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THE HATE BOOK EVERY JEW MUST READ

MICHAEL TOLKIN ON "THE TURNER DIARIES," VLS

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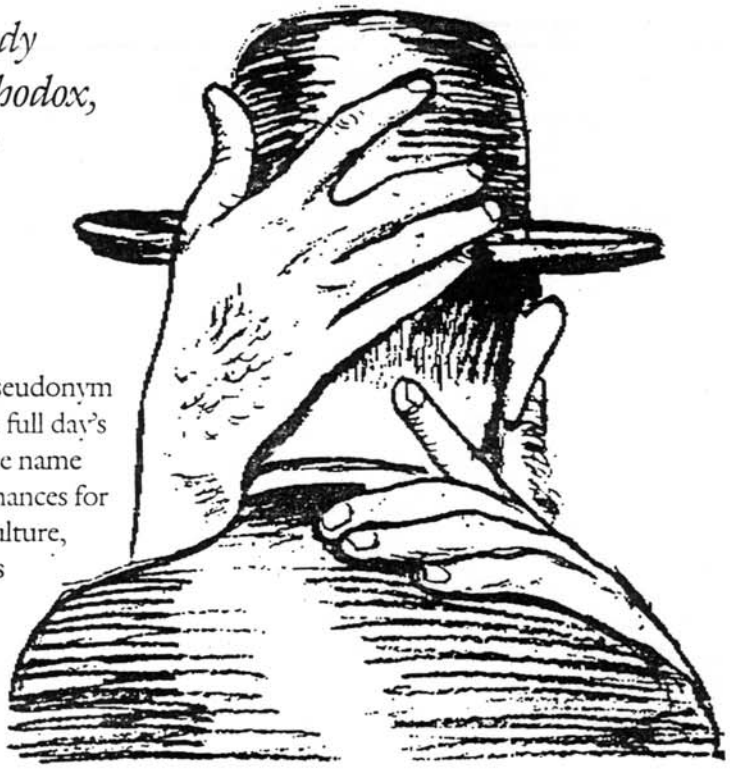
Sunday, the RABBI *Got* AIDS

Though most Orthodox Jews are reluctant to admit that AIDS even exists in their communities, educators estimate that, among the 2 million Jews in the New York area, around 15,000 are infected. Nobody knows how many are Orthodox, since almost all those cases are kept secret.

by Vince Beiser



Call him Joel, a pseudonym he picked after a full day's deliberation. The name has private resonances for him in Jewish culture, religion, and history—which is to say, all that which is most important to him. After all, Joel is an Orthodox rabbi, his life centered on Judaism. At least, most of it is. But

there is another defining aspect to Joel's life, painstakingly hidden from all but a few close friends. Joel is gay, and infected with HIV.

Needless to say, if that were public knowledge, Joel's life as a member in good standing of the Orthodox Jewish community would be over. Which is ironic, since his membership in said community is at least partly to blame for his infection with the disease that will almost certainly kill him.

Joel first recognized his homosexuality 10 years ago, when he fell into a relationship with another man that lasted five years. He kept himself closeted, working as a Jewish day-school teacher and pulpit rabbi. "I dated women at the same time, wanting to get married, thinking I could work it out," he says. He couldn't. When the relationship ended, Joel went to his doctor—also an Orthodox Jew—for an HIV test.

"When he heard that I needed an HIV test, he asked me why, and I told him," says Joel. "He laid into me, told me that a rabbi shouldn't be doing this and I had to stop. I told him he was supposed to be my doctor, not my rabbi. He said, 'I am obligated to reprove you when you violate the Torah.' He would not provide me with any safe sex information. I thought I knew. I thought safe sex was using a condom." He pauses, hugs his elbows. "In one very desperate and sad moment, I actually engaged in sex with a stranger, which was very rare for me. The condom broke. It broke because I had not been told that oil-based lubricants compromised condoms. I wasn't part of the gay community. I didn't know this. The doctor didn't tell me this. Three months later I was HIV-positive."

