

ACCEPTANCE: JEWISH VIEWS ON HOMOSEXUALITY THROUGH THE LENS  
OF ORTHODOX, CONSERVATIVE & REFORM BRANCHES

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by

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## ABSTRACT

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The objective of this study is to highlight differences in how various branches of Judaism discuss LGBTQ inclusion and acceptance. Political and public support for same-sex relationships has shifted considerably from the 1970s to the present, and prior research indicates that one's religious affiliation is an important factor in defining their views on such matters. I assert that distinctions in three branches make Judaism a key opportunity to consider a more nuanced link between religious institutions and sexuality. I leverage key insights from a convenience sample of 58 blog entries taken from a major website targeted to the entire, religious, Jewish population (MyJewishLearning). Findings highlight two guiding lens through which Judaism, as a social institution, grapples with LGBT+ issues and same-sex marriage. The first, which was less common (25% of all entries), concerned the different interpretations of sacred texts. Consistently, literal interpretations were used to lobby against greater inclusivity of LGBT+ persons whereas symbolic interpretations of the *Torah*, and related texts, were actually used in support of "the LGBT+ experience." The second, more pervasive (as in 100% of blog entries) theme concerned some discussion of religious community, which appears to differ across branches. Multiple forms of community involved in this study included communities pertaining to family and allies, an online space, a venue for political activism, socially constructed as well as rigid and inflexible communities. My research contributes to future studies on LGBT+ religious communities and has important implications for individual health and well-being.

KEY WORDS: LGBT+, Community, Jewish, Identity, Same-sex

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

A wealth of scholarship has considered the association between sexual orientation and health and well-being (see Shearer, Russon, Herres, Wong, Jacobs and Diamond 2018). For instance, gay and bisexual men, on average, report higher levels of mood and anxiety disorders than their heterosexual counterparts (e.g, Bostwick, Boyd, Huges and McCabe 2010; Cochran, Sullivan and Mays 2003; Meyer 2003b; Sandfort, de Graff, Bill, and Schnabel 2001; Walker 2013). Arguably, “coming out” has notable implications for this association with “coming out” typically being associated with better mental health. The coming-out process has changed over time, yet continues to be an important experience in peoples’ lives (Green, Kasik and Rothblum 2015), and each LGBTQ person has different experiences when coming-out. In some cases, research has emphasized how young lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals deal with coming out focusing on the perceived personal growth that results from that experience (Cox, Dewaele, Van Houtte and Vincke 2011). In addition, others have asserted that the strategic disclosure of closeted secrets both diminishes hurtful effects of self-stigma and leads to a sense of persona empowerment and improved self-esteem (Beals et al., 2009).

Not surprisingly, a sound body of sociological research has already documented LGBT+ coming out stories and experiences. Key insights from this work suggest that such narratives represent important touchstones in personal history that are often associated with heightened levels of stress (King and Smith 2005). Many LGBT+ individuals experience sexual minority stigma, or the anxious expectation of pending rejection based on one’s sexual orientation and such stigma may prevent or delay LGBT+

persons from “coming out” (Earnshaw and Chaudoir 2009; Meyer, 2003b). Yet, another vein of this scholarship has emphasized how social support can serve as a key factor in alleviating this sexual minority stigma and encouraging individuals to “come out” (Corrigan, Kosyluk and Rush 2012), which is how I seek to contribute to this existing scholarship. Specifically, I consider how religion, as a social institution, can serve as both a key source of social support, which may encourage LGBT+ individuals in their coming out, and a form of social control (prohibiting the coming out process).

I am not the first to consider the role of religion in this process. Yet, the story appears complex. For instance, Pargament (2002) asserts religion can serve as an important source of social support and guidance to facilitate the coming out process. However, at the same time Rowe (2014) suggested that in coming out, many struggle to reconcile religious and sexual identities. This research illustrates the importance of religion for many persons who identify as a sexual minority in their coming out narratives. Yet, much remains unknown. Most research on this topic in the United States has focused on Christianity and its support, or lack thereof, in coming out (Rodriguez 2010). I assert that focusing on Judaism and its stance on LGBT+ experiences increases our understanding on the association between religious institutions and sexuality in three important ways. First, consideration of Jewish, LGBT+ experiences draws attention to the intersection of two minority statuses (i.e., religion and sexual orientation).

Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins’ (1993) theoretical framework, I argue that Jewish sexual minorities experience life much differently than Christian, LGBT+ individuals, whose religious experience and community reflects the privileges associated with a dominant group status. Both of Jews and LGBT+ persons are oppressed minority

groups, in part, because they are less prevalent among the United States general population. Some members of the Jewish population still experience anti-Semitic crimes to this day as well as members of the LGBT+ community, who experience hate crimes. In spite of similar statuses as oppressed, minority groups, I recognize that lived experiences based on sexual identity and religion are distinctive. Drawing on an intersectionality approach, a bit more attention to the historical responses that Jews have employed is beneficial here. For instance, Sanchez and Schlossberg (2001) asserted that in response to anti-Semitism, Jews strategically employed chameleonism to alter their mannerisms, diction, dress, and behaviors in certain situations to avoid (or reduce) persecution. In many ways, this may ring true of the LGBT+ experience, where some individuals may suppress their sexual identity (to differing degrees) to avoid persecution given their minority status. This discussion becomes more complex, however, as recent work has also emphasized that many Judeo-Christians selectively “cherry pick” the aspects of religion that support or align with one’s choices, existing, identities, or lived experiences (see Ammerman 2010). Taken together, these findings indicate that: (1) LGBT+ Jews may strategically limit their disclosure of sexual identity within a religious context that may not support it or (2) LGBT+ Jews may selectively draw on aspects of their religion that support or defend their membership in a sexual minority group. My analyses seek to address this important question to the extent my data can allow.

