

The Way to Open Conversation

By Steve Greenberg

On October 24th, *Trembling Before G-d*, an unprecedented feature documentary about the lives of gay Orthodox Jews, began its theatrical run at the Film Forum in New York City. The film won numerous awards at film festivals during the past year and now has broken box office records in its first week of commercial release. The phenomenon of “gay Orthodoxy” is surely sensational enough, but the filmmaker tells these stories in a compelling and understated style.

The film is built around extended interviews that the director Sandi Dubowski conducted with six men and women who know, from the inside, what it means to be gay and Orthodox. Three of the six were willing to show their faces on camera, and the others were silhouetted to protect their identities. The film also includes interviews with rabbis who do their earnest best to defend the Orthodox status quo, and interviews with one Orthodox rabbi who argues that Orthodoxy must find a way to include a legitimate place for gay Jews. This reporter happens to be that rabbi.

The Jews who stand at the center of the film have been rejected by religious leaders and, more poignantly, by their families. The stories they share are filled with anger and pain, but they are also suffused by irony, humor, and resilience. Their debate with the Jewish tradition is intimate and personal; for them it is an intensive family quarrel even if there are many on the other side that would like to throw them out of the family entirely. The film was shot over five years in Brooklyn, Jerusalem, Los Angeles, London, Miami, and San Francisco, and captures a wide array of ways of being Orthodox and gay. When the film ends, a quote from the Talmud appears on the screen -- “Blessed are You Lord, knower of secrets” -- and the members of the audience understand that they have been granted a rare opportunity to look behind the veil of secrecy and to discern something of the divine life that lies hidden beneath.

As striking as the film is, even more striking is the effect it is having on the Orthodox world where it is generating lively public debate on the issue of homosexuality. On November 4th, two weeks after the film opened, eight Orthodox synagogues co-sponsored an evening at the theatre followed by an open discussion of the issues raised by the film. Rabbi Haskel Lookstein of Kehilath Jeshurun participated in one of these discussions and offered to bring the film to his synagogue and to the Ramaz School’s sex education class. (Ramaz is the leading modern Orthodox day school in New York City.) A few days later, the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale became the first Orthodox synagogue to screen the film and to host an

open forum on the issues it raised for the rabbis and the community. Six hundred people showed up for this event.

“None of us could have predicted this,” says Sandi Dubowski, referring to the Orthodox community’s response to the film. The interest of these communities in the film and their readiness to use it as a catalyst to explore the issues it raises have taken many by surprise. One would not be surprised if the push for screening the film in Orthodox synagogues like HIR had come from the closeted ranks of gay Orthodoxy, but in fact the impetus has come from Orthodox rabbis in synagogue leadership positions who sense the importance of the film and of the issues it explores. Dubowski reports that he has been contacted by Rabbi Kenneth Hain, former president of the Rabbinic Council of America (the official representative body of the Modern Orthodox rabbinate), who has expressed an interest in screening the film in his own congregation.

Given that for most Orthodox Jews the topic of homosexuality and Jewish law begins and ends with the injunction in *Leviticus* 20:13 that a man who lies with another man as one lies with a woman is an abomination and ought to be put to death, the increasingly widespread interest in engaging with the issues the movie raises is quite remarkable.

Dubowski’s genius may be part of the reason. He provides a portrait of Orthodoxy that does justice to its virtues and profound depths even as it unflinchingly illuminates the suffering that Orthodoxy brings to gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews. In the discussion periods that have followed many of the screenings of the film, someone inevitably asks: Why would any sane person remain Orthodox if he or she were gay? Aren’t there other Jewish communities that welcome gays and lesbians? What sort of madness is it that makes them stay? The answer, of course, is the madness of love. Marc and David, Devora and Malka (four of the individuals profiled in the film) -- all love their Orthodox Jewish lives too much to leave. Yes there are other venues in the Jewish world that are more tolerant of gay Jews than are most modern Orthodox shuls, but for these Orthodox Jewish gays these venues are not attractive, as they lack the “sweetness of traditional Jewish life” that they find so powerful and affecting. There is something paradoxical and poignant in the figures cut by these Orthodox gays and lesbians who are in every other way Orthodox, but who would be shunned by the community to which they want so much to belong if they should dare to be honest about their sexuality.

Dubowski has also created a film that tells stories and offers no answers. This is perhaps what is the most frustrating about the film for those who desperately seek a resolution of some sort to the predicament. Dubowski, however, refuses easy answers and instead forces us to encounter the painful realities. But by so doing, Dubowski has begun a process that gives many of us reason for hope. The Orthodox community -- or at least the Modern Orthodox community -- has

already demonstrated by its response to the film a willingness to listen to the testimonies of those who have been silent for so long and a readiness to grapple with the hard questions that these stories of suffering steadfastness pose for the Orthodox community. It is a very exciting time indeed.