Joel's new doctor called with the news on the evening of Yom Kippur. "I had just enough time to get ready and go to shul. It was harrowing. The liturgy was on fire. It was very painful but also a blessing in a way, because I had a whole 24 hours to cry and to groan. It would have been harder to go to work the next day and act like nothing had happened."

This year's high holidays, as always, brought Joel back to that moment. Every year, at certain points in the service, he bursts, mid-prayer, into uncontrollable tears. "Yom Kippur is not only about sin and guilt, but redemption and renewal," he says. "I feel the need to respond to being gay as a calling, and stop my self-doubt and self-hatred. But at the same time, I lay myself open to being a sinner, and need to think about the pieces of my life as a gay man that are not holy. I don't want to say I am guilty or responsible, but there's no way, on Yom Kippur, I can't feel implicated in my illness."

Joel is unique only in that he was willing to speak to a reporter. Though most Orthodox Jews are reluctant to admit that AIDS even exists in their communities, Joel is far from alone. Jewish professionals who focus on AIDS estimate that, among the nearly 2 million Jews in the New York area, around 15,000 are infected with HIV. Nobody knows how many come from Orthodox communities, since almost all those cases are kept secret. A social worker knows of a dozen cases, a doctor knows of 20, an educator is in touch with a secret support group for HIV-positive Hasidic women, a sister knows only that her brother died of AIDS.

The disease creeps into close-knit Orthodox communities by several routes. A case history from one hospital shows that one Hasidic mother recently gave birth to two HIV-infected children, passing along the disease she had contracted from her husband, who apparently got it from a prostitute. (In the late 1980s, anthropologist Rick Curtis helped organize a survey of 50-odd prostitutes who came through his storefront AIDS prevention pro-

ject in Williamsburg. By their own reckoning, about 15 per cent of their customers were Hasidic men.) Then there are *ba'alei tshuvah*, people who give up secular life to return to Orthodoxy, baggage and all. Dr. Larry Lutwick, director of infectious diseases at Brooklyn's Maimonides Hospital, has treated at least one such case, a newly converted Crown Heights woman who was infected by her intravenous-drug-using ex-husband. There are also occasional tainted transfusions, and even one case in Britain where doctors speculate that a newborn may have been infected during his circumcision.

But by all accounts, the majority of HIV infections come from sex between men—which, for Orthodox Jews, is the worst way possible. To them, the Torah condemns homosexuality in no uncertain terms. To be infected with HIV—regardless of how you actually get it—is often seen as proof of the victim's homosexuality, a sin so potent it can cast a shadow over the victim's entire family.

In some congregations, at least in theory, this is not the case. Haskel Lookstein, rabbi of Manhattan's Kehilath Jeshurun synagogue and one of New York Orthodoxy's most tolerant voices, says an open homosexual "would be perfectly welcome in the congregation." In fact, he knows of several "privately gay" members. "The gay lifestyle is not appropriate for observant Jews and is objectively wrong according to the Torah," Lookstein maintains, "but a person who lives it still has to be loved, in the same way we would someone who violates the Sabbath or doesn't keep kosher."

But in most Orthodox circles, particularly the Hasidim, announcing one's homosexuality means social excommunication. "A blemish like that is a blemish on the whole family, or even the whole sect in some Hasidic groups," says Pinchas Berger, a program director at the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services. "It can put the marriageability of the children in danger."

For the very observant, Judaism is more than just religion; it's a blueprint for life. It defines what clothes you wear, what food you eat, where and with whom you live. In exchange for its restrictions, an Orthodox life, especially among the Hasidim, can give a profound and precious sense of belonging. But being gay, let alone having HIV, destroys that. Many seropositive Jews leave their communities, seeking new ones in places like Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, Manhattan's gay and lesbian synagogue that is home to many ex-Orthodox. Many others can't bear the thought of leaving, and stay, keeping their infection a secret for as long as they can.

For the *frum* (highly observant), it's the fear of being shamed and outed that is the most severe, says Steve A., a sad-eyed, semi-out gay Orthodox Jew who lives on the fringes of the community, running a shelter for homeless lesbian and gay youth in a run-down corner of Park Slope. "If the disease gets bad enough that they won't be able to hide it, that's even more terrifying than dying."

