

A close-up photograph of a person's bare chest. A large, dark blue Star of David is painted on the center of the chest. The star is outlined with a thick, shimmering silver or white paint. Several small, square, metallic-looking pins or clips are attached to the points of the star. The background is dark, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of the paint and the person's skin.

**CultureReport**

Lifestyle Travel Arts Dance Food Film

# Bridging the gap

A New York party group is helping gay men to keep in touch with the Jewish community

**By Maya Shwayder** *New York*

**Photos** by Anna Hiatt



One nearly nude dancer is Israeli, the other is Egyptian. Both are decorated with Jewish symbols in dark blue body paint and sporting yarmulkes and tiny briefs.

By 11 p.m. on this particular Saturday in early April, the swanky downtown venue, Slate, is packed with young Jewish guys, almost all sporting dark brown hair and five o'clock shadows. The vibe is one of a typical gay club, but we're not in Tel Aviv – this is New York and the party is the annual Passover party – this year called HoMoses – thrown by the gay party production company Hebro.

Hebro is relatively new to the roster of gay and Jewish organizations in New York. Started in 2007, founder and native Brooklynite Jayson Littman, 36, says Hebro came about by complete accident. "I had just come out [as gay]," Littman tells *The Jerusalem Report*. "Before I came out I had always gone to the Matza Ball [the annual party on Christmas Eve for Jewish straight singles], and once I came out I didn't want to go there anymore. And, you know, young people don't want to eat Chinese food and go to the movies on Christmas – that's what our parents do."

Littman called a local gay bartender with whom he was friendly and arranged to reserve a venue for that Christmas Eve, expecting an intimate turnout. But this was 2007. "That was when Facebook first exploded," Littman said. "So I sent the invitation to 20 friends, who sent it to 20 other friends... We had over 200 people come out that night."

And, thus, Hebro was launched – growing from a once-in-a-while event into a linchpin of New York's gay Jewish world in its seven-year existence. Littman ended up quitting his job in finance to manage Hebro full-time.

"The response to that first event made me realize there's something here," Littman says. The next year, at what became the annual Christmas Jewbilee party, there were more than 500 attendees and now each party – five or six a year – routinely attracts thousands. It's grown so popular that Littman has arranged the first ever Hebro trip to Israel, from June 6 to 15, and organized specifically around the Tel Aviv Gay Pride Parade on June 13. Twenty-six participants are expected to be along for the ride.

Jonathan Gilad, 29, runs a group in Washington, DC, called "Nice Jewish Boys," a social group for young, gay Jewish professionals. He says Hebro events are a big deal and he frequently travels to New York specifically to attend the parties. "It's a smaller community

in DC, but Hebro parties are on our calendar," says Gilad, a native of Westchester who was raised modern Orthodox. "It's become a conduit for the DC gay Jewish community, as well. Hebro has made our job [of connecting young gay Jews] a lot easier."

### RELIGION ISN'T REALLY AN ACCEPTED PART OF THE GAY COMMUNITY – MOST PEOPLE FIND RELIGION DOESN'T LIKE US TOO MUCH

Hebro is not your typical Jewish group. Unlike Jewish Queer Youth (JQY), Keshet or Nehirim (just some of the other big names out there in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community), Hebro isn't dedicated to helping Jewish youth reconcile with their gay identity. There's no social justice mission, no attempts to convert anyone, no fundraising or activism for LGBT rights. Hebro is simply a place where gay people can party and be Jewish.

"There is a lot of gay Jewish stuff in New York," Littman relates. "A lot of those other groups do gay work in the Jewish community, but Hebro provides Jewish events in the gay community." Hebro is not the place for a Woody Allen-style neuroticism of "I don't know how to reconcile these two identities," Littman says.

"OUR PRIMARY market is the gay community," he explains. "We don't do events at JCCs or synagogues. We won't ever do an event there because our primary market is secular. Most of my crowd is secular, gay Jews who have no issues with being gay or Jewish and want to be in a similar environment."

Hebro's very existence has brought out of the woodwork many gay men who otherwise might not be involved with the Jewish community in any other way. At a time when the tribal elders repeatedly express grave concern over the loss of young Jews to intermarriage, groups like Hebro, coupled with outreach efforts like those of JQY and Nehirim, could help to hold on to a demographic sector that otherwise would be pushed away from Judaism.

Littman isn't just a native of Brooklyn – he used to be a black-hat ultra-Orthodox boy, who underwent matchmaker dating and went



to a counselor to try and cure his homosexual impulses. These days, Littman wears his hair close cropped and doesn't sport much more than a shadow of a beard on his chin. His clothes are colorful and secular. Looking at him today, one would never guess his religious background.

"I never really thought about it [being gay] growing up," Littman says. "It wasn't part of the structure of the Orthodox community – it just wasn't an option. I knew it existed, but I didn't know how it would relate to me, or even to the feelings I was having at the time."

Littman's experience may look like a typical Orthodox LGBT experience – a young person grows up in a religious home, comes out, leaves the religion. Except for the last part – Littman still considers himself a religious Jew, if not completely Orthodox. "I still keep kosher and I won't party on Friday nights, but I will use electricity," he explains. "I will always feel more comfortable in an Orthodox environment than in a non-Orthodox one." Many of Littman's regulars at Hebro parties are today non-religious – whether they grew up non-religious or very religious.