Second, Judaism has multiple, distinct branches (e.g., Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative) that are well-represented in the United States, and prior research suggests each branch offers differing levels of support (or animosity) to sexual minorities. In short, Judaism cannot be treated as a singular religion and consideration of distinctions across



these branches yields insights can inform a more nuanced understanding of *how* religious institutions may impact individual behaviors in this context. Finally, prior work has noted the lack of scientific analyses regarding homosexuality and Judaism in the United States is a problematic omission (Shilo, Yossef and Svaya 2016), which illustrates that any analysis of the Jewish LGBT+ experience in the United States stands well-positioned to increase our current understanding.

Herein, I conduct a content analysis that examines the three branches of Judaism and compares and contrasts their differing levels of support/constraint for sexual minorities more broadly. By emphasizing the differences in branches of Judaism, I am able to zoom in on a more nuanced discussion of religion and sexuality. Specifically, my findings indicate that broad patterns exist in the manner in which branches *most often* discuss LGBT+ experiences in Jewish communities. Yet, even within each of the branches, views, rules, and acceptance of LGBT+ individuals appears somewhat fluid. This findings challenges stark “black and white” answers to how any given branch of Judaism can be discussed solely in terms of its support or constraint of LGBT+ rights and inclusion. Findings also drew my attention to the *way in which* braches defended their stances. Notably, references to sacred texts and the *Torah* were much less common than expected (a mere one-in-four blog entries made a single use the sacred texts). In contrast, *every* blog entry made at least one reference to Judaism as a religious community in the context of LGBT+ lived experiences. Through analyses, I identify five distinct sub-themes of community: (1) community as rigid or inflexible, (2) community as flexible and socially constructed, (3) community as an important venue for activism or inclusion, (4) communities for families and allies of LGBT+ persons, and (5) online, communities.

Although the most commonly cited form of community showcased the Jewish, religious community as a potential venue for activism and inclusion, the discussion of community is quite complex. In many instances, Judaism, as a religious community, was discussed in terms of *multiple* ways in which it emphasized this notion of “community.”

## CHAPTER II

### Background

People are “assumed” to be heterosexual until they indicate otherwise. A wide variety of social science research has considered the coming out as a process from many angles. For instance, Rossi (2010) emphasizes who LGBT+ individuals come out to first and found the individuals generally came out to mothers before their father. Other research has focused on the difficult nature of coming out. The general narrative here has often emphasized that coming out can be scary and painful at times, but to be seen - *really* seen - by others is such a relief. Many social institutions shape and guide individual behaviors, but Whitehead (2010) asserted that religious congregations consistently influenced more Americans than any other voluntary social institution. Internalized homophobia as a psychological phenomenon has attracted little systematic research despite its destructive impact on the mental health of the gay community (Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remein and Williams 2010).

#### Religion and Homosexuality

The link between religion and sexuality is not surprising. For instance, Whitehead (2010) reports that religiosity is a key predictor of an individual’s attitude toward same-sex marriage, even after controlling for a variety of characteristics (e.g., gender, age, race/ethnicity, etc.). Yet, recent evidence suggests that some may assume too much regarding the links between religion and sexuality. For example, many assume that more religious individuals believe that homosexuals choose their sexual orientation and may be less supportive of LGBT+ rights. However, it is inappropriate to paint all religions with a seemingly broad brush. Indeed, DiMaggio and colleagues (1996), emphasize that, many,

in the United States associate religious perspectives and their stances on homosexuality in terms of a binary position, pro-gay and anti-gay. Yet, this approach is too simplistic. Religious views have caused much of the public debate on homosexuality, causing stereotypes, exacerbates conflicts, and compounds confusion (Moon 2014). Both Christian and Jewish religious institutions have been described as facing the most challenges to accommodate lesbian and gay members over the past 50 years (Whitehead 2010) based on the Hebrew Bible, which both religions recognized, and its explicit references to same-sex encounters as “sinful.”

Rosenborough (2006) considers the tension between religion and sexual identity for gay and lesbian people and finds these individuals often feel trapped between a constitutional sexual orientation and a religious body that rejects it. I have already established that narratives indicate coming out is difficult regardless of religiosity. Etengoff (2013) notes coming out is even more difficult for individuals who come from conservative religious communities and suggests that religion may play an important role as to why many LGBT+ individuals struggle in coming out. Many verses from the *Torah* (for example, see Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13) place restrictions on sexual relationships, including but not limited to homosexual encounters. Such passages are often used to inform (and defend) both Christian and Jewish stances on sexuality.

The United States is unique, however, in that religion continues to play an exceptionally powerful role in shaping Americans’ perceptions of and engagement in non-traditional families (Perry and Whitehead 2016). Openness to homosexuality at the congregational level of American religious life has only recently received scholarly attention (Adler 2014). Besen and Zicklin (2007) examine the issues of how religiosity

and fundamentalism negatively affects support for approval of gay marriage, gay adoption as well as gays in the military in their study.

