



אשל ESHEL

“All You Need is Love?”

Orthodox parents love their LGBTQ+ children but need more ...

They need their Orthodox community.

A survey of Orthodox parents with LGBTQ+ children.

An Eshel Community Survey

February 2024

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“It is vital that we find ways to ensure LGBTQ individuals and their families remain wholly and securely part of our Orthodox communities and feel assured that there is room for them and a path forward within observant life. To not do so is detrimental to their religious and spiritual lives, as well as their physical and emotional safety. Eshel’s “All You Need is Love?” is a giant step forward in helping rabbis and communities to understand the needs of parents of LGBTQ children and supporting them.”

**- Rabbi Hyim Shafner (Yeshiva University)
Keshar Israel/ The Georgetown Synagogue**

“Welcoming LGBTQ+ individuals and ensuring inclusiveness for everyone in our shuls is of utmost importance. Supporting them means supporting their families as well. Every person deserves respect and acceptance, without judgment. This is an issue of pikuach nefesh—saving lives. We should strive to create a safe, welcoming environment where everyone feels valued and accepted.”

**- Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch (Ner Israel Rabbinical College)
Mekor Habracha/Center City Synagogue, Philadelphia**

Love is not enough.

Love, fear, hope, and rejection are all part of what Orthodox parents of LGBTQ+ children experience. What they want from their families and communities is acceptance and respect.

Between December 2023 and January 2024, Eshel ran a survey of its parent population, which includes parents who have reached out to Eshel, joined a support group, or attended educational programs. These parents come from a range of Orthodox backgrounds and communities throughout the United States, as well as some from Israel and Canada.

In this survey, we asked parents about their fears and concerns for their children and their families. We also asked about what problems parents, their families, and their LGBTQ+ children encounter on a daily basis. Finally, we asked them to share their hopes and dreams for the future of their family and their Orthodox community.

No matter how many questions we asked, and how finely we have parsed the questions in this survey, the road that these families must travel can be complex. Their experiences vary widely. When a parent or a child experiences exclusion or discrimination, each experience is unique, although there were many similarities across the surveys. We therefore asked parents to provide ranking and detailed comments to describe the qualitative impact it had, in addition to our quantitative summaries.

Consider this an opinion poll of the 133 parents who participated. Parents answered the survey questions anonymously, and therefore where their quoted comments contained identifying information, we have redacted it. The survey consisted of three sections:

1. **Who We Are** (A demographic snapshot of the parents and their families)
2. **Our Challenges** (A look at the challenges they faced within their family and in the world)
3. **What We Wish For** (What parents want in the future from their families, communities, schools, synagogues, and greater Orthodox community)

Who should read this report?

Anyone who is part of the Orthodox community will benefit from understanding the experiences of parents with LGBTQ+ children - which represents an increasing percentage of our community members.

First and foremost, we want **Orthodox parents with LGBTQ+ children** of their own to see these results and understand what other parents believe and are experiencing. We hope this report can offer some relief and useful information to parents who often feel alone or isolated in their communities.

The second and vital audience for this report is **Orthodox community leaders** - the rabbis, teachers, principals, and other leaders who serve these parents. Communal leaders may

also feel isolated or have limited opportunities to discuss this topic. They may not realize how their actions or inactions can harm or damage a parent, a child, or an entire family.

Finally, we want the greater Orthodox community to hear what their neighbors and friends with LGBTQ+ children are feeling and encountering. We want them to listen to these parents and how they believe a future Orthodox world can be more welcoming, less threatening, and safer for themselves and for their children.

At the end of the day, all the parents want Orthodox communal leaders and institutions to grant them and their children the same level of “citizenship” enjoyed by everyone else. Now, here is what they have to say.

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Report Highlights

Orthodox parents love their LGBTQ+ children.

However, **they have to contend with an Orthodox community that has**, either through neglect, lack of preparation, or willful resistance, **largely have failed them and their families**. Many have experienced a great upheaval in their lives after their child has come out. While parents do report some improvement among synagogues and schools, most of those surveyed report the Orthodox community generally treats these parents and their LGBTQ+ children as second-class citizens.

- **“Loving your children” ranked last among parent concerns** by a fair margin among all categories presented. Overwhelmingly, these parents love their children. Though once their children “came out,” parents commented that **they worried most about their child’s place in the world**, about their loneliness, and that their children would not remain close.
- **Health, safety, and acceptance concerns:** Parents most worry about the health and safety of their LGBTQ+ children, and whether or not they will be accepted.
- **The great upheaval:** Parents mourn the fact that more than one-half (52%) of their LGBTQ+ children have left Orthodoxy, with 17% of them reporting at least one of their non-LGBTQ+ children leaving Orthodoxy as well. The upheavals include changing shuls [synagogue], moving to another community (9%), as well as ending relationships with friends and with family members and community rabbis (25%). What these parents state about their LGBTQ+ children’s departure from Orthodoxy are in sharp contrast to findings of a 2020 Pew Research Center study that reported a relatively stable and extremely satisfied Orthodox community with 67% of Americans raised as Orthodox remain Orthodox as adults. The same study also found that 90% of Orthodox Jews are satisfied with their community.¹
- **Discrimination mostly encountered in shuls and schools:** Their children, according to parents, faced the most discrimination within synagogues and Jewish day schools, as compared to their neighborhood, or youth organizations. In contrast, their children face little discrimination at their jobs.
- **More openness and acceptance in synagogues:** Families want open acceptance by the rabbis and the synagogues. This includes congratulatory lifecycle announcements, being able to join the synagogue as a member, and receiving full honors during services.

¹ Jewish Americans in 2020, Pew Research Center report, May 11, 2021.

- **Parent affiliations:** More than 80% of parents participating in this survey identify themselves as Modern Orthodox, Yeshivish, Chabad/Chassidish, Charedi, or Sephardic. One-fifth identify as Open Orthodox.²
- **Day schools need more training and staff accountability** to educate, protect, and nurture LGBTQ+ students, according to parents.
- **Parents' wishes for the future of their families and for their LGBTQ+ children and community were hopeful, as well as filled with frustration.** They generally do not understand the rejection and why their communities cannot accept their children as they would any other child.

Part I: Who We Are

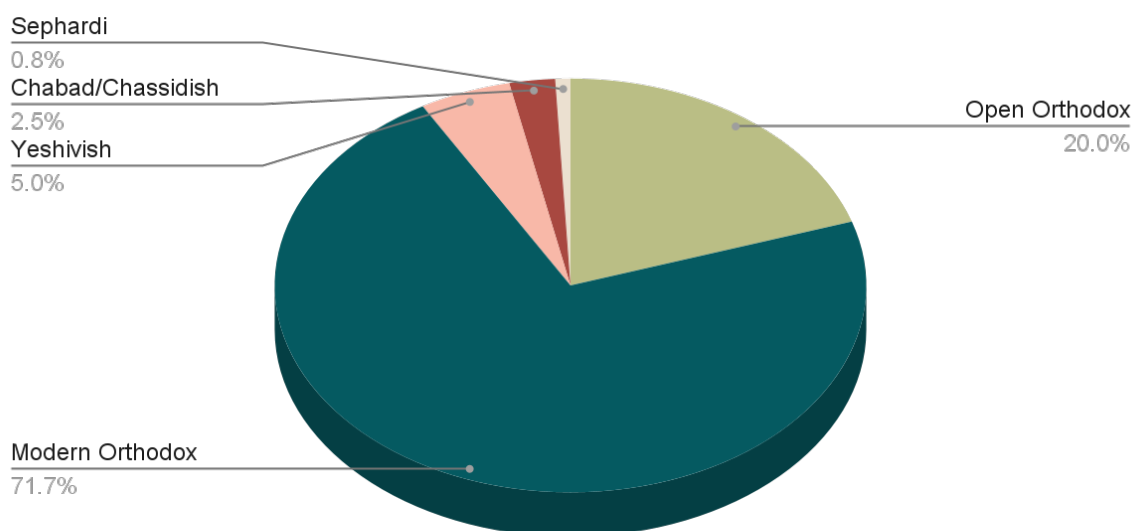
Of mothers and fathers

More women participated in this survey than men on an order of 3-to-1 (26.92% men; 73.08% women).