Joel is so concerned about being discovered that I can't even mention his hair color or where I met him. "My gayness is a threat to my life as an Orthodox rabbi," he says. He speaks slowly and deliberately, choosing his words with a scholar's care. "If I came out, I'd be marginalized, deprived of the most important thing to me, which is a place that honors tradition and lives in the present." But holding fast to his religious beliefs, Joel has wound up in a kind of limbo. "The gay community tends to look at Judaism, especially Orthodox Judaism, with some suspicion, if not outright condemnation," he explains. "Jewish gay organizations and institutions are generally dominated by the left and the radical left. There is little space for articulating a more traditional worldview. On the

and can no longer feel fully a part of them, knowing that, were my full self known, I would not be welcome."

At least Joel recognizes who he is. Most gay Orthodox Jews are deep in denial, which is not just their problem. Dr. William Wedin can tell you all about it. Wedin is an authority on gay and bisexual Orthodox Jews. It's not so limited a field. Over the last 20 years, he has treated hundreds—rabbis, Hasidim, even followers of Meier Kahane. He estimates that one in five of his clients has been HIV-positive.

Israel Kestenbaum, an Orthodox rabbi and chaplain at Beth Israel Medical Center, gives private counseling to a handful of secretly gay Orthodox men. They hear about him mostly through word of mouth, which can spread far. Kestenbaum hears the troubles of one man in Israel only by phone or fax. They have never met; Kestenbaum doesn't even know the man's last name. Others slip in among the many visitors to his office at Beth Israel. Thoughts of suicide are a common topic.

"It's important for them to have an Orthodox rabbi who is not homosexual, someone from within their own community, validate them and their struggle," says Kestenbaum. "Everyone assumes we are all heterosexual, but it's not the case. We have to assume that the proportion of homosexuals born into Orthodox communities is the same as in the rest of society."

The proportion of Orthodox Jews who act on their homosexual impulses is probably lower than in mainstream society, but those who do so often put themselves at particular risk. Their fear of being found out, or even admitting their sexuality to themselves, makes it very difficult to find stable relationships or be part of the gay community. Instead, when the urge overwhelms, they trade their yarmulkes for baseball caps and go find sex in parks or bathhouses. Often, they numb their guilt with drugs or booze, says Wedin, dulling their caution about using condoms. Some, he adds, are in such denial that they are hardly even there. One of his patients, a Brooklyn rabbi, used to find himself driving into Manhattan every Saturday night and then back to Brooklyn a few hours later, with no memory of what happened in between. Wedin helped him acknowledge that, during those lost hours, he was having sex with men in a riverside park.

"I know several HIV-positive Jews who knew better," says Steve A., who is not, himself, infected. "That's the nature of being Orthodox and gay. There's so much denial and delusion. Rational considerations are not operating with someone who has so many conflicts. I've seen men married with kids, with positions in the community, going out there and not taking precautions. To protect yourself you have to want to live. If you hate who you are, you might not want to."

All of which creates a fertile field for HIV to spread. But even once they know they are infected, most of Dr. Wedin's patients keep it secret as long as possible—which can be a long time, since HIV can lie dormant for years. Even when symptoms appear, they can be explained away as cancer or some other more acceptable disease.

"Having to conceal, being constantly afraid of detection, takes a huge toll," says Wedin. "People end up on their deathbed terrified a nurse or doctor will say the wrong thing. There is often a terrible guilt, a feeling that this is punishment from God, that they are getting what they deserve. They feel cut off from their family on one hand and God on the other, having done something unforgivable to both."

A statement from the Rabbinical Council of America, the Orthodox rabbinic association, gives the flavor of the official Orthodox response: "The AIDS epidemic is as much a disease of lifestyle as of specific viral etiology, hedonism, promiscuity, and drug abuse, and is abhorrent to our Judeo-Biblical heritage. . . . We urge that strong measures be taken to prevent a spread of this lifestyle in our society, and certainly to deny any measures that encourage it and make it acceptable. . . . We nevertheless declare that the same Judeo-Biblical heritage . . . dictates that a victim of the AIDS disease be given proper medical attention and care."