### *Homosexuality and Judaism*

Whitehead (2016) has asserted that unlike other countries, religion remains an exceptionally powerful factor in shaping individual perceptions of non-traditional families. Yet, a distinctive case for Judaism as a social institution (separate from religion broadly) and sexuality can be readily made. In the most basic sense, views on homosexuality can vary widely from more traditional Jewish positions to those that consider themselves to be more liberal minded Jews. Separately, identifying as LGBTQ and Jewish can make gay and lesbian Jews feel a sense of alienation from the Jewish community and develop an ambivalent or conflicted relationship about their own Jewish identity (Schnoor 2006). Having two conflicting identities can cause much stress and anxiety for individuals wondering if and how they can live with both.

Halper's (2011) survey revealed that there were significant gaps between gay Jews and their heterosexual counterparts such that LGBT+, Jewish individuals face greater challenges in using cultural knowledge to articulate homosexual identity. For instance, many Jewish religious organizations strive to impose their versions of thought, belief, and religion onto members of the LGBT community, and they want to do so with a legal blessing. In these situations, LGBT individuals who report using both positive religious coping strategies experience better mental health outcomes than their counterparts who embrace negative religious coping strategies (Shilo, Yossef and Savaya 2016).

Judaism and Jewish culture have a strong emphasis on family ties and values. This in turn, places an emphasis on traditional gender roles, the nuclear family, procreation, and conservative religious values, which may leave gay and lesbian Jews feeling a sense of alienation from the Jewish community and develop an ambivalent or conflicted relationship about their own Jewish identity (Schnoor 2006). It is not surprising then that, significant gaps exist in LGBT+ Jews, who report lower engagement in ritual practice, religious identity and religiosity (Cohen, Aviv and Kelman 2009), than their gender-conforming counterparts. Further, among those LGBT+ Jews who regularly attend religious services, those who belong to conservative denominations report more sexual prejudice (Finlay and Walther 2003).

In spite of these cultural norms and values, a variety of attitudes and opinions exist concerning homosexuality in Judaism. Jewish law initially condemns homosexuality as an abomination, however, this is not consistent across all branches and synagogues. The Talmud, also known as the Jewish prayer book, specifically discusses male homosexuality or homosexuality in general and has been used to suggest that homosexuality is not a pressing problem (Morris 1987). Others have considered the uses of halakhic (Jewish legal) passages that relate to homosexuality and marriage between two males to make a case for the implementation of same-sex marriage (Moss and Ulmer 2008). Jewishness and “queerness” is a powerfully charged chiasmus in which each term glosses, illuminates, displaces, and transumes the other, all at one and the same time” (Freedman 2001: 521). This shows how difficult it is for an individual to accept themselves as both Jewish and as a member of the LGBTQ community. Jewishness and queerness yet utilize and are bound up with one another in particularly resonant ways.

This crossover also extends to the modern discourses of antisemitism and homophobia, with stereotypes of the Jew frequently underwriting pop cultural and scientific notions of the homosexual (Boyarin, Itzkovits and Pellegrini 2003).

*Variation across Branches of Judaism*

Historically speaking, some branches of Judaism has been more supportive of LGBT+ persons than others, with the Reform Movement “leading the charge.” However, all three branches have made recent, visible efforts to create more spaces for LGBT+ persons within their religious communities. The Reform Movement has been leading the initiative since 1965, when the Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ) passed a resolution calling for the decriminalization of homosexuality according to the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. The position of the Reform Jewish Movement made another move to marshal increasing support and acceptance of LGBT+ individuals in 1977, when it called for human rights for homosexuals. In recent years, multiple formal organizations (e.g., Union of Reform Judaism, Central Conference for American Rabbis, Women of Reform Judaism, Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, and The Reform Jewish Youth Movement) have come together to pass resolutions dealing with issues specific to Reform Judaism, such as inclusion of gays and lesbians in the rabbinate and cantorate, as well as national issues, such as support for marriage equality according to the Religious Action Center.

Though it was considerably later on the scene, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism partnered with Keshet, a national organization that works toward full LGBTQ equality, to promote inclusion in Jewish life in 2013. Results from this partnership indicated that 80% of Conservative synagogues had membership policies that

allowing same-sex couples to have a family/household membership, and 60% of synagogues reported they have members who openly identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer (Malka 2013). Members of the Orthodox community read, study and practice the Noahide Laws, which emphasize more prohibitive views concerning sexual minorities and gender nonconformity. Devout Orthodox Jews accordingly believe that laws (banning homosexual encounters) must be observed and God's teachings that were passed down by Moses (in the *Torah*) must be respected. In spite of more resistance to LGBT+ rights, Kabakoy (2014) has asserted that parents of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children may serve as catalysts for change in the Orthodox community in the United States and that parents' consultations with rabbis may provide a more inclusive space for LGBT+ individuals within Orthodox Judaism.

*Trembling before God* is a documentary that was used to interview multiple Orthodox Jewish gay and lesbian persons who vividly and movingly describe their struggle to live their lives as observant Jewish people, being faithful at the same time to their sexual desires and their religious tradition. Yaakov (2008) believes that it is almost impossible to be a sexually active gay or lesbian and a practicing Southern Baptist, Seventh-Day Adventist, Jehovah's Witness, or Mormon, it is not impossible for gays and lesbians to live their lives as Orthodox Jews. Orthodox Jews are the most strict when it comes to abiding by Jewish laws and rules. For Orthodox Jews religion represents a far more encompassing web of beliefs, values, ritual practices, and social and familial connects that cannot easily be uncoupled by the individuals' deepest sense of being (Halbertal and Koren 2006). Many Orthodox Jews do not accept that Reform Judaism has grown more popular in the United States. Orthodox thinkers respond to



Reform simply as a heresy, they ignore the fact that most American Jews are influenced more by Reform Judaism than they are by Orthodoxy, possibly because Reform Judaism speaks to their secularized, self-perceived Jewish needs (Bessen and Zicklin 2007).