Our religious identity

Parents self-selected their affiliation with more than two-thirds identifying as Modern Orthodox, and just over 19% as Open Orthodox. The remaining approximately 13% classified themselves as Yeshivish, Chababad/Chassidish, Charedi, or Sephardi.

Demographics



² For a definition of the Orthodox categories listed, please refer to My Jewish Learning (<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-jewish-denominations/>)

Our ages

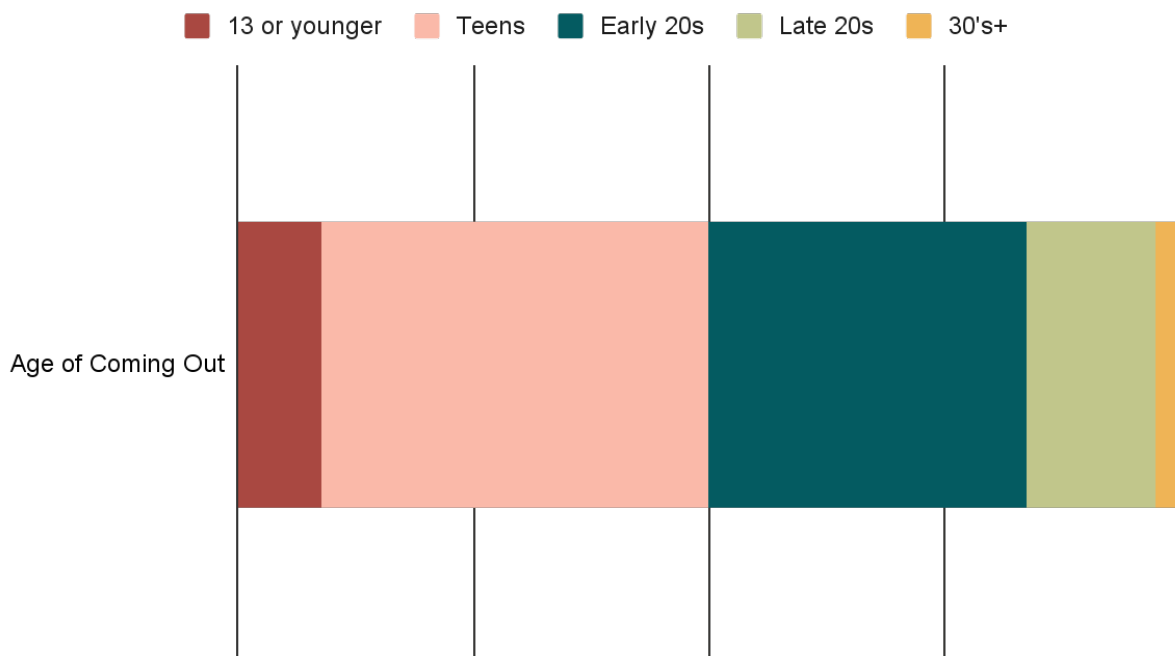
Over half (50.76%) are 61-plus years old. Just over one-quarter (25.76%) are 51-60 years old. Nearly one-fifth (19.70%) are 41-50 years old with the lowest percentage (3.79%) 30-40 years old.

Our children

Participants reported how their children³ identify. Nearly half are Gay (46.97%). Close to one-fifth (20.45%) are Lesbian or Bisexual or Pansexual (18.18%). Approximately one-third (32.58%) are Transgender. One-tenth (10.61%) are Nonbinary or Genderfluid. The lowest percentage (4.55%) are Questioning or Unsure.

When Our Children Came Out

Slightly less than half of the parents (45.03%) reported their child or children had come out to them or other family members within the past 5 years. Approximately one-third (32.82%) reported their children came out within the last 5 to 10 years. Over one-quarter (28.24%) stated their children came out 10 or more years ago.



Nearly one-tenth of parents (9.92%) reported their children came out when they were 13 years old or younger. **Close to one-half (45.80%) of parents indicated that their children came out when they were teenagers.** (The large percentage of LGBTQ+ teenagers from

³ Because some parents had more than one LGBTQ+ child, the total percentages are greater than 100%.

Orthodox families coming out suggests that there is a strong need for day schools to be prepared for them and for their families. This report details parents' concerns about their day schools later in the report).

More than half reported their children were in their 20s (37.40% in their early 20s, and 15.27% in their late 20s). The smallest group (3.05%) were those who came out when they were 30 years old or older.

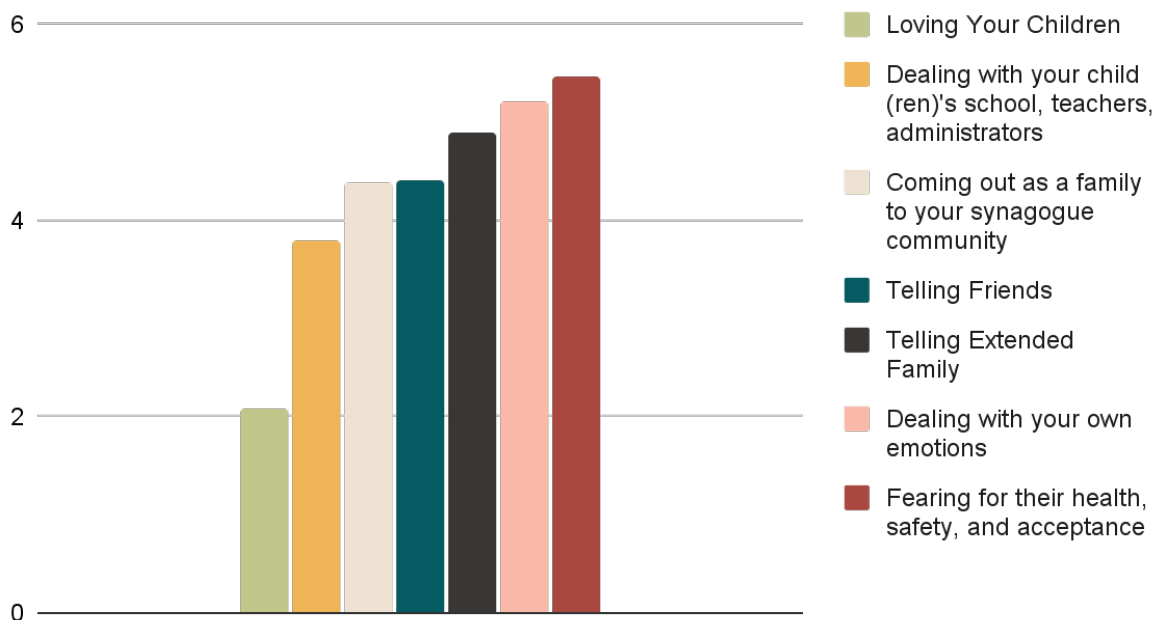
Part II: Our Challenges

Parents' Most Difficult Challenges

Fear for a child's wellbeing and acceptance is the greatest challenge; "Loving your child" is not the problem.

