Acceptance, Empowerment, and Change: The Experiences of LGBTQ Jewish Women at Camp Ramah and Beyond

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ACCEPANCE, EMPOWERMENT, AND CHANGE: THE EXPERIENCES OF LGBTQ JEWISH WOMEN AT CAMP RAMAH AND BEYOND

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Abstract

The overlap between being Jewish, LGBTQ, and a woman has not been well studied, and the nuances of these intersecting identities have often been overlooked. Focusing on these intersections, my research examines a group of LGBTQ Jewish women linked by their experiences with one Jewish summer camping network, Camp Ramah, focusing on how they experienced inclusion or exclusion and empowerment or disempowerment. Those I interviewed all had communities they felt fully accepted in, and all felt that Judaism was compatible with their sexuality or gender identity; however, participants did face discrimination at Ramah and in the wider Jewish community. At Ramah, they experienced some discomfort from their peers about their sexuality, and in the wider Jewish community, their sexuality was not acknowledged. Particularly in Orthodox spaces, they also faced discrimination because of their gender. Despite these experiences of discrimination, the participants in my study felt generally accepted in Jewish communities, empowered to change tradition, and able to shape Jewish communities to become even more accepting and inclusive. My research demonstrates how the Conservative movement and the Ramah Camping Movement have become more accepting of LGBTQ Jews and Jewish women, while also showing how those shaped by Conservative movement institutions are now seeking to create more welcoming and diverse communities.

Introduction

Jewish feminists have long recognized that community is an integral part of Judaism. The creation of spaces where any Jew can be fully themselves and where healthy interpersonal relationships can flourish has been an important part of Jewish feminist activism that has led to the transformation of Jewish communities. As Judith Plaskow has argued, the creation of a community of sisterhood is essential for dismantling patriarchy; Jewish communities where women can share their experiences and recognize both commonalities and differences among themselves support individuals to grow beyond their perceived limits and to change Judaism and the secular world.¹ Plaskow has pointed out a similar need for community among

LGBTQ Jews, arguing that the Jewish community needs to challenge the status quo that has categorized LGBTQ people as undesirable and unwelcome in community.\(^2\)

The difficulties that LGBTQ Jews and Jewish women face often stem from the same source and therefore require similar solutions.\(^3\) Jewish feminists in general, and LGBTQ Jews in particular, have especially worked to create welcoming communities, including synagogues and activist organizations. These communities have created spaces where women and queer Jews could be accepted and welcomed and could be fully themselves. LGBTQ Jewish women regularly deal with one or both of their identities being ignored in the communities to which they belong. Feminist organizations may gloss over Judaism or sexuality, and LGBTQ organizations may ignore the difficulties around being a woman. The overlap between being a Jewish woman and being an LGBTQ Jew is infrequently studied and is often overlooked in Jewish communities.

Previous research on LGBTQ Jews, as well as anthologies of personal essays, often discuss the difficulty that queer Jews have in finding a community that accepts them, as well as the difficulty that many queer Jews have had with self-acceptance. Anthologies of LGBTQ Jewish experiences published in the late twentieth century—such as *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (1982, 1989)—often include stories that involve many years of working toward self-acceptance and acceptance in communities. For example, Evelyn Torton Beck, a Jewish lesbian and feminist, told the story in *Nice Jewish Girls* of her journey to accepting her sexuality, which took many years and was not a linear progression.\(^4\) Even after she accepted herself as a lesbian, she was still not welcoming of her daughter coming out as a lesbian.\(^5\) The process of coming to terms with herself and her sexuality as well as her daughter’s sexuality was long and fraught with complications.