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Current Study**

The United States remains a fairly religious country compared to other western societies. Along this vein, Whitehead (2016) argues that religion remains an influential institution for shaping individual perceptions families in the United States. However, there is not a well-developed sociological literature that examines micro-issues, such as negotiation of intersecting identities (i.e., religious and sexual) among gay Jews (Schnoor 2006). The limited research that has been conducted has primarily documented lesbian experiences at the expense of gay experiences (Alpert 1997, Alpert et al. 2001, Moore 1995; Mushkat 1999; Torton Beck 1989). The failure to empirically evaluate the linkages between Jewish religious communities and LGBT+ experiences more broadly is problematic for a number of reasons.

First, an established body of research has considered the role of religious institutions in the coming out experiences of LGBT+ persons. While it may seem intuitive to assume that Judaism, based on the Hebrew Bible, would strive to regulate sexual encounters (i.e., limiting them to heterosexual experiences within marriage), an established body of research has illustrated that religious institutions can be both a source of control (see Rowe 2014) and support (see Pargament 2002). Further, Ammerman's (2010) work focusing Judeo-Christianity, has indicated that LGBT+ individuals are making spaces form themselves in traditionally, hostile spaces by either selectively engaging with certain aspects of religion (e.g., "love your neighbor") and rejecting others (e.g., religious laws banning same-sex encounters). This research, when coupled with other work, set in the Deep South suggests that religious institutions (even those that have

historically been quite traditional) are adapting to create safe spaces for LGBT+ individuals (see McQueeny 2009). These factors demonstrate that additional work to better understand how religion, in this case Judaism, positions itself with regards to LGBT+ rights and inclusion is needed. In addition, although Judaism is known for its perpetuation of pronatalist values, gender conformity, and traditional gender roles, DiMaggio and colleagues (1996) demonstrate that religious institutions should not be discussed in simplistic, binary manners. To this end, Judaism presents a compelling scenario for consideration given substantial distinctions across Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox branches. Lastly, Cohen and colleagues (2009) highlight the difficulties that LGBT+ individuals report in negotiating their Jewish and “gay” identities, which provides further evidence for the timeliness and importance of my study.

I present three guiding research questions that make important contributions to existing scholarship on the sociology of sexuality and religion. First, I evaluate how Judaism (more broadly) seeks to articulate and defend its stances on LGBT+ rights and experiences. Then, I consider the nuanced differences in how Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox branches of Judaism discuss LGBT+ rights and inclusion. Finally, I conclude in considering the overall level of support for LGBT+ inclusiveness across the three branches of Judaism. Based on the different ways in which these branches interpret the sacred texts and their history of inclusion (or exclusion) with regards to sexual minority status. I expect that the Reformed Movement will present the strongest case for LGBT+ inclusion (and illustrate how religion may operate as a means of social support) whereas the Orthodox Movement will be the least accepting of LGBT+ experiences and more readily illustrate how religious institutions function as a source of social control.

In answering these questions, I make a number of contributions to existing research. First and foremost, I answer a direct call for research to better understand the experience of LGBT+ Jews in the United States. Second, this research considers the intersection of two minority statuses (i.e., religious and sexual orientation) to better understand the challenges that LGBT+ Jews may experience in reconciling a Jewish and “gay” identity, as well as the strategies some may employ to do so successfully. Finally, analyses consider an important case study to illustrate that the association between religion and sexuality is complex, nuanced, and better represented by “shades of grey” than “black and white.”

## CHAPTER IV

### Data and Method

To answer these guiding questions, I conducted a content analyses of blog entries on a publicly available (and free) website (MyJewishLearning.com). This analytic strategy is advantageous for a number of reasons. However, prior to articulating the unique strengths of these data, it is important to discuss the website and its primary objective more broadly.

The MyJewishLearning.com website is intended to provide Jewish individuals a wealth of information needed to concerning the Jewish “way of life.” The website was launched in 2003, in collaboration with the 70 Faces Media – the largest nonprofit, nondenominational Jewish media organization in North America. The website strives to empower Jewish individuals in their “day-to-day” lives and offers thousands of blogs, videos, and other resources to help people navigate all aspects of Judaism. This website is uniquely appropriate to answer my guiding research questions as it: (1) strives to instruct users in how to live out their Jewish identities, (2) includes resources across each of the specific branches of Judaism that I consider, (3) is a well-known and frequently visited website, and (4) is easily accessible and minimally invasive<sup>1</sup>.

Prior to briefly acknowledging some of challenges associated with blog entries, I provide a bit more context concerning: (1) the target audience for this website, (2) the decision to focus on blog entries (as opposed to other website content like articles videos,

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<sup>1</sup> The study was classified as IRB exempt by the Sam Houston State University’s Institutional Review

Board (see Appendix A for documentation).

etc.), (3) the requirements to post blogs, and (4) potential for anonymity in blog authorship. First and foremost, this platform is intended to be nondenominational in its scope. Rather than having an affiliation to any one branch of Judaism, the website is designed to engage with Judaism more broadly. In some instances, content (like blogs) can clearly be tagged or attached to specific branch of Judaism (e.g., Orthodox, etc.), but in other cases, content might simultaneously address multiple branches of Judaism, or not clearly attach itself to any specific branch. When possible, I note the blog's affiliation (based on my second guiding question). In an effort to target my analyses, I limit my analyses to blog content.