The survey posed the following statement to parents: **When your child or children first came out to you, you felt your most difficult challenge was...**

Most Difficult Challenges When a Child Comes Out



We also asked parents to rank the seven choices from the least difficult challenge to the most difficult challenge. Many parents felt that it was difficult to separate the options and said so in their comments. Yet without any ambiguity, "Loving your child(ren)" was by far the least challenging. Based on their ranking, we used a weighted average to score how difficult each challenge was, from 1 (least challenging) to 7 (most challenging). The chart above depicts the results of their ranking, from least to most difficult.

This topic of challenges prompted an outpouring of comments from parents. Their comments illustrate both the similarity and differences that come from their variety of experiences and circumstances.

- I. **Health, safety, and acceptance:** “Fearing for your child’s health, safety, or acceptance in the world” clearly fell out as the biggest concern, and greatest challenge for parents. Here is a sample of their statements:

“It was relatively not difficult at all when she came out. It was a relief, because she was isolating for many years, I was so happy that she finally confided in me. **Most difficult is concern for her to feel good about herself, and socially accepted ... It is very hurtful for them to be excluded [in the Orthodox community].** I care very much about the mental health of the LGBTQ community.”

“I am worried about my child having a more difficult life because there are a large number of mean people out there.”

“I was afraid she was destined to live alone.”

“Fear for his health (STD and emotional), happiness (finding a partner not just a fling), building a family (surrogate parent, which religious community would accept).”

“Worrying about my child’s safety because **I immediately know they would have a tough road ahead with family and the Jewish community,** but also that **there were people in greater society that want to harm gay people.**”

“The first thing I was concerned about was his physical safety and wellbeing. Then I had to deal with my own emotions and expectations as a parent.”

- II. **Emotions:** The next most difficult challenge was “**dealing with your own emotions.**” These emotions included the loss or regret of having missed the signs, of worry, of remaining part of your child’s life and helping with future decisions, of losing contact with other family members, and numerous other feelings and sentiments. Here is a selection of parent comments:

“Being convinced that this was “real” and that my child wasn’t making irrevocable decisions.”

“Feeling badly that we never ever suspected and that we wouldn’t be as close, and worrying how he would remain part of the Orthodox community.”

“Dealing with the emotions that his future was not what I envisioned it would be in terms of meeting a girl, getting married, living within the Modern Orthodox world. I

also felt an extreme sense of guilt for not being there for him when he clearly struggled with so many emotions regarding his sexuality for so long with no one to turn to while I was literally right there the whole time. At times I had an inkling about him being gay, but I never broached it because I didn't want it to be true."

"Mourning my child's ability to have a place in the world and build a family. Fear about my parents' emotional ability to process."

"Trying to understand the child's desire for change, dealing with grief, etc. Because I thought I knew my child. And sad that I didn't know my child was struggling."

"I needed to get through some baggage of my own. After that, I think I'm still struggling with the question of whether this is actually real or not. What if my child just grows out of these questions? But if not, I'm scared how the world will receive a transgender religious Jew."

- III. **Extended family members:** Following closely behind was deciding **"which extended family members need to, or should, know about your child,"** and **"which friends you select to discuss your 'news'."** For some, the comments reflected unrealized fears, and for others the fear and concerns were legitimate and the rejection very real. See a handful of comments below.

"It was at a time when there were many fewer truly out people, especially in the Orthodox community. To whom could I share this news? The first person I told was a dear non-Jewish friend from college. I didn't know it, but her family was only then telling the world that her daughter is gay."

"[My child coming out] really wasn't hard for me. I have some very religious friends and I think the decision whether or not to tell them was a challenge."

"Most difficult was not being able to share the experience with my husband, it took much longer for him to accept it. He wasn't very emotionally open minded."

"Really for me the most difficult part has been dealing with my husband. He was much more worried about the outside world and community. My approach is if people have a problem, then to heck with them. My feeling is also that our community is more accepting than he thinks."

"There was a lot of worry and challenging family dynamics and even trauma for all concerned. I have struggled with significant grief, for the most part not related to my child's transition per se but with the fact that my child was making all kinds of other changes at the same time. I have also, at times, felt abandoned by family members and friends who just didn't support our family during this challenging time. Some did, but I'd say they were very much in the minority. And that has been hard. I am so, so grateful to Eshel for this very reason!!!"

- IV. **Synagogue community:** Nearly as concerning for parents as coming out to family and friends was “Coming out as a family to your synagogue community.” Here we heard a great deal about rejection and invisibility. Below are sample comments:

“After that it was the stares and comments at shul. As a family at the center of every Orthodox community we’ve ever been a part of, selected for leadership positions, honors, community etc., it was astonishing to be on the margins literally overnight. Most unexpected and painful though was learning that my siblings would no longer allow their children to even see my child in a picture or video, let alone be in the same room, and suddenly we were no longer welcome at my nephew’s wedding or my nephew’s bar mitzvah - things I could have never even imagined in a family as close knit as ours. My siblings claim to be just as pained by this, but they claim that this is the Torah way, and they are listening to their rabbis/da’as Torah.”

“Our gay son has avoided attending shul and shul events with us for 5 years now. This saddens us, but - as parents - we will always support our son and his partner! **We have, therefore, reduced our shul attendance.”**

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“The rabbi at our shul (at the time) stated that he decided not to give an Aliya to our son’s partner if he set up a household with him, so I stopped going to that shul until they got a new rabbi who only cared if someone was Jewish to give them an Aliyah.”

- V. **Schools:** While participants ranked schools as less challenging than their local synagogue, **“Dealing with your children’s school, teachers and administrators”** came with its own set of problems. For a number of parents, the best solution was to avoid sending their child to an Orthodox day school altogether:

“[Our] Orthodox school and rabbis are **traditional and unaccepting.**”

“We were told that our family would feel ‘more welcome’ at the Jewish non-denominational school than at the Orthodox school, by the Head of the Orthodox school. That was the first moment of exclusion.”

“I have not disclosed to our synagogue community or rabbi and never intend to. **They would reject us immediately. Same with school.**”

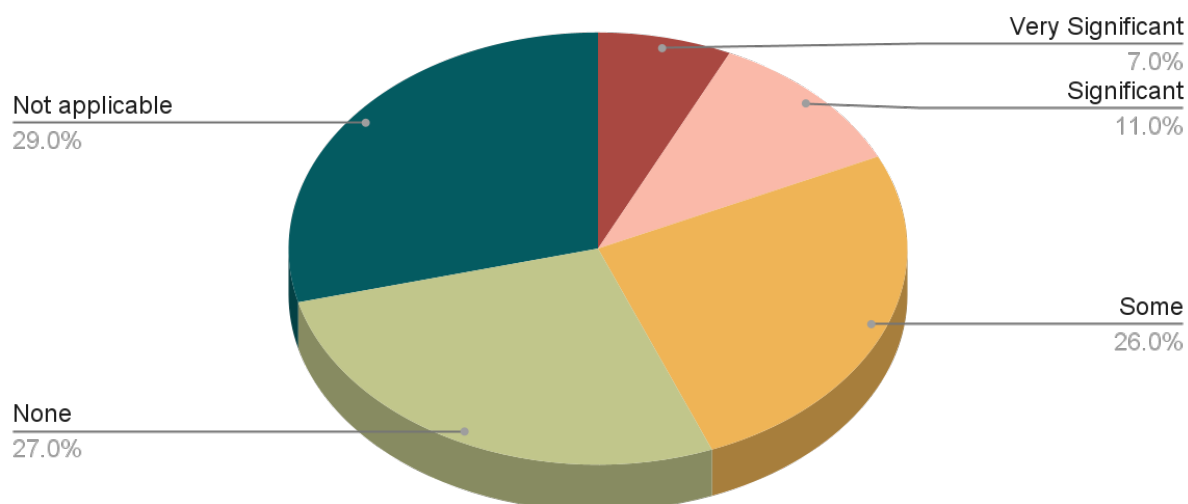
Our Childrens' Experiences of Discrimination

Here we asked parents to reflect on what their children told them or what they witnessed about the level of discrimination their child experienced in the Orthodox community.

