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## Meet the king of New York's gay Jewish nightlife

After an ultra-Orthodox upbringing and yeshiva education, Jayson Littman has become a leader in the gay Jewish community

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By: Nathan Burstein

**T**he proverbial Jewish mother would have been thrilled – then crushed. Standing as far as the eye could see were nothing but single Jewish men – young, well-educated, most with good jobs in prestigious professions. They would have been perfect suitors for New York's eligible Jewish daughters, except for one detail. They were all gay.

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Busily navigating this scene — at times in a headset so he could coordinate the chaos — was Jayson Littman, the evening's host and one of the most dynamic figures in New York's gay Jewish community.

The event was the fifth annual Jewbilee, a Christmas Eve party that has quadrupled in popularity since it began in 2007. With nearly 1,000 partygoers this past December — most from New York, but others traveling from Boston, Philadelphia and Washington — the Jewbilee has become a major event on the region's gay Jewish calendar, as well as a way for revelers to connect often-separate parts of their identity.



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With nearly 1,000 partygoers this past December -- most from New York, but others traveling from Boston, Philadelphia and Washington -- the Jewbilee has become a major event on the region's gay Jewish calendar. (Photo credit: Courtesy)

"The people at my parties are what I call cultural or urban gay Jews," says Littman, 34, a former yeshiva boy who spent two years after high school studying in Israel. "Judaism may not be [the dominant element of] their identity, but a lot of them are very culturally Jewish, and I believe these parties speak to both parts of who they are."

Born into what he calls a "black-hat Orthodox family" in northern Manhattan, Littman is a somewhat

unlikely candidate to organize this sort of event. But as he monitored the festivities at the most recent Jewbilee – hosted at Amnesia, a club normally targeted at a straight clientele – it seemed clear he had found his place, receiving endless shouted greetings as Rihanna blasted in the background.

That sense of place didn't come easily for Littman, who struggled for years to reconcile his religious background with his sexual orientation. "I was aware I was attracted to guys, and I just didn't think I'd ever act on it," Littman now says of the two years he spent studying in Jerusalem. "I'd go to the Kotel [the Western Wall] on Tuesdays and pray to change."

While coming out is rarely an easy process, Littman's was more stop-and-start than most. Even after telling his parents at 22, he grappled with the prospect of what he calls "living gay," and then for half a decade "decided that I didn't want to be gay" after all. For five years, he participated in "reparative therapy," a religion-based effort to suppress his sexual identity

Paradoxically, the program — which Littman has written about for the [Huffington Post](#) — ultimately aided his coming out. "I probably had the most growth in who I was as a person in reparative therapy," he says. "I really liked it because I was able to deal with my sexuality through a religious perspective."

“Going to a gay-affirming therapist just wasn’t an option at that point,” he adds. “Reparative therapy was more comfortable. I never would have been able to go from being really religious to being gay” without a framework that dealt with both.

Like practically everything else in New York, his turn toward gay Jewish leadership hinged partly on real estate. After inviting friends to his apartment for a party on Christmas Eve in 2006, Littman moved to a studio, giving up the ability to host the party for a second year. Instead of dropping the idea, he contacted Vlada, a gay bar in Manhattan’s Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood that was perfectly happy to sell drinks and play music on what would otherwise have been a silent night. “I thought that it wouldn’t get more than 40 people,” he says, “but the numbers on Facebook kept going up, ultimately to about 250 people. I realized that there was something there.”

In the years since, Littman — whose day job is in finance — has founded He’bro, a nightlife organization that hosts three gay Jewish parties in an average year. (The next, a Purim celebration he’s calling “Homotashen,” will take place March 10 at Manhattan’s Maritime Hotel.)

While the organization has effectively made him a small-scale nightlife impresario, Littman says his purpose isn’t to make a profit. Part of the proceeds from ticket sales go to a rotating set of LGBT charities, and Littman says he has ploughed money back into He’bro, legally incorporating the organization and building up its [website](#) (which features the obligatory Lady Gaga song on its homepage).

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Growing attendance at He’bro events has attracted attention in the broader Jewish community. Littman says he was approached by one of New York’s mainstream Jewish organizations about partnering on future events (he declines to name which one), but says he balked at the prospect of eliminating his parties’ more risqué elements, such as hired “go-go boys” who dance in yarmulkes at some of the events. Some gay partygoers have also expressed discomfort at the more outré elements, but that hasn’t moved Littman to alter the festivities.

“Sometimes I get e-mails from people saying that my parties are too edgy, that I shouldn’t


have go-go boys,” he says. “My response is that I’m not running a synagogue. I’m running a nightlife event, so I don’t have to adhere to the rules of a Jewish organization.”

Outside his parties, however, Littman has retained a number of Jewish traditions, keeping kosher and observing the holidays, often in the company of his family. He’s volunteered for the Jewish National Fund and Birthright Israel, and is now preparing to launch [Out! for Israel](#), which he’s billing as “the LGBT pro-Israel voice.”

While he looks forward to highlighting Israel’s positive record on gay rights — especially in comparison to its neighbors’ — he says he hesitated about forming the new organization because of the issue’s divisiveness. “We are supposed to agree,” he says of the gay community, referring to marriage equality and other issues. But he predicts that Israel will become an increasingly prominent topic in the gay world, and hopes his group will be an out-and-proud source of support, even if it doesn’t necessarily agree with or weigh in on every Israeli action.

For Littman, He’bro and [Out! for Israel](#) are just two more outlets for gay Jews in New York, joining the city’s decades-old [gay synagogue](#) and other organizations. But for those at his parties, he’s offering a new way to connect both sides of their status as double-minorities: gay in a mostly straight world and Jewish in a country that mostly isn’t.

"I found out that you can't come out as gay and then put your Jewish identity in the closet," he says of his own experience. "In order to be fully healthy, you have to reconcile the two."

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