In one 2006 study, sociologist Randal Schnoor, one of the earlier scholars to research LGBTQ Jews, found that gay Jews tended to choose one of four options: embracing a traditional Jewish lifestyle and repressing their sexualities; embracing a gay lifestyle and mostly ignoring their Judaism; switching between the two, compartmentalizing; or integrating the two identities together successfully.\(^6\) Overall, Schnoor found that many of the gay Jews he interviewed felt alienated from Jewish community and had fraught relationships with their Jewish identity.\(^7\) He also noticed that the participants in his study who managed to integrate their gay and Jewish

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\(^7\) Schnoor, 15.
identities were generally younger and that many found LGBTQ synagogues or other similar organizations that helped them combine the two parts of their lives.\textsuperscript{8}

Elisa Abes, who conducted a long-term study on two Jewish lesbians focusing on their experience as college students (ages 18–25), demonstrated in a 2011 article how the participants initially kept their Jewish and lesbian identities separate, considered how to reconcile sexuality and Judaism, found community, and integrated their separate identities into a connected, holistic identity.\textsuperscript{9} Although the two participants she interviewed, Leah and Beth, never believed that their Jewish and queer identities were incompatible, Beth did leave the Conservative movement in favor of the Reform movement because she did not believe the Conservative movement could accept her sexuality.\textsuperscript{10} Both Leah and Beth discussed how their Jewish identity helped them accept their sexuality, as they already experienced a feeling of difference due to being Jewish.\textsuperscript{11} Originally, they considered their identities as lesbian and Jew to be separate but over time integrated them into facets of their overall identities.\textsuperscript{12} One key point of Abes’s study to consider is that “both Leah and Beth were comfortable identifying as Reform” but that “Jews affiliated with more traditionally observant movements such as Orthodoxy often struggle to acknowledge their lesbian identity in the face of religious doctrine.”\textsuperscript{13}

Historically, LGBTQ Jewish women have often been overlooked or ignored in traditional Jewish literature. The verses in the Torah that have been the basis for Jewish arguments against homosexuality, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, do not mention women. The earliest prohibition of lesbian marriage is found in the rabbinic midrash Sifra, which forbids imitation of the Egyptians, including the same-sex marriage practices of the Egyptians.\textsuperscript{14} The only explicit Talmudic discussion of sexual contact between two women says that a woman who has had sex with another woman is still acceptable for marriage, essentially declaring that sex between two women is not actually sex and should not be a major concern.\textsuperscript{15} Some Jewish feminists and LGBTQ activists have begun to reinterpret those sections of text in a more inclusive manner.\textsuperscript{16} Others, including Plaskow, argue that authority stems from the community and not from the text, so community can be changed to be more welcoming, accepting, and diverse.\textsuperscript{17} Even so, it is still difficult for LGBTQ Jewish women to find a place that

\textsuperscript{8} Schnoor, 16.
\textsuperscript{9} Abes, “Exploring the Relationship.”
\textsuperscript{10} Abes, 217.
\textsuperscript{11} Abes, 213, 217.
\textsuperscript{12} Abes, 221.
\textsuperscript{13} Abes, 222.
\textsuperscript{14} Sifra, Acharei Mot, 8.8.
\textsuperscript{15} Sienna, \textit{A Rainbow Thread}, 39.
\textsuperscript{16} Alpert, “In God’s Image,” 61–70.
\textsuperscript{17} Plaskow, \textit{The Coming of Lilith}, 124–27.
celebrates all parts of their identity, as exclusion happens on multiple levels.\textsuperscript{18} LGBTQ Jews may find that their sexuality or their Jewish identity is ignored in feminist spaces, and those struggling to be accepted as women in their fields may feel the need to hide their sexuality to avoid facing more adversity.\textsuperscript{19} Belonging to two different, frequently ignored groups within Judaism can easily exacerbate feelings of invisibility and difficulty finding a welcoming and accepting community.

My research focuses on LGBTQ women in one network of Jewish communities where women—LGBTQ women in particular—have not always been accepted: the Camp Ramah network, affiliated with the Jewish community’s Conservative movement. The Ramah Camping Movement includes affiliated camps across the United States (e.g., Ramah Darom in Clayton, Georgia; Ramah Poconos in Lakewood, Pennsylvania; and Ramah Berkshires in Wingdale, New York), Canada, and Israel.\textsuperscript{20} Standard Ramah overnight camps accept campers in fourth to tenth grades, and there are some specialized programs tailored to younger campers.\textsuperscript{21}

Gaining equality for women in the Conservative Jewish community happened in multiple stages over many years. Women were first counted as part of a minyan in 1973 and were not allowed to be ordained as rabbis until 1983, with the first female rabbi being ordained in 1985.\textsuperscript{22} Other rulings, including but not limited to women being allowed to serve as witnesses, lead services, and wear tefillin, were also announced by the rabbinical association in the following years.\textsuperscript{23} Though Conservative movement leaders have described the movement as gender egalitarian for several decades, it was only in 2014 that the movement’s rabbinical association approved a responsum\textsuperscript{24} declaring that women were fully and equally obligated to perform mitzvot they had historically been exempt from, stating that the historical exemption stemmed from women’s subservient place in past Jewish society. Because women are now recognized as equal to men, women are no longer exempt from performing certain mitzvot.\textsuperscript{25}

The Conservative movement’s rabbinical association first announced that it would work for equal rights for gays and lesbians in 1990.\textsuperscript{26} In 2006, the association approved a responsum that normalized the status of homosexual individuals and allowed sexual acts between same-sex couples except for anal sex between two men.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{18} Alpert, Elwell, and Idelson, \textit{Lesbian Rabbis}, 14–16.
\textsuperscript{20} Camp Ramah, “About Camp Ramah.”
\textsuperscript{21} Ramah Darom, “FAQ About Ramah Darom.”
\textsuperscript{22} Dorff, \textit{Modern Conservative Judaism}, 130, 144.
\textsuperscript{23} Dorff, 144–45.
\textsuperscript{24} A written reply by a rabbi or Talmudic scholar on the matter of Jewish Law.
\textsuperscript{25} Barmash, “Women and Mitzvot.”
\textsuperscript{26} Dorff, \textit{Modern Conservative Judaism}, 288–90.
\textsuperscript{27} Dorff, Nevins, and Reisner, “Homosexuality, Human Dignity, and Halakha.”
The responsum did not comment on gay marriage but did explicitly forbid bisexuals from engaging in same-sex activity, as the authors considered heterosexual relationships the ideal.\textsuperscript{28} In 2011, the rabbinical association extended its previous declarations to include bisexual and transgender individuals, and in 2016, the association approved a historic resolution affirming the rights of transgender and nonbinary individuals.\textsuperscript{29} The Conservative movement today has a welcoming stance on LGBTQ Jews, but actual acceptance frequently varies from synagogue to synagogue and rabbi to rabbi. Ramah camps are similar to synagogues belonging to the movement: how egalitarian and how accepting any camp is depends on multiple factors and is not guaranteed by the camp belonging to the Conservative movement.

I chose to study Ramah alumni because of my personal experiences at Camp Ramah Darom, the strong commitment to community that Ramah fosters, and the long-term connection to Judaism that Ramah creates. I know from my own experiences the kind of community and long-term connections that Ramah can provide, and I wanted to focus on community, how it can go right, and how it can go wrong. One of the Ramah Camping Movement’s goals is to help its campers grow socially and create long-term relationships. The social aspects of Ramah camps are what tend to be retained long-term, and Ramah camps generally have a healthy social atmosphere, with a minimal amount of bullying and other social issues.\textsuperscript{30} Another goal of the Ramah Camping Movement is to strengthen Jewish identity and create a lifelong connection to Judaism.\textsuperscript{31} A study of long-term Jewish involvement in Ramah alumni found that those who went to Ramah camps tended to continue practicing Judaism and stayed involved in Jewish community.\textsuperscript{32} I wanted to talk to LGBTQ women who were involved in Jewish community and had a strong sense of their Jewish identity, and Ramah alumni filled that criteria.

Methods

For this study, I interviewed eleven individuals, soliciting participation by snowball sampling: I began with individuals I knew personally, and at the end of all but the last interview, I asked the participants if they knew anyone else who was a suitable subject and might be willing to be interviewed. All of my participants were between the ages of 18 and 20 and had attended a Ramah camp for at least one summer. Almost all of the participants attended either Ramah Darom or Ramah Poconos, with the exception of one individual, who attended Ramah Berkshires as a camper and spent one year on staff at Ramah Poconos. Nine of the eleven participants identified as

\textsuperscript{28} Dorff, Nevins, and Reisner, 3, 19–20.
\textsuperscript{29} Human Rights Campaign, “Stances of Faiths on LGBTQ Issues.”
\textsuperscript{30} Kress and Ben-Avie, “Social Climate at Ramah.”
\textsuperscript{31} Camp Ramah, “About Camp Ramah.”
\textsuperscript{32} Cohen, “The Alumni of Ramah Camps.”
women; one identified as nonbinary (they/them); and one identified as agender (they/them, she/her, he/him). The nonbinary and agender participants were either regularly grouped with women while at Ramah or identified as women during their time attending the camp.

I used a semistructured interview format, with a set list and order of questions that I deviated from to pursue lines of inquiry that came up during the interviews. I asked about the participants’ experience at Ramah, their experiences in Jewish community, and their impressions of Jewish tradition, among other topics. Questions included the following:

- Looking back on your experiences at Ramah, what are your impressions of Ramah’s approach to gender? What are your impressions of Ramah’s approach to sexuality?
- Are there any ways in which Ramah could do better with respect to issues of gender or sexuality?
- How important is it to you that all aspects of your identity are recognized and accepted by any community you participate in?
- What aspects of Jewish tradition do you find uncomfortable?
- Have you had experiences with aspects of Jewish tradition that were disparaging toward women or LGBTQ people? Did you ever have experiences like that at Ramah?
- Who do you think has the authority to change Jewish tradition?

To protect the personal information and confidentiality of the interview participants, all names used here are aliases.

Community and Connections at Ramah

At Ramah, participants had a mix of experiences regarding gender and sexuality, ranging from near-complete acceptance to experiences marked by discrimination. Community connections, personal relationships, and the interactions with other campers were crucial to their Ramah experiences; a positive experience with community was integral to a positive overall experience. Participants reported that relationships formed at Ramah tended to be longer-lasting, closer, and more able to withstand periods without contact. When talking about her friends from Ramah, Lily, who was a camper for three years and a staff member for one year, explained, “Despite that distance for ten months of a year, those are some of the closest friendships and relationships that I’ve had in my entire life, [despite] having only known these people for two months at a time for a few years. It goes to show how important these friendships have been to me.”

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33 Interview 9, April 28, 2020.
Ramah is excellent at fostering long-term connections between people and creating a common sense of identity that can last for years even if not purposefully maintained. These long-term interpersonal connections are a large part of what helps Ramah create long-term connections to Judaism. Gracie, who attended Ramah Darom for four years, explained that at Ramah, “people in general come together and sing the same words, even though we’re from different places. To know that people with such different backgrounds… [are] able to have the same connections. It’s just really inspiring. It makes you want to continue to feel a part of that community.” Such discussions of the importance of community at Ramah make sense in light of the ways that most participants discussed the importance of community in their lives. Many interviewees highlighted the importance of community in multiple parts of their lives, and Ramah was frequently described as a place where participants felt especially accepted. A number of participants also grew up in or had affiliations with Orthodox communities, however, and they often contrasted feelings of acceptance at Ramah with experiences of alienation in Orthodox communities.

Gender Dynamics at Ramah and Beyond

Most participants did not have any concerns about gender dynamics at Camp Ramah. Participants reported feeling comfortable in groups of any gender makeup, with the determining factor in how safe they felt being if their closer friends were in the group. Rachel, a nineteen-year-old bisexual, talked about how “I had groups of people I would flock to depending on how the groups were set up… There were things I felt more comfortable saying [in smaller groups] than I did with everyone, but that was just because that’s a personal thing because I’ve got… some people in the [larger group] I didn’t like expressing myself to.”

Most other issues with group makeup were similarly linked with social anxiety or personal relationships, and gender came into play only because small-group activities at Ramah are often gender-segregated. With regard to the treatment of males and females, no participants noticed or remembered any particular religious discrimination or uncomfortable traditions regarding gender. In their experience, Ramah wholeheartedly embraced the gender egalitarianism affirmed by Conservative movement leadership; however, when specifically prompted to talk about her treatment as a woman at Ramah, Gracie explained that the boys in her age group, sometimes even the counselors, behaved very poorly toward the girls and it was not addressed properly. Anna, who dealt with a lack of religious egalitarianism in her home community, explained that while structured religious activities at Ramah were egalitarian and felt comfortable, some personal interactions and relationships at Ramah were nonetheless affected by sexism: “I think that even though it’s a religiously

34 Interview 6, April 23