The question posed reads as follows: **“Based on your child(ren)’s past or current experience, in which venues or groups within the Jewish community has your child been treated differently or experienced discrimination?”**

We asked parents to consider five settings or venues when answering this question: Synagogue, school, neighborhood, youth organization, and workplace. We asked them to select from “no discrimination” to “very significant discrimination.” As with the previous section, their comments offered more details of the nature of this discrimination and the effect it had on the child and family.

Synagogue Discrimination



Once again, parents reported that synagogues and schools were places where their child experienced the highest degree of discrimination. Close to half of parents (44%) declared that in synagogues their child felt either “some discrimination,” “significant discrimination,” or “very significant discrimination.” A number of parents stated their child lives away from home or no longer attends synagogue, which in part explains 29% of parents declaring “Not Applicable” for this question.

Close to one-third of parents (32.98%) reported the same range of discrimination against their child in their local day school. The “N/A” category registered at 44% for day schools, largely because over half of respondents (55.67%) reported that their child came out in their twenties and thirties. For this group, their child’s coming out occurred years after day school

and did not apply. However, a few parents reported that an older child coming out did impact the experience of that child's younger siblings who were still in yeshiva day school.

Youth organizations were places where children felt least discriminated against among the religious venues with just over one-fifth (21.65%) of parents stating no discrimination and a relatively small percentage (13.4%) reporting discrimination of any kind.

By far, adult children felt the least discriminated against in their jobs with nearly two-thirds of parents (65.26%) stating that their adult children felt no discrimination. Neighborhoods, however, were a mixed bag. While a large portion (56.70%) of parents scored a child's neighborhood as generally safe - with over half stating their child has experienced no discrimination - nearly a quarter (24.74%) witnessed "some discrimination" to "very significant discrimination". **Compared to schools and shuls, however, the parents reported that their LGBTQ+ children experienced significantly less discrimination outside of the Orthodox world.**

Parents offered the following comments on this subject:

Gap year program: "Israel Gap year program: I am not sure, but I suspect that my son was not accepted to a certain gap year program because he was out. He was accepted to another program that I later found out was accepting of gay students."

No aliyot: "No aliyot. Genuine snubbing in shul."

Discrimination and violence: "Yeshiva wouldn't let him be a dorm counselor; had a bottle thrown at him and his partner."

Mean kids: "Kids are mean to each other! At least a few kids in shul don't call my child what they want to be called."

Formal rejection: "My daughter is 18. She isolated herself for fear of discrimination. She attended high school minimally. **The director of her school told me flat out that she does not accept lesbian students into the school. My child suspected that she would be rejected.** So, she wisely kept her identity to herself."

Whispers, innuendos: "He is not completely out but has experienced the Modern Orthodox community at his university as a whole has been somewhat antagonistic toward LGBTQ+ individuals including himself. He's heard derogatory comments from members of the Modern Orthodox community who did not know he was gay. He is part of [a student club] which also has another gay male member. A member of the Modern Orthodox community made a comment to another member of the group, "At least I'm not in a group with two gay guys." Lots of rumors going around the Modern Orthodox community at school that my son and this other gay member of the group

"They don't have a place in the synagogue, their day school friends have largely ghosted them since high school."

were dating because of course you'd just assume that and talk about it when they are the only two gay guys you know."

Don't ask, don't tell: "Our child came out to the world post High School, so we didn't need to deal with school. However, our other children's day school would not be supportive, so we've taken a don't ask don't tell approach. Some admin and teachers know as they are part of our shul community, but we just don't talk about it as **we know that if it became known more broadly in the school, the other kids in the school would likely say hurtful things and some of the teachers may treat our kids differently. It's awkward to live two realities and hurtful to know that our child (who had attended that school for 3 years) would not be accepted there** and that our religiosity would be questioned simply because our child is transgender."

Rejection by friends: "Friends stopped speaking to him. His babysitting jobs were stopped because parents were uncomfortable around their kids."

Ghosted: "They don't have a place in the synagogue, their day school friends have largely ghosted them since high school."

100-percent supportive: "The school admin was amazing and 100 percent supportive. Students were not overtly homophobic but use slurs as part of daily vernacular."

Deliberate, open exclusion: "To date excluded from [almost] every Orthodox day school in the US ... Excluded from summer camp (except the "kiruv" [outreach] Gan Izzy), no longer invited to certain homes in the community, people switching seats at shul. My child is young and so is (hopefully) unaware of these (we try to shield as much as possible), but this past Shabbat said "I feel uncomfortable. People are staring at me" (this was accurate), and in school (the non-Orthodox one) was recently teased for being a "boy-girl", and the administration said there was nothing to do, since they hadn't seen it with their own eyes."

Rejection: "Transgender at Modern Orthodox shul: 2 different rabbis handled it very poorly. The first resulted in my son saying, "I am not a Jew anymore". The 2nd resulted in my son saying to us, "I don't know why you belong to an organization that doesn't accept your own son."

Discomfort: "When my son is home, he goes to shul. Many talk with him appropriately and some don't who are clearly not comfortable with him."

Modern Orthodox campus organization "mean and nasty.": "The [on-campus Modern Orthodox kiruv organization] at her college was extremely mean and nasty to her and her girlfriend. I think that's what led to her decision to leave Orthodoxy."

Shul discrimination: "In our synagogue gay men cannot lead Shabbat services, have an aufruf [pre-wedding celebration], or announce their life cycle events. In our local day school, children of same sex couples are not admitted."

Virtual, private chat group only: “[Modern Orthodox high school] had a group chat for LGBT kids but no open welcoming support so they felt somewhat isolated, hopefully it's better now.”

Camp policies: “First came out at camp; camp's response was discriminatory and hurtful, but not malicious. (Restricted her being alone with any one camper. Had to be in a group; couldn't wander off alone.) Another camp, however, refused her admission.”

Homophobia post-high school: “At yeshiva in Israel, an ignorant rabbi to whom he came out said every inappropriate response and told a class about the incident causing everyone to gossip. At [Orthodox college] (subsequently transferred), it wasn't anything personal towards him, but a homophobic sentiment among students, student government and some administration.”

Left synagogue: “Our child has chosen to not attend our synagogue anymore; however, she does participate in Jewish life where she lives.”

Geographic acceptance: “We live in a very open and accepting part of the country.”