Given the personal nature of blog posts, as opposed to published articles or news content, I consider them a nice compliment to the existing research on “coming out” narratives that have emphasized in-depth interviews. Given the website's status as public and free, anyone who sets up an account has the ability to post any type of content. There is not a ‘vetting’ process for entries and the space, is intended to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Many blog authors who chose to disclose specific information regarding their identity were rabbis, or local synagogue leaders, but this was not a requirement. For instance, some bloggers also present as congregants. Finally, bloggers have the option to post anonymously or reveal their personal identification. I expect the option to post anonymously reduce the social desirability bias to present oneself as either more devout or more tolerant. However, the anonymity that some (but not all bloggers) invoke does prevent me from being able to consider how one's position in either the Jewish or LGBT+ community may directly impact their experiences. Rather, my analyses can simply speak to the manner in which Judaism as a religion appears to engage with

LGBT+ issues, rights, and inclusivity. I return to some of the challenges that blog entries pose in my study's limitations and the implications for future research. In the immediate future, I turn to my sampling strategy.

### *Sampling Restrictions*

I began by systematically limiting my scope to *one* type of resource provided on the website, blog entries. Blog entries were the most appropriate unit of analyses for my approach because they, by definition as blogs, reflect the personal, lived experiences of individuals in the broader context of their Jewish religious community. Accordingly, a critical analyses of their content provides an in-depth look at how: (1) LGBT+ individuals, (2) rabbis, and (3) family/friends of LGBT+ individuals process and negotiate their daily experiences in a Jewish community. After, limiting my analyses to resource type, I turned my attention to topic. The website allows users to search a variety of different topics via dropdown menu items. One of these items/tags is "Gender & Sexuality." I use this as an initial sampling frame for relevant articles/entries (i.e., those addressing sexual orientation or transgender experiences<sup>2</sup>). Lastly, I strove to limit my entries to recent blog that were published in 2015 or later, given the Supreme Court's ruling in favor of marriage equality in 2015. After imposing these sampling restrictions, I

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<sup>2</sup> I recognize sexuality and gender should not be conflated. However, in many cases blog entries treated same-sex marriage and gender non-conformity synonymously. Accordingly, I have chosen to frame this around LGBT+ experiences more broadly.

employed convenience sampling to amass a dataset of 58 blog entries spanning each of the branches of Judaism<sup>3</sup>.

After compiling 58, relevant entries, I categorized each blog according to its tag that corresponded to a branch of Judaism (e.g., Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed) when possible. A substantial share of the entries, 57%, could not be clearly categorized as they referenced *multiple branches* of Judaism in a single blog entry.

### Coding Strategy

Based on prior research, I approached analyses with two general concepts in view, references to sacred texts and community. “Coming out” narratives emphasized the role of religious texts and challenges with navigating inclusion in a Jewish community as a sexual minority. Initially, I flagged every reference to the *Torah* (or other sacred texts) as these were the most straightforward. After first flagging references to sacred text, I then went back to examine each reference and categorize its interpretation as *either* literal *or* symbolic. The third, and final, round of coding for sacred texts considered the manner in which the text was cited – *either* in support of *or* opposition against LGBT+ experiences.

[Table One about here]

Analyses of community were more challenging for a number of reasons. For starters, references to religious community were not as explicit. Second, there was greater variation in the way in which religious community was discussed. Once again, I

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<sup>3</sup> Given the nature of this research project, I have no interest in the generalizability of my findings. Further, in coding my data, it appears these 58 observations present a reasonable picture of how various branches of Judaism incorporate discussions of both their sacred texts and religious communities in a discussion of LGBT+ experiences.



conducted an initial round of coding that flagged any passage in a blog that emphasized the role of community in some form or fashion. Given the nature of this task, and the subtlety with which some of the blogs referred to “community,” I conducted *three, separate rounds of reviews to identify any* reference to community. Then, I focused explicitly on each reference to community (across all blog entries), to identify recurring sub-themes for the manner in which community was addressed<sup>4</sup>, which resulted in the five, distinct sub-themes presented in Table 1. After identifying the themes and coding all 58 blog entries, I completed this process two separate times as well to ensure reliability in my coding strategy. After completing this process, each of blog entries has at least one reference to one of my relevant codes for *either* the sacred texts *or community*, which I consider further evidence of the soundness and saturation of my coding scheme.

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<sup>4</sup> This process was initially conducted under the supervision of my thesis advisor, for a two-hour, face-to-face meeting on “coding norms” with checks across multiple coders and blogs, as a safeguard for reliability in coding and analyses.

## CHAPTER V

### Analyses and Results

Analyses proceed in two steps. First, I document the frequency with which blog entries refer to either the sacred texts or specific aspects of community to address LGBT+ lived experiences. Table 2 consists of two distinct panels that correspond to the guiding codes for this analyses. Panel A documents the use of sacred texts throughout the blogs overall (and by branch of Judaism). Then Panel B highlights the various uses of “community” and the frequency in which these different communities are mentioned amongst the different branches of Judaism. Effectively, Table 2 provides a descriptive portrait of the different manners in which Judaism maps on to LGBT+ experiences.