People like Sharon Kleinbaum, Beth Simchat Torah's diminutive powerhouse rabbi, are understandably unimpressed: "The message is, we reject your lifestyle in totality, but come to us when you're sick and dying. Or don't." Kleinbaum recalls a funeral for one of her AIDS-infected congregants last year that the family refused to attend. "That young man was lucid until days before his death," she says. "He felt totally abandoned. I don't judge them, but I sat through two weeks of excruciating pain with him. I hope they find some healing, because I don't know how they deal with that."

There are plenty of similar horror stories out there, but Wedin and others agree that even the most observant families almost always put aside their judgments and support their children who confide in them. Joel's did, albeit with difficulty. "What upset them most was that it took my infection for me to fully come out to them," he says. "So for them to disasssociate my gayness from HIV is almost impossible." Still, he was home this year, helping his father build the family sukkah on the porch of their modest suburban house.

Then comes the next layer of denial: The families almost always keep their ordeal a secret. Sarah, a young woman from a New York Orthodox family, had to watch her brother die of AIDS with barely a sympathy visit from friends in the community her family has been connected to for decades, because their parents didn't want anyone to know about his sexuality or his infection. Sarah's father died only a few months after her brother. "He had to watch his handsome young son turn into an old man with no hair and almost no vision," she says. "I believe one thing that helped kill him was the strain of keeping my brother's sickness a secret."

Sarah was sufficiently outraged by the denial and ignorance to help found the Tzvi

Aryeh AIDS Foundation, one of the first organizations targeting the Orthodox community with AIDS information. The group's volunteers are working to set up a Yiddish-language AIDS hot line and organize groups to visit patients. "It has to be acknowledged," says Sarah, "because people are dying, and we don't even know how many."

But it's an uphill battle. Most Orthodox institutions are as deep in denial as their gay constituents. "We don't have education on AIDS in the same way that we don't have any about teen pregnancy because, thank God, we don't have those problems," explains Isaac Abraham, a prominent member of Brooklyn's Satmar community. To which Dr. Robert Zielony, one of the New York Jewish community's few full-time AIDS educators, replies: "I just hope and pray that the most effective educator for the Orthodox community doesn't end up being HIV itself." Zielony speaks every year at scores of Reform and Conservative schools and summer camps, but he has only been invited to a handful of Orthodox ones.

That may be changing, especially among the more mainstream modern Orthodox, says Pinchas Berger. "It's like the way they've dealt with issues like alcoholism or domestic violence over the last 20 years. The community originally said, 'We don't have it.' Then it was, 'We have it, but we can take care of it.' Finally it was, 'We need some external resources to help us deal with this.' It hasn't happened yet with AIDS, but I think that issue is on the same trajectory." A number of Orthodox rabbis and individuals already quietly tend to stricken members of their congregations. Then there are rare souls like Anchelle Perl, a Lubavitcher rabbi on Long Island who is openly active in AIDS support and education work. "I don't make judgments," he says. "I'm not interested in how someone got it. The issue to me is just that someone needs help."

Joel's sexuality and his HIV status may have distanced him from the community, but his religion remains a source of strength. Though he doesn't know how or why, his belief that everything—including his illness—is ordained by God seems to be reassuring. Along with Judaism's daily rituals and rules, that knowledge must provide a feeling of order to the universe that can make sense of his incomprehensible condition.

Still the contradiction is clear: How can a gay man continue to believe in a God whose rules forbid his existence? Hasn't his experience shaken Joel's faith? "No," he says, carefully. "But it's affected my ability to pray. I have trouble regimenting communication into three parcels every day when I am so full of things to say, so full of tears and frustration, anger, fear.

"But it has not shaken my faith. Why? Because my God is not Santa Claus, ensuring that everything will work out just hunky-dory. That's never been my God. God is my companion, even as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." ❖

For more information about the Tzvi Aryeh AIDS Foundation, write to P.O. Box 150, New York, NY 10025, or call (212) 866-6306.