Our Family's Response

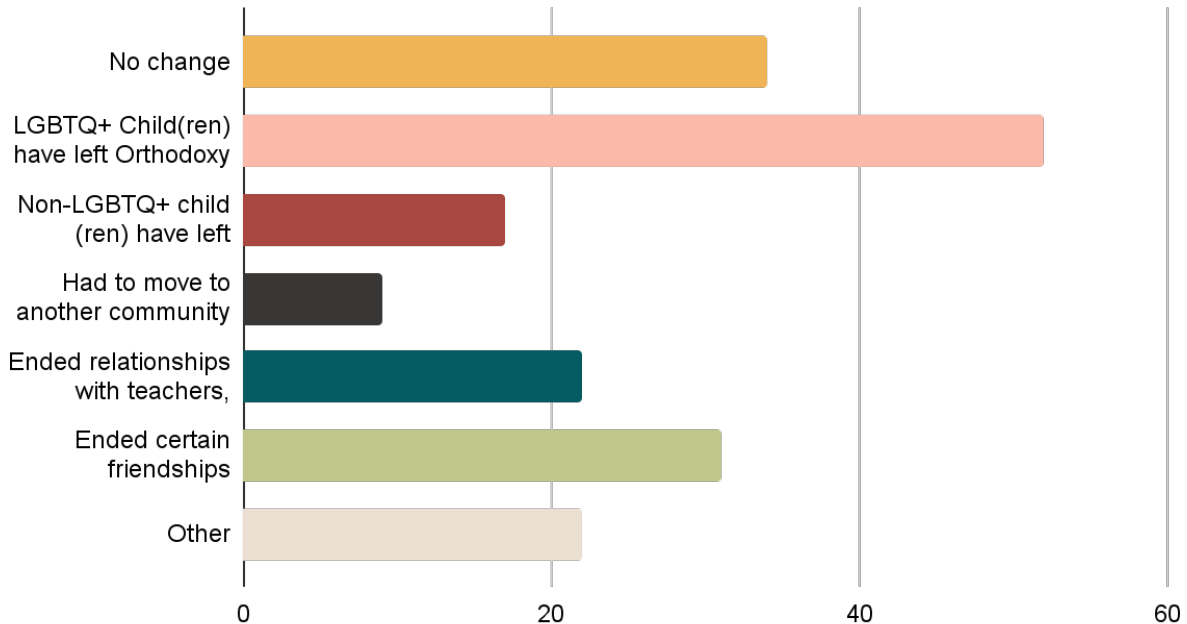
In this section, we polled parents about their response to discrimination. What action did they or their LGBTQ+ child take to change their circumstances or to protect themselves and their families?

We stated the question as follows: **“How have you or your children responded to the Jewish community's treatment or possible rejection of your LGBTQ+ child(ren)? (Check all that apply).”**

In addition to “Other,” we presented respondents with six choices. Once again, we asked them to select all that apply. Their choices were as follows:

- No change in how our family lives our Jewish life (34%)
- My LGBTQ+ child(ren) have left Orthodoxy (52%)
- One or more of our non-LGBTQ+ children have left Orthodoxy (17%)
- We or our child(ren) have had to move to another community (9%)
- We or our child(ren) have ended certain relationships with teachers, mentors, Rabbis, or family members (25%)
- We or our child(ren) have ended certain friendships (19%)
- Other (31%)

Our Family's Response



The great upheaval

More than one-third (34%) of parents stated that they have not changed how “they live our Jewish life.” Nonetheless, the majority of respondents (nearly two-thirds) described major upheavals in these families’ lives, as a result of one or more of their LGBTQ+ children coming out to them and to their communities.

The upheavals include changing shuls, moving to another community (9%), as well as ending relationships with friends and with family members and community rabbis (25%).

More than one-half (52%) of their LGBTQ+ children have left Orthodoxy, with 17% of parents reporting that one or more of their non-LGBTQ+ children left Orthodoxy as well.

Once again, parents’ additional comments illustrate more specifically how they have changed their Orthodox lives – with some of these changes being subtle or nearly invisible to the outside world but emotionally charged inside the family.

A selection of their comments are as follows:

Ended relationships: “We have not ended relationships with Rabbi’s and friends, but we have reduced our time, avoided them and not attended shul functions and shiurim [classes] with them.”

Forced out of Orthodoxy: “Child somewhat left Orthodoxy because he was forced out. He would like to find an orthodox synagogue that will accept him.”

Not seen Grandma: “We boycott the shul and have lost some important connections. We have not been to visit Grandma as a family in 2 years.”

Leaving Orthodoxy: “I’d say my son is on the cusp of leaving Orthodoxy. He still has a Shabbat and keeps kosher at least in the home but has stopped many practices he grew up with like wearing a kippah all the time and putting on tefillin.”

Ended relationships with us: “It’s not that we have ended certain relationships, but rather that others (many others) have ended their relationships with us. We are also in the midst of a country-wide tour, having invested tens of thousands of dollars searching for an Orthodox school and community that will accept us.”

Belong but going elsewhere: “We still go to same Modern Orthodox shul, but I (not my husband) joined a Conservadox shul but too far to go to on Shabbat. I no longer ask the rabbi at our Modern Orthodox shul for his opinion.”

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Less committed: “We have become less committed.”

Doubling down: “My child has doubled down on proving that she can be both transgender and religious. We just continue supporting her.”

Crisis of faith: “In some ways it has caused a crisis of faith in me; In other ways I’m more committed than ever to Orthodoxy and making it a better place for LGBTQ Jews.”

Our Synagogue

In this section, we asked parents to rank their answers. Many objected, believing that most of the choices expressed the same set of issues around discriminatory behavior in their shuls. Many of the parents would have preferred the option “check all”. They believe all the options presented are important.

When forced to rank their choices, parents chose basic expressions of acceptance and respect over more specific actions, such as their children being included in announcements or allowed to join the synagogue (the rankings were based on the scale of 1=most important, 5= least important). While some parents noted that their shul already did some of the things we listed, **many reported that there is still much work to be done so that their child can be treated with dignity in their shul.**

The two most important actions a synagogue needs to demonstrate, according to respondents, are (1) **“Be treated with respect by the rabbi and leadership,”** followed closely by (2) **the synagogue allowing the individual to “be open about their LGBTQ+ identity at shul.”**

Virtually tied for the second tier of “asks” by parents were:

- Receive announcements directly congratulating them for simchas, including milestones such as births, bar/bat mitzvah, etc.
- Apply for household membership, as a couple or with children
- Receive full and appropriate honors during services

What Parents Want From Synagogues



Approximately one-half of the respondents offered comments and detailed suggestions following this question. Some described improving conditions in their synagogues, as well.

Here are some of their comments, suggestions and hopes for their synagogues:

Equality and invisibility: “These are all the same thing to me - treating people equally and respectfully and acknowledging their true selves. We need more LGBTQ couples to feel comfortable to join shuls, and they’ll do so if they are treated equally. And the more LGBTQ couples join, the more our kids will see that it’s ok to be who they are, and they’ll feel accepted. But **it’s very hard when they don’t see any adults like them in their orthodox spaces.**”

Moving in the right direction: “Our minyan has all of this, and more conventional MO synagogues (not the shtiebls) in the neighborhood are moving toward these practices.”

Be themselves: “Everyone should be able to feel comfortable and be themselves in a synagogue.

The rabbi’s lead: “The congregation follows the rabbi's lead.”

In the Divine Image: “My gay son, like the entire LGBTQ + community, should be treated with respect and not with rejection. We are all created בצלם אלקים [In the Creator’s image].”

Kicked out: “My daughter was kicked out.”

Of equal importance: “It is hard to rank these; I feel like they are all tied together and of equal importance. Sorry!!”

The rabbi is in charge: “The rabbi is in charge of deciding the laws of the shul. I want my son to be able to be included as usual - before he came out.”

Hashem decides: “Only Hashem could decide who is worthy or not to have aliyot or other honors - not the congregation. He should be allowed just like anyone else to be a part of the services.”

“The rabbi is in charge of deciding the laws of the shule. I want my son to be able to be included as usual before he came out. “

Permitted to simply exist: “I would add another option. Be permitted to simply exist (I'd make that number 1 if that were an option above). My ordering is based on a hierarchy of needs. At the most basic level, people should have the right to exist as themselves. They should be treated with a basic dignity afforded to all human beings (and this should start with leadership), with the same access to aliyot etc. While announcements and mazal tovs sounds really nice, **it's something I cannot even begin to fathom, because it's about celebration, when my child doesn't even have the basic right to exist as themselves in so many Orthodox spaces.**”

Our School

If the scores could talk, then **parents in this survey are screaming for training of faculty and staff on matters concerning their LGBTQ+ students.** This choice was ranked either first or second by nearly half of the respondents. **Accountability “for staff who use hurtful language” received the second highest** first- and second-place ranking. It is clear that trainings alone, in the few schools that do currently speak to their teachers about LGBTQ+ inclusion, are not sufficient in the absence of enforcement. Many students have reported hurtful and inaccurate comments made by teachers in class. Clear admissions policies ranked just below Accountability. Anti-bullying policies were a close fourth in importance for parents.