[Table two about here]

Only fifteen blogs have at least one direct reference to the sacred texts. Stated differently, one in four blogs refer to the *Torah* or sacred laws when addressing LGBT+ experiences. References to the sacred texts are notably absent (as in nonexistent) in blogs that were tagged as Reformed. As many as 33%, of blogs that refer to multiple branches of Judaism explicitly refer to sacred texts. Perhaps more interesting, however, is the *way* in which the sacred texts are referenced. It is not surprising to see that symbolic interpretations of the sacred texts are more often used to support LGBT+ experiences whereas literal interpretations typically oppose greater rights and privileges for LGBT+ individuals. Overall, there are more blogs that apply a symbolic interpretation of the sacred texts (16% or 64% of those referencing the sacred texts) as a means support LGBT+ inclusion than any other use. However, for blogs that can be identified as *solely* Conservative or Orthodox, a greater share interprets the sacred text literally as a means to

oppose LGBT+ rights and privileges (more than 50% of those referencing the sacred texts in both instances), consistent with my expectations.

Panel B illustrates that references to community were *much* more common than the sacred texts in discussing LGBT+ experiences. Recall, I identified five sub-themes for community. Community as: (1) rigid and inflexible, (2) socially constructed, (3) a venue for activism, (4) a space for family and allies, and (5) online or virtual spaces. Every blog I analyzed has at least one reference to community as defined above, across each branch of Judaism. The most commonly cited reference to community concerned activism (with the exception of Orthodox Judaism). Community as a means for activism was followed closely by references that emphasized the social construction of community. More often than not, the least common reference to community concerned family and allies of LGBT+ individuals. However, this pattern did not hold for the Orthodox branch of Judaism, where community was *most often discussed* in terms of family and allies.

After quickly presenting a picture for *how* different branches address LGBT+ experiences (see Table 2), I turn my focus to a more nuanced discussion concerning the way in which blogs refer to multiple aspects of community. Many, but not all, blog entries simultaneously discuss different aspects of a religious community that may be particularly salient for LGBT+ individuals. One common pairing (across multiple blogs) emphasized two *seemingly contradictory* dimensions of community – community as rigid and inflexible and community as a social construct. This combination was particularly effective in drawing attention to a problematic norm (i.e., LGBT+ exclusion or prejudice) and lobbying for effective social change (e.g., constructing or reshaping Jewish, religious

communities to be more inclusive and less prejudice). Below I present two block quotes (including Orthodox and Reform branches to illustrate this point).

"Overall, we're not doing a good job of including Jews on the margins, whether by that we mean LGBT Jews, Jews of color, Jews without a lot of money, Jews with non-mainstream understanding of what's happening in Israel. That big queer lens a lot of us have, I dream would be able to be used to help the Jewish community step out of some of the narrowness we see - that lens could help us find our moral compass amidst the day-to-day."  
(Reform Movement)

"Coming out for me only served to reinforce the divide I felt between myself and my community. That gap became so wide that my family eventually felt forced to leave the community, and lost contact with all but a few people from the neighborhood that I considered my hometown. In coming out of the closet, I found my way back to religion, I found community and I found my passion. It was the silence that prompted me to cultivate a community inside my school of people who cared about the LGBT community." (Orthodox Movement)

Each of these blog excerpts effectively articulates how Judaism (not sexuality) has a degree of fluidity in its construction of community and key tenets. This emergent finding was quite unexpected and emphasizes the potential for a religious institution to focus as an agent of social change rather than an agent of social control. Note how both the Reform movement and Orthodox entry begins with a critique of how Judaism has historically functioned as a rigid and exclusive community denying person's full

inclusion on the premise of sexual minority status. However, the narrative shifts to emphasize that Judaism does not have to operate in this manner and can, instead, be revised to create a community of inclusion. Further, this pattern emerged across Reformed and Orthodox branches of Judaism, which suggests such ideas are being circulated in the most and least conservative religious communities.

This narrative, when coupled with the most commonly cited reference to Jewish community as a venue for change, suggests that the representation of Judaism through blog excerpts on a high profile website emphasize the potential for religious institutions to function as a source of social support empowering LGBT+ persons to “come out” more readily than as a source of social control to limit and restrict sexual encounters. Consider the blog excerpts below that emphasizes the role of a Jewish community to serve as a venue for social change and social support to empower young people in their own coming out narratives.

“I was an intern at a LGBTQ youth organization where I worked with some incredibly talented LGBTQ high schoolers. Through this experience I was able to witness the power of youth-led movements and also the fierceness of LGBTQ young people. Their clarity and conviction in their own identities helped me to begin my own coming out journey.”  
(Unassigned)

“We were a small but uniquely qualified group of volunteers. I remember four full-time Jewish educators, a retired rabbi and his wife (whos daughter is a lesbian), and Keshet’s administrator (then the only staff person other than our

executive director), splitting our time between designing lessons and strategizing around how to get in the door at synagogue schools. Involved in Keshet and now sat on their Safe Schools Committee, working with volunteers to help make Hebrew Schools better for LGBT kids.” (Conservative)

“Jewish Queer Youth, or JQY, was founded in 2001 and acts as a support group and advocacy group for LGBTQ Jews, with a particular emphasis on Orthodox Youth. JQY helped organize a conference that brought together Orthodox rabbis and mental health professionals to talk about homosexuality in what is believed to have been the first public discussion of its kind.” (Orthodox)

The amount of times that we see community being mentioned in these blogs show that the sense of community is very important to Jewish groups amongst all different branches of Judaism. Not all forms of community were the same however, community was still prevalent amongst all of the blog entries that were studied.

