



# Ending the darkness

## Four questions about LGBT inclusion

### Benjamin Ellis

#### Co-director and Trustee of Keshet UK

Benjamin Ellis is a co-director and trustee of Keshet UK, a rheumatologist at Charing Cross Hospital, and Senior Clinical Policy Adviser to Arthritis Research UK. He sings in the New West End Synagogue choir, Diversity Choir and London Gay Men's Chorus.



**'I fancied other boys and I was pretty sure that the righteous son wasn't gay.'**

I never knew which child I was.

Every year at seder, we read the allegory of the four sons, or children. Growing up in an observant, Orthodox family, we always took this section quite seriously. How should parents respond to the different questions that come their way? What kinds of child did we all aspire to be? Are there questions, like that of the wicked son, that should never be asked? How should the community engage all types of Jews with their Jewish heritage?

Reading about these children, these archetypes of Jewish living, filled me with worry.

Because I knew that I wasn't what I seemed to my family. On the surface I was a good Jewish boy. I kept Shabbat and kashrut, I wore my kippah and went to shul regularly. But there was something about me that – if they knew – would surely out me as the wicked son. I fancied other boys and I was pretty sure that the righteous son wasn't gay. So for years I hid in the darkness thinking that one day I might be cast out of the community like the wicked son. And so it was that for many years I lived in fear of being found out.

Pesach is a time when Jewish people celebrate freedom. Many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people take this as an opportunity to celebrate our own liberation. We tell of our individual and communal journeys

from oppression and hiding, through the wilderness of uncertainty, to the celebration (in the West, at least) of freedoms that within living memory were unimaginable. We remember the bitterness of the rejection we were forced to swallow, and the salty tears that we shed as a result.

Pesach is also a time of community. In Temple times, this was built into the fabric of the ritual as groups of people came together to eat their paschal lamb. In modern times, we reflect this by opening the seder with an Aramaic pre-ambles: all who are hungry, come and eat; all who are needy, come and join our seder. There are parallels here with the other giant of the Jewish liturgical calendar, Kol Nidre, which begins with a similar rubric: we grant ourselves permission to pray together with those who transgress.

Each of these evening-time services – one celebrated in the spring, at home with family and foods; the other in the autumn, in synagogue with no food at all – reflect the complementary ways that Jews build community. And with these opening declarations they converse across the Jewish calendar to call out from their start: we are a community because all are welcome; we are here because we stand together; we are all diminished if some of us are missing. Before we set off from the starting blocks, our tradition insists that we look around and check we have not left anyone behind.

The four sons from *The Szyk Haggadah*



There are many ways to be inclusive. Like the four children of the seder, there are also archetypes of how communities can relate to LGBT people.

The intolerant community openly discriminates against LGBT people and homophobia is not challenged. LGBT people know they are not welcome, and either leave or hide their LGBT identity.

The tolerant community is a quiet, awkward place where discussions of LGBT issues are avoided, even though there may be private support for LGBT people. In the tolerant community, LGBT people feel uncertain and cautious, not knowing if they can be open or not.

The accepting community recognises the presence of LGBT people, but focuses on reducing discrimination and intolerance. LGBT people can openly discuss their identity and their partners, knowing that their presence will not be challenged.

The welcoming community sees LGBT inclusion as a Jewish value. Public speech and materials explicitly include LGBT people, and LGBT are represented in the leadership. There can be no doubt to anyone that the community values the presence and contribution of LGBT people.

The celebratory community recognises that it would be diminished without its LGBT members, recognising that LGBT inclusion is an ongoing process of

learning from LGBT people. Communal ritual, events and facilities meet the needs of LGBT lives. LGBT people know their needs will be met.

Since its foundation in 2011, I have volunteered with Keshet UK, an organisation whose vision is a world where no Jewish person has to choose between their Jewish and LGBT identity. Each community is different, with its own traditions and aspirations. Keshet UK works with Jewish communities to help them identify where on this spectrum of inclusion they would like to be, and then explore together what the journey might look like.

Looking back at my childhood, I think I was wrong.

Really, I was the child who didn't know how to ask, what to ask, who to ask. And I think that largely this was because I inhabited a community that didn't know how to answer. While it takes courage for a child to ask, it also takes courage for a community to break from the bonds of the known, and to set out on a journey whose destination is yet unknown. But going on this journey is a duty that our communities can no longer shirk. We cannot expect others to do all the work.

As an adult, now living as an openly gay, Jewish (but no longer religiously observant) man, I often think about how harmful uncertainty can be. It is all too easy for communities to drift along in silence, lost in a perpetual

plague of darkness, avoiding outright homophobia but not finding ways to explicitly include LGBT people.

And we should make no mistake about it. This resulting uncertainty still experienced by LGBT people in large parts of the Jewish community causes avoidable pain. It is unacceptable that conversations about LGBT inclusion are still whispered in the shadows. It is intolerable that we allow LGBT people to believe that our shared heritage is not theirs to inherit.

So, as we approach the night of four questions, here are four more we can ask:

**What sort of a community do we want to be?**

**How do LGBT people and their families experience our community?**

**What possibilities can we explore to meet our aspirations?**

**How can we make sure LGBT people feel welcome?**

These answers won't come quickly. They rarely do. And if we wait long enough, others will perhaps light up the path through the wilderness. Or maybe this will be the year when we collectively resolve to step forward and speak out for the inclusion of LGBT people in our communities. Why not make this the year that we set out on this journey? As Jews, when one of us suffers, we all suffer. This year we are slaves; next year, let's see if we can all be free.