The categories they ranked were:

Training: Educational training for faculty and staff

Accountability: Clear policies and accountability for staff who use hurtful language in class

Student Manual: Clear and accepting language inserted into the school student manual

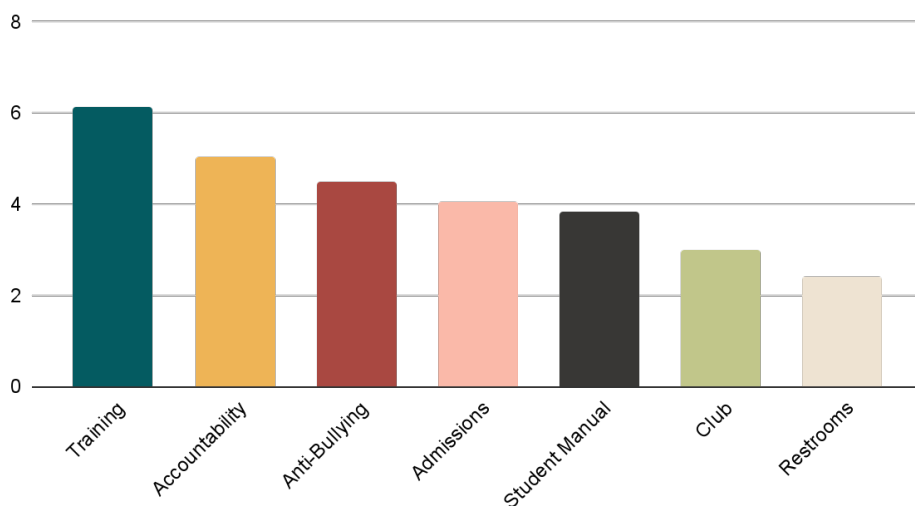
Club: A special place or club where queer students can meet and feel safe (for middle school- and high school-age children)

Anti-bullying: Education for students and strong anti-bullying policies

Restrooms: Clear and accommodating policy for restroom facilities

Admissions: Clear and public admissions policies for LGBTQ+ students and students with LGBTQ+ parents

What Parents Want From Schools



Parents were very direct about the experiences their children had in their local day schools. Particularly in this category, parents' comments add substance and color to what they and their children have witnessed during their years attending and being part of school life.

Thinking LGBTQ+ students are always there and listening: "I want every school to say to their teachers every August that they need to teach as if there are at least 2 LGBTQ kids in each of their classrooms. They need to use language that will make those kids comfortable, and stop making blanket statements assuming everyone is heterosexual, and that homosexuality is wrong."

Training from the top down: “If a school administration is not being trained in how to relate to each of their students, there’s no hope that children will.”

Teachers need training because they set the tone: “Teachers set the tone for the school. They need to receive education and training so they can lead appropriately. There are easy ways for schools to be accepting (treat everyone equally regardless of identity...have a clear policy on admissions/have a club). I think if schools can't do the easy stuff there's no way they'll do the harder things.”

Lack of acceptance: “Honestly wasn't sure if any of these were the real issue. The issue in my child's school was that **the teachers and administrators are not accepting of LGBTQ, and publicly explained why it is "not normal" and that it is a terrible sin.** I chose educating staff, because I am sure they did not know that my child (who is an amazing person) was LGBTQ and that **they were hurting him by repeatedly saying these things publicly.**”

“Teachers set the tone for the school. They need to receive education and training so they can lead appropriately. There are easy ways for schools to be accepting (treat everyone equally regardless of identity...have a clear policy on admissions/have a club). I think if schools can't do the easy stuff there's no way they'll do the harder things.”

Knowing if we're allowed in the building: “At the most basic level LGBTQ+ students should be admitted. We can't get at anything else if they are not accepted. In our experience, too many schools won't even tell us no, they simply will delay and delay and ask us to enter numerous conversations - for years. They know that saying no is simply unacceptable, but they also won't say yes. Then they'll say something to make it our fault "you never submitted a formal application" - but doing so would cost us tens of thousands of dollars, just to find out if we are welcome. **Before paying several hundred dollars in fees per child per school to apply, I need to know if my child will be considered for themselves.** Not having a clear policy makes this nearly impossible. As such, I listed policies as most important. (and bathrooms as number 2 for the simple reason that my child must have a place to go to the bathroom before we can discuss anything else). Once you have a commitment on the books, then we can begin talking about living the policies. **Belonging will always be last since I can't imagine belonging until we are even allowed in the building.**”

Less than perfect homes: “During our children's tenure at our local modern Orthodox school it admitted children from all sorts of less-than-perfect Jewish homes, including if the father is not Jewish but the mother is. **Yet, this same day school currently does not admit a child of a same-sex couple.**”

No safe space in school: “I’m thinking of the yeshiva high school from which my children graduated. Currently, the LGBTQ students there connect over a private WhatsApp group. There’s no sanctioned safe space for them at the school.”

Part III: What We Wish For

We wanted the parents to have the freedom to submit their wishes and hopes for their children within the Orthodox community. Rather than limit them to choices and ranking options, as we did in the previous section, we presented them with a clean, open space in which they could submit their thoughts.

In the Wishes section, they expressed a wide range of feelings and emotions. **They displayed both optimism for the years ahead, as well as a sense of frustration over the lack of change or feeling of exclusion in today’s Orthodox community.**

Think of this portion as parents giving you permission to hear their innermost and unvarnished thoughts. The only limitation we placed on them was to present their wishes for three areas that have an impact on their lives and the lives of their LGBTQ+ children. These are the wishes for their family, their community, and for their synagogue.

My Wish for My Family (Immediate and Extended)

In quote after quote, one theme shines through: A desire for acceptance mostly within extended family and outwardly by friends and the wider Orthodox Jewish community. In turn, you will see statements that tie acceptance to wishes of general health and safety.

“To be healthy in every way.”

“Unconditional love and support.”

“Acceptance. Love. Respect. Understanding. Even though some can never accept gayness into their lexicon.”

“That they can see that there IS value in connecting to the Jewish community and that there ARE Orthodox Jews who can be accepting and welcoming.”

“All would fully accept our son and know that he deserves a full life, rather feeling he should force himself to live a heterosexual life.”

“That religion doesn’t stand in the way of acceptance. **We struggle with one of my siblings being Charedi and not accepting our child. One of our children is struggling with how to accept their transgender sibling while also embracing the religious education they are receiving.** They more often choose rejection of siblings than religious upbringing. I wish the school would be accepting so my child wouldn’t feel like he’s doing something wrong by being accepting.”

“My Yeshivish family would accept my daughter and her spouse. One member is creating a family tree but will not include my daughter-in-law in the tree.”

“Having space for us.”

“My immediate family has accepted my child, but parts of my extended family have not accepted them fully or not at all. I wish that they would be less hateful and more tolerant.”

“My Yeshivish family would accept my daughter and her spouse. One member is creating a family tree but will not include my daughter-in-law in the tree.”