According to Littman, for a lot of the families of those Orthodox Jewish youth who come out, the hardest part of the process isn't necessarily their child's sexuality. It's the outside social pressure, and the fact that many of those children tend to leave the religion when they come out. Being gay is still not kosher in





(Right and preceding pages) The gay production company Hebro throws a party in New York

many religious Jewish communities. Much of the stigma surrounding LGBT life revolves around community and social expectations rather than problems with scripture, according to Littman and many others interviewed by *The Report*. On the bright side, Hebro's participants say many in the religious community are ever so slowly changing their attitudes, spearheaded by the modern Orthodox movement.

"We now have hassidic rabbis come out and say, 'Hey, it's OK, everything should be taken with grain of salt, and you should do as many *mitzvot* as you can,'" says Ethan Weisinger, 30, a native Californian who will be one of the participants on the Hebro Israel trip. "It's a much more liberal interpretation of Torah. But it's still very hard."

Jewish Queer Youth (JQY), a non-profit support group that provides programming and counseling for young Jews (mostly in the more religious sects), who are struggling with their sexual identity, is often mentioned in the same breath as Hebro as being sort of a cousin. Just as Hebro provides an outlet for secular or otherwise non-conflicted gay men who want to be Jewish, JQY is a safe space for Jewish men and women who need to deal with their sexuality.

One of JQY's biggest pushes right now is outreach programming for modern-Orthodox high schools and Yeshiva University. "Years ago, when we met Jayson,

the most basic response of Orthodoxy to gay people was 'reparative therapy,'" says Mordechai Levovitz, co-executive director of JQY. "That was problematic, not only because it's not the best way to deal with an issue like this, but because, with issues of self-esteem and shame, changing who you are is not going to help."

Justin Spiro, 29, a social worker who is active with JQY, specializes in sensitivity training – making students more aware of how certain actions or language that they may think is innocuous or funny could be offensive or harmful – at modern-Orthodox high schools, and in, as he says, putting a face and person to the idea of homosexuality for many kids who may not know someone who is gay.

"The modern-Orthodox community has one foot in the modern world," Spiro tells *The Report*. "They watch all the same TV shows, they have the same cultural references. The difference is, if you allow a Gay-Straight Alliance or sensitivity training in the school, then it becomes like the school is endorsing homosexuality. If you do not, the de facto message is we are endorsing hate speech. And the rabbis can be very afraid to reply to these issues. So they narrowly teach the Torah and say, 'We'll leave the social commentary to the kids.'"

In all the schools in which JQY does programs or hosts speakers, there are hardly any students who have come "out," Spiro says. "They don't realize there is a safe space for them and we need to create that safe space," he says. Educating this generation is imperative for spreading wider change and acceptance, he believes. "I realize that I can't change society in the next months or years," he admits. "But the message is that it's a *mitzva* to treat all people with respect and love and care and sensitivity."

**"COMMUNITIES USED** to pretend that there were no LGBT people," says Rabbi David Dunn Bauer, director of social justice programming at the LGBT synagogue in Manhattan, Beit Simchat Torah. "They are now coming to terms with the reality that we exist and are much more willing to engage with institutions like ours. There are also more and more Orthodox people who are out of the closet and they don't want to sacrifice that ap-

proach to Judaism where they feel at home. Nobody can keep their head in the sand with impunity," he tells *The Report*.

But the reason many people still leave their religion behind when they come out has as much to do with the reaction of their religious community as it does with the reaction of the LGBT community. Even as the religious community learns to accept those who are gay, lesbian or transgender, the gay community still needs to learn to accept those who are religious.

"Religion isn't really an accepted part of the gay community," Weisinger says, speaking to *The Report* ahead of the Hebro Israel trip. "Most people find religion doesn't like us too much." Weisinger grew up in a Chabad-affiliated family, but today says he's "kind of strayed from being religious." The first time he encountered other Jews who were also gay was when he went on an LGBT-specific Birthright trip, trips that Littman has led in the past.

"I've remained close to the Jewish community," Littman says. "I never had problems with the Jewish community. I did struggle with my relation with the Orthodox community, and a lot of guys fully give up the religion, because they don't know how to practice any other type of Judaism. Orthodoxy teaches us we don't have another way of practicing Judaism."

"A lot of my friends are in the Jewish gay community," notes Spiro, an example of someone who was raised Conservative and actually became more religious after he came out. He now considers himself modern-Orthodox. "Among my group of friends, both parts of identity are embraced and welcomed. But I definitely see, in the broader community, an anti-religion sentiment."

"A lot of Orthodox Jews whom I know tend to be full of conflict," relates Lonnie Ginsburg, a regular at Littman's parties who grew up Conservative and is now Reform. "The first relationship I was in ended because he was in such conflict between his religion and his sexuality that it got in the way of everything. I happen to know of other guys who constantly struggle."

"I have been out since I was 21," Weisinger says, "and I was just invited to my first gay wedding. I know that if I were to get married I could not find a hassidic rabbi to marry me. Even the one I grew up with wouldn't marry me. That's hard." ■

*Michael Wilner contributed to this report*