## CHAPTER VI

### Discussion and Implications

In spite of Whitehead's (2010) assertion that religious institutions in the United States remain a critical factor in understanding our views on family life, a noteworthy religious denomination has received minimal attention. Schnoor (2006) has drawn attention to this oversight to emphasize that very little empirical work has considered the linkages between Judaism and sexuality in the United States. This oversight is problematic as consideration of Judaism allows the research to facilitate a more nuanced discussion of religious institutions, given historical differences in Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox branches of Judaism. Based on this context, I make noteworthy contributions to existing work. At its core, this study evaluated how Judaism stands for or against LGBT+ rights and experiences.

Perhaps surprisingly, I find greater emphasis on Judaism as a means of social support than social control. I was expecting that the interpretation of the Torah would have been taken more literal thus having individuals form negative views of the LGBT+ community. This suggests that Judaism operates somewhat distinctively from Christianity, which has historically presented more as an opponent to LGBT+ inclusion and same-sex marriage, in spite of both religions use of the Hebrew Bible. While this finding may have been somewhat surprising, it does align with research that has illustrated individuals are becoming more liberal in their adherence to religious doctrine – choosing, rather, to select the aspects of a religion that support or align with their personal preferences (see Ammerman 2010). Moreover, McQueeney's (2009) consideration of the sexuality, Christianity, and the Deep South indicated a similar

finding; that religious institutions are adapting to create a safe, inclusive space for LGBT+ congregants. When possible, I took an in-depth look at the differences and similarities found across the multiple branches of Judaism. In short, I found that while certain patterns were more common across various branches, none of the branches could be clearly discussed in terms of its “black and white” support for (or animosity against) LGBT+ rights and inclusion. Finally my study examined the different ways in which Judaism informed and defended its stance pertaining to LGBT+ experiences, inclusion, and rights. References to Jewish community played a considerably larger role in discourse on sexuality than the sacred texts. Moreover, five distinct sub-themes of community (i.e., “as rigid and inflexible,” “flexible and socially constructed,” “a venue for social change and inclusion,” “as it pertains to family and allies,” and “virtual or online”) were quite common across many of the blog entries. More often than not, the sacred texts were interpreted in a symbolic fashion to lobby for greater inclusivity of LGBT+ persons, and Jewish communities were most often discussed as a venue for social change, as I have already demonstrated.

In spite of these important contributions, my analyses have a few limitations. Rather than speaking to a generalizable discussion of the Judaism as a social institution, I have opted to exploit a very specific data source, personal blog entries that were uploaded to MyJewishlearning.com. Accordingly, I cannot speak comprehensively to each branch of Judaism’s stance. Rather, my analyses are limited to highlighting how individuals may experience the intersection of sexual minority status and Jewish identity. Further, by only using one major website, my sample size was limited to 58 blogs, many of which could not be categorized as a single, branch of Judaism. This at times, made discussions



of distinctions across branches more challenging. Statistically speaking, both my non-random sampling technique and smaller sample size prevented me from conducting statistical tests for significant differences across the different branches. Based on the website's platform (and number of relevant cases). Lastly, given the flexibility with authorship of blogs, I did not have consistent information regarding authors' genders, sexual orientations, positions in Judaism (e.g., congregant vs. rabbi, etc.), which could have certainly provided a more comprehensive understanding of each entry's perspective and its implications for the association between religion and sexuality.

In spite of these limitations, my analyses drew attention to a number of important factors and raise implications for both practice and future research. In terms of practice, an additional theme that I did not emphasize concerned the health and well-being of LGBTQ persons as a central priority for rabbis and synagogues to consider. Much of the emphasis on the Jewish community as a venue for social change was framed around a desire to make sure that LGBT+ individuals have a healthy and safe space to practice their religious faith. Many synagogues have taken great strides for change, however, many others have not. Given stark differences in each branch's guidelines, rules, and interpretation the sacred texts, it is unlikely that a singular Jewish experience will emerge. However, these findings are somewhat optimistic in that *despite* these differences, each branch of Judaism was represented in lobbying for greater acceptance for LGBT+ individuals. My findings also raise important questions moving forward. For instance, considerations of similar guiding research questions in other places around the world would yield important insights. Separately, a different approach that could explicitly link a person's statuses with their views (such as in-depth interviews) would

mark an important next step in this line of study. Finally, an effort to situate the evidence that I found in support of Judaism as a key factor of social support rather than control in an historical context would make important contributions to this body of work as well.

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## APPENDIX A

Table 1. Coding Schemes Emergent BLOG Entries Regarding Marriage Equality and Sexual Minority Status

Panel A: Use of Sacred Texts		
<i>Object</i>	<i>Interpretative Approach</i>	<i>Stance</i>
Torah and sacred texts	Literal or Symbolic	Opponent or Proponent (advocate)
Panel B: References to Community		
<i>Community as...</i>	<i>Conceptual Definition</i>	<i>Operational Definitions by Way of Examples</i>

Rigid and inflexible

Refer to Jewish communities as heavily structured, rigid, and a means to exercise social control.

