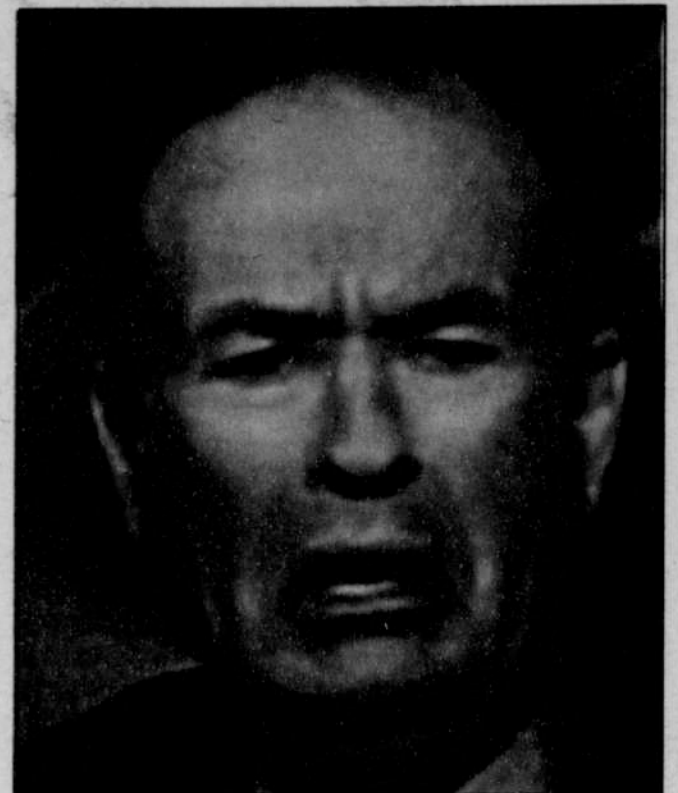
The older I got, the more religious my family became. The women at my new Orthodox temple sat in small cordoned-off aisles on the sides of the prayer hall, where the men ran the show. There were no kids I related to, no kids who made me feel safe in my little Jewish bubble. None of them wore tween makeup or watched *St. Elsewhere*. And while my school friends were getting bar and bat mitzvahs, I was getting homemade gefilte fish and an

unspoken lesson about my future marriage: He would be Jewish.

So there I was, in the United States, not Christian, not even a conventional Jew, feeling just a tad slighted about being a girl and just a smidge freaked out about being gay. Suffice it to say, I have not returned to an Orthodox synagogue since coming out in my 20s. I have actually had quite a time finding a place to be my gay and spiritual self. First off, the names of religious affiliations are less than appealing: Orthodox reminds me of orthodontia, and a locked box, and Conservative, well, you get the picture. Reformed Judaism, for all its acceptance of queer folk, is a movement so foreign to the Judaism of my upbringing. People (women even!) singing in English and using tambourines in front of G-d and everybody is just not in my comfort zone. Getting comfortable as "the other," in any situation, is difficult.

Despite my best efforts to block out my religious past and assimilate properly, I keep going back for more. This year, a couple of friends and I decided to visit a temple on the Friday night during Hanukkah. The two people leading the service were a queer couple, and with guitars and harmonies à la Indigo Girls, they led us in a Yiddish song I hadn't heard since my childhood. While I could feel a brand new comfort bubble being formed around me in that small group, I was hesitant to completely settle in.

This inability to relax reminds me of my experience with the pending implementation of our



This guy is not my fan.

domestic partnership rights. Besides gratitude and excitement, I feel anxiety about how this will play out. Did the injunction validate my worst fears? Should I always take signs of hope and change with a grain of kosher salt? That's definitely been my M.O. But my goal for the new year is to embrace my differences, to explain why it's more than "OK" I don't celebrate Christmas and to continue fighting for (not fearing) the rights and recognition I deserve. (j)

MALKA GEFFEN has plenty of room in her head. Fill it by e-mailing malkageffen@gmail.com.

Portland Lesbian

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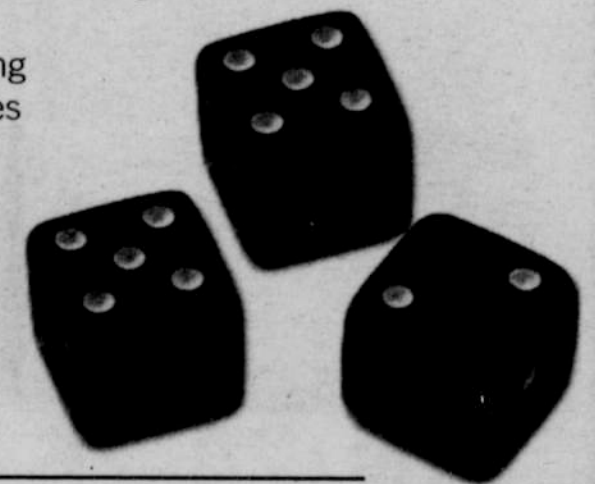
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