“One thing I would love to see more of in the Orthodox community (and in any community, really) is more support for families whose kids are newly out and/or who are facing mental health challenges (as so many of our kids do). When we faced other challenges, our community rallied. But when one's child is hospitalized for mental health reasons, support is nowhere to be found. And likewise, almost nobody in our lives checked in with us when our child came out. Just a simple, “How are you? How is (child)? What can I do to support your family?” would be sooooo nice. So, I guess what I'm saying I'd like to see more awareness that families like ours need love and support. Again, I am so grateful to Eshel for providing this kind of support. I don't know where I'd be if not for Eshel.”

“NO DRAMA!!! Willingness to speak openly about what the needs are as a family.”

“My wish is that my LGBTQ+ children feel loved by their gigantic Orthodox extended family, respected for who they are, and accepted.”

“That my son finds the man of his dreams who treats him with respect, and they have an amazing relationship and can afford to have children.”

“I wish that my daughter felt that she could be truly accepted by the Orthodox world and wanted to be part of it.”

“Our family and our extended family are completely accepting of our child. It's such a joy to see him and his siblings getting together and enjoying each other's company. My wish is that this should be the case for all families with LGBTQ+ children.”

“My family is stressed by the anti-LGBT government actions aimed at us especially anti-trans healthcare access, anti-trans healthcare insurance reimbursement, anti-trans document policies and anti-trans bathroom use, the anti-LGBT media even though we mostly have no exposure to secular media it filters in and the total anti-LGBT Orthodox media across the board, to the point that we

stopped all our subscriptions long ago except the ones that never mention current issues. Even so, with phone calls, texts, emails, and social media just from our closest friends, we are exposed/aware of the media anti-LGBT hatred, and it causes our family significant stress. It is as if we are living in a war zone, we feel under continuous attack. Will they force our trans children to de-transition? Will they force those in relationships to divorce? What new law will they pass against us besides the ones denying health care and insurance coverage? Already one state (FL) is a no-travel zone.”

“I wish that they would be able to show some decency and congratulate my son on events with his partner (e.g. engagement) even when they have a religious issue with it.”

“I hope that my daughter’s kallah’s family, who have a strong relationship with their daughter, can overcome their discomfort and attend the wedding.”

“That it is not a big deal to be LGBTQ+.”

My Wish for My Community

When parents responded with their wishes for a better future for themselves and for their children, they included their friends, their synagogues, schools, and all other institutions that form the Orthodox community.

You will find many phrases and words repeated throughout this section as well, words like: “Alone,” “Stigmatized,” “Openly acknowledge,” “Alienate,” “Marginalize,” “Ignore,” “Painful,” “Educate,” “Openness.”

A small number of parents also spoke about improving conditions within their communities.

The quotes below reflect the pressures felt and wishes hoped-for by these parents.

“I wish more people would openly speak about their LGBTQ kids, so others won’t feel alone. I wish more people would feel comfortable being out in Orthodox spaces so our kids can see themselves reflected in their community members. I wish more people would feel welcome to stay in Orthodox spaces.”

“I would love to see Orthodox shuls (and schools) acknowledge and welcome LGBTQ individuals and their families and encourage people to remain within orthodoxy. **There are heters given for so many things and there should be an effort to accept that this is a fact of life and find a way to make this reality a part of the Orthodox world.**”

"My wish for my community is to recognize that there are so many within the community that have an LGBTQ+ family member in their lives. **If we continue to either ignore the issues or remain outwardly unaccepting, we will alienate many members of the community.**"

"My wish for the Orthodox community is that they treat my children exactly the same as they treat any other child."

"More conversations and learning about how authentic Orthodox Judaism can accommodate and include people who are queer."

"That we accept everyone for who they are and embrace what they bring to the community. We do this for lots of other marginalized people. LGBTQ+ shouldn't be any different."

Strength to deal with life's challenges **with Emuna and Bitachon, tolerance and acceptance of everyone.**"

"That they should get over themselves."

"To be welcoming to all and **nonjudgmental.**"

"My wish for the Orthodox community is that **they treat my children exactly the same as they treat any other child.**"

"I wish for the basic right to exist as an LGBTQ family. How is it possible that people who are not shomer shabbat [Sabbath observant]. etc., are fully embraced, but our frum child has nowhere to be simply because of who they are? I will say that over time, simply from exposure to our family, many people in our community, including the rabbis have begun to shift, and numerous friends have stood by us...but these individuals, including the rabbi who goes out of his way to welcome my child, would be among them)."

"Respect from all leaders and community members that people who have come out or have left the religious life that they have previously followed are still Jews and should be treated with kindness and respect. Hashem still loves them so why don't the humans?"

"To realize that being queer does not preclude being religious. (That misunderstanding is almost more painful than anything else.)"

“I wish the community would recognize that LGBT is like being left-handed or having blue eyes or red hair, one is born this way because HaShem creates diversity, and difference is not a threat. Why are Jews of color stigmatized? Why are LGBT Jews stigmatized? Our family is frum and we have twelve beautiful children and fifteen grandchildren. But we cannot disclose.”

“LGBTQ+ kids don’t think they have to choose between sexuality and observance. they should find a comfortable space to balance both parts of their identity.”

“I just want my kid(s) to feel like they don’t have to leave Orthodoxy if they or their sibling is gay. I just want it to be a non-issue.”.

My Wish for My Synagogue

Synagogues remain both places of hope and places of stress for many parents with LGBTQ+ children. A minority of parents report improving conditions within their shul; most do not. The wishes these parents expressed are mostly centered around more tolerance, leadership from the top, education with synagogues, more public statements of support.

The emotions in the quotes below range from hopeful to frustration to feeling it is time to leave their shul and even to depart from the Orthodox community.

“That my child would be welcome to attend services in the place of their choosing. (Currently they only come for the Kiddush.)”

“Someone recently asked me what it would look like for shuls to be accepting, and they said that we (parents of LGBTQ kids) are ASSUMING that they’re not accepted, and we’re assuming the lack of ‘wishing a mazal tov from the Bima’ means they’re not accepting. **I see these mazal tov announcements, ability to sponsor a kiddush, name a baby, etc., as imperative.** But there needs to be LGBTQ couples who push the shuls on it.”

“Replacement of all [named a brand of] siddurim and other sefarim that use exclusionary and judgmental language.”

“My wish for my synagogue is for the rabbi to openly acknowledge how many community members have a family member who is LGBTQ+ or are LGBTQ+ themselves and publicly address them. Privately he is accepting but does not make any public statements.”

“Frankly, until the rabbinical leadership changes, I do not see any chance of improvement in attitude and acceptance. Many new young families are moving into our community who seem to be more modern Orthodox or possibly open Orthodox, so down the line I hope the situation will change. Already we are seeing splintering, with some breakaway minyanim and other minyanim being marginalized even as the participants remain members of our synagogue. I don’t expect to see any real change in the near future. My husband and I are associate members of another synagogue in another community [named] where we feel much more comfortable with their “hashkafa” and admire their rabbinical leadership and accepting environment. Unfortunately, we are not in a position to move to be near that synagogue for full membership and participation.”

“More conversations and learning about how authentic Orthodox Judaism can accommodate and include people who are queer. Education and guidance

from leaders about inclusion of queer people into Orthodox life so that queer people don’t have to leave Judaism ...b/c they don’t feel that they belong in the community.”

“I wish my synagogue would acknowledge that there are LGBTQ+ people in its community. I know that some family members have gone to the Conservative shul with their LGBTQ+ child so that the child would feel more comfortable and welcomed.”

“My synagogue is stuck. They have superficially spoken about the subject of LGBTQ+ Jews and have made a few changes. There is no household membership; I am not sure it is ever going to happen. More recently, **I sit in shul on Shabbat sad and upset.** Nearly every week it seems the president announces a wedding or engagement; shouts of mazel tov follow. **This hurts, especially when I know I will not hear a similar announcement for my child.** Privately and quietly, we are congratulated but publicly my family feel we are left alone in the corner of the room.

“The place we feel we can least be who we are is our synagogue, we cannot disclose. The person we feel we can least be who we are with is our rabbi, we cannot disclose. **If we were to leave the frum world, we would find inclusion and respect from synagogues and rabbis, but we would be a fish out of water in our beliefs and observance and could not daven there, eat there, etc. So, the only alternative for us would be to not have any synagogue at all.**”

Our LGBTQ+ child is a second-class citizen. I am losing patience with my synagogue and its resistance to positive, halachically acceptable change.”

“The place we feel we can least be who we are is our synagogue, we cannot disclose. The person we feel we can least be who we are with is our rabbi, we cannot disclose. **If we were to leave the frum world, we would find inclusion and respect from synagogues and rabbis, but we would be a fish out of water in our beliefs and observance and could not daven there, eat there, etc. So, the only alternative for us would be to not have any synagogue at all.**”

“My particular shul has a way to go. **My wish is for basic decency to start with**, and for the rabbi to get some training on LGBT issues 🙄.”

“Just want it to be a nonissue.”

My wish for my schools

Parents’ wishes for their schools were clear and fairly uniform across most comments. Once again, they wanted their school staff and teachers to receive training that, in turn, led to other wishes, such as: Talking about LGBTQ+ issues out loud and in a positive way. Teachers and staff need to build warm, loving relationships with their LGBTQ+ students, just as they would for those who are straight.

Once again, the themes of safety and inclusion repeated themselves in parent comments.

That their job, first and foremost, is create a safe and inclusive learning space for all of their students, where they can fully be themselves and can continue to grow and develop into kind, accepting, and respectful members of their community.”

“I wish that all Jewish day schools would make a safe space where kids know it is safe to come out and be accepted. **I wish that all teachers and administrators are given training on acceptance and understanding.**”

“To put our children first and their identity second. Accept all kids. Schools so often embrace kids who are not shomer shabbat but are quick to reject kids who are LGBTQ+. We need a lot of education for schools that a child's personal identity is not a reflection of their Jewish identity or their commitment to an Orthodox lifestyle.”

“To put our children first and their identity second. Accept all kids. Schools so often embrace kids who are not shomer shabbat but are quick to reject kids who are LGBTQ+. We need a lot of education for schools that a child's personal identity is not a reflection of their Jewish identity or their commitment to an Orthodox lifestyle.”

“Remember that at the very least [a few] of your students are LGBTQ. **Recognize that they are real people and make their lives richer and better for having been in your school.**”

“I wish our children and all children would **not be told by their schools that LGBTQ+ people are an abomination.**”

“At the very least for co-ed Orthodox schools (I understand that single sex is harder to navigate around trans issues), all children should be welcome. Gender identity should not be a consideration. **Every single school should have an admissions policy (many do, and they say things like “all children born to a Jewish mother are welcome” but what they really mean is all cis-gendered children) and must train their staff.** This issue exists in every school. Not talking, training, or developing policies around it doesn't make that less true, it just makes you less prepared.”

“Our main Modern Orthodox Day school follows a very conservative religious tradition and is unlikely to change any time soon. Each year it graduates a handful of kids who are about to come out and likely have begun to figure out their sexuality. I want my local school to let these kids know out loud that they are loved and respected.”

“Jewish schools need to support all Jewish students, including those with learning disabilities and special needs, those who are LGBT-identified or the children of LGBT-identified parents, Jews of color and other diversity. Torah is for everyone. And relationships are just as important as the learning...**How can a student have close friendships or a Rebbe-Talmid [Teacher-student or mentor] relationship who has to hide who they are?** How can a student make the Torah his own if he experiences the Torah world as rejecting?”

“Recognition of the reality that any sizable school has dozens of LGBT students and willingness to deal with that reality.”

Closing comments

Parents want their Orthodox communities to hear them.

The majority of parents who participated in this survey have had many conversations with each other similar to the ones covered in this report. They have done so at a variety of Eshel meetings, discussion groups, and in the annual parent retreat. Unfortunately, most also find that once they return home, these conversations stop, or at best are muted.

By reading this report, now you are also privy to the essential bits and pieces of these conversations. These parents have told you they love their children. They have also told you their children and their families have felt profound – and in some ways hurtful – discrimination from the very organizations that form the backbone of the Orthodox community.

A minority of those polled did tell you that everything is fine. In contrast, a great many have told you that they have either had to leave their community, switch synagogues or day schools, or declare defeat and stay put. This leaves them with few people to have an honest conversation. With much pain, a number have had to “shelter in place,” hiding from their institutions, and, by doing so, protecting their families and their children.

In the end, what makes most of these 133 parents stand out is that they are Orthodox, and expect to remain so, despite communal pressure to accept the status quo. This same group does have hope for Orthodoxy and for the next generation of Jewish communal leaders.

For the moment, they have a basic need that they want you to appreciate: **They want to feel fully engaged, accepted, and completely a part of their synagogues and schools. They want the same for their LGBTQ+ children.**

They want you to understand. They do not want pity. They simply want to be heard and to belong.

Eshel's Community Survey Project

Along with the Welcoming Shuls Project (WSP), Eshel conducts surveys of its community. The Community Survey Project's goal is to learn about Orthodox communities from the perspective of LGBTQ+ individuals and their families. These two projects represent two sides of the same coin. WSP interviews Orthodox rabbis and lay leaders nationwide about their institutions' acceptance of LGBTQ+ Jews. The Community Survey Project surveys LGBTQ+ Jews and families about their communities from their perspective. Eshel believes these two endeavors will help bring about wider understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ Jews, their families, as well as build a healthier Orthodox Jewish world.

Eshel's mission

Eshel envisions a world where LGBTQ+ people and their families are full participants in the Orthodox community of their choice. Eshel's mission is to build LGBTQ+ inclusive Orthodox Jewish communities.

- **Community:** Eshel builds community for its LGBTQ+ individuals and their families so that they can break isolation, grow, and thrive.
- **Support:** Eshel supports LGBTQ+ Orthodox Jewish individuals and families through our warmline, support groups, mentoring, and community network.
- **Education:** Eshel raises awareness and sensitivity amongst Orthodox religious and communal leaders, educators and guidance counselors on how to address the needs of their LGBTQ+ members through consultations and trainings.
- **Advocacy:** Eshel advocates for LGBTQ+ individuals within the larger Orthodox community so that they can be included in Orthodox communities.

For more information on this report or to learn more about Eshel, please contact Miryam Kabakov at miryam@eshelonline.org.



The poster features a light blue background with a series of white, 3D-style rectangular blocks arranged in a descending staircase pattern from the top left towards the bottom right. The text is overlaid on this background. The title '11th Annual Eshel Parent Retreat' is in a large, bold, teal font. The dates 'March 28-31, 2024' and the location 'Pearlstone Retreat Center, Reisterstown, MD' are in a red font. The phrase 'Eshel is with you' is in a dark grey font. The tagline 'Every Step of the Way' is in a teal font, followed by 'as Orthodox parents' and 'of LGBTQ+ children' in a dark grey font. The Eshel logo, which consists of a stylized tree with orange and red leaves and the word 'ESHEL' in Hebrew and English, is in the bottom left corner.

11th Annual
ESHEL PARENT RETREAT
March 28-31, 2024
Pearlstone Retreat Center
Reisterstown, MD

Eshel is with you

Every Step of the Way
as Orthodox parents
of LGBTQ+ children



Learn more about our annual Parent Retreat: <https://www.eshelonline.org/2024-parent-retreat/>