“We must do everything possible to ensure that the seven Noahide laws are observed. If this can be accomplished through force or through other kinder and more peaceful means through explain to non-Jews that they should accept God’s wishes [we should do so] ... since that is what God commanded Moses our teacher”

“Laws create only the possibility of justice, justice can only be realized fully through the will of those who carry out the laws. Moses made “people consider themselves cursed for doing wrong ... to assure that they will, under pressure find the inner strength to do right.”



Socially constructed	Refer to Jewish (and at time Jewish LGBTQ Communities) defined as flexible with the potential to build community around shared expectations, values, and beliefs.	<p>“As Jews we must seek out the compassionate side of God and not the punitive one. Ours is not a God who gives people with polio, cancer, or AIDS as a punishment. Let us understand tzara’ at as a timeless warning against cruel and evil speech and action”</p> <p>“We have a long history of common sensibility born from our outlaw days as a secret society. This culture we need to protect, celebrate and hand down to our youngsters”</p>
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Table 1. Coding Schemes (continued)

<i>Community as...</i>	<i>Conceptual Definition</i>	<i>Operational Definitions by Way of Examples</i>
A venue for activism and inclusion	Refers to the Jewish community as one that should strive to lobby for political change or become more inclusive of LGBTQ individuals.	<p>“... organizations and support groups exist for gay Jews who are interested in maintaining a traditional Jewish lifestyle.”</p> <p>“Many Jewish institutions ...have begun taking steps to accommodate and welcome transgender Jews.”</p>

Online communities	Emphasizes the importance of virtual Jewish communities for LGBTQ individuals.	<p>“The anonymity provided by the Internet has been a godsend to Orthodox gays... questions can be asked without fear of exposure”</p> <p>“Take your mental health seriously ...look for media that you see yourself reflected in so you don’t feel alone. Facebook had just been launched and it basically consisted of only personal profiles and interest groups.”</p>
Pertaining to family/allies	Focuses on family members and allies of LGBTQ individuals within the Jewish community.	<p>“The weekend brought together thirty-nine [<i>Jewish</i>] parents from various cities, all seeking support and a sense of community”</p> <p>“Jews and their families draws of inclusion and acceptance of others. Advocacy is critical as we protect and cherish the ones we love dearly”</p>

Table 2. Descriptive Findings, overall and by Branch of Judaism

	<i>All BLOG Entries</i> (n = 58)		<i>Unassigned</i> (n = 33)		<i>Reformed</i> (n = 2)		<i>Conservative</i> (n = 7)		<i>Orthodox</i> (n = 16)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Use of Sacred Texts</b>	15	25%	11	33%	0	0.0%	2	28%	2	12%
Literal as opponent	5	9%	2	6%	0	0%	2	28%	1	6%
Literal as proponent	1	2%	1	3%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Symbolic as opponent	1	2%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	6%
Symbolic as proponent	9	16%	8	24%	0	0%	1	14%	0	0%
<b>Community</b>	58	100%	33	100%	2	100%	7	100%	16	100%
Rigid and inflexible	12	20%	7	21%	1	50%	1	14%	3	18%
Socially constructed	16	27%	10	30%	1	50%	2	28%	3	18%

Venue for activism	20	34%	11	33%	0	0%	5	71%	4	22%
Family and allies	10	17%	4	12%	0	0%	1	14%	5	31%
Online	8	13%	5	12%	0	0%	1	14%	2	12%

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## APPENDIX B

### IRB Exempt Status

TO: Benjamin McKey James Stykes

FROM: SHSU IRB

PROJECT TITLE: Acceptance: Jewish Views on Homosexuality through the lens of Orthodox, Conservative & Reform Branches.

PROTOCOL #: IRB-2019-131

SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial

ACTION: No Human Subjects Research

DECISION DATE: May 17, 2019

This letter is provided in response to your IRB request regarding human subjects involvement in your proposed research titled, "Acceptance: Jewish Views on Homosexuality through the lens of Orthodox, Conservative & Reform Branches. (IRB #IRB-2019-131)." Please note the following recommendation regarding ethical conduct of research:

Notes to the Researchers: **Although it has been determined that this study does not require oversight by SHSU's IRB, because the Office of Research & Sponsored Programs is charged with ensuring that all research is conducted in an ethical manner, it is the recommendation of the IRB that you closely follow the terms and conditions of the My Jewish Learning website regarding the possible re-using of any content as described at this link: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/terms-use-re-using-content/>.**

This study does not appear to fit the regulatory definition of human subjects research. The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations 45 CFR 46.102(D), defines research as "a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge." Thus, this study does not require IRB oversight as specified in DHHS regulations 45 CFR 46, subpart A.

**This determination means that there are no restrictions on your research and you may proceed with your study without IRB oversight.** If I need to provide further information, please let me know.

Donna M. Desforges, Ph.D.

Chair, Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects

PHSC-IRB

## VITA

### **Benjamin J. McKey**

#### **EDUCATION**

Masters of Arts student in *Sociology* at Sam Houston State University, August 2013- May 2020. Thesis title: “Acceptance: Jewish Views on Homosexuality Through the Lens of Orthodox, Conservative & Reform Branches.”

Bachelors of Arts (December 2012) in *Geography*, Florida International University, Miami, Florida.

#### **ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT**

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of *Sociology*, Sam Houston State University, August 2018-December 2018. Responsibilities included: assisting the professor with the preparation and presentation of undergraduate sociology course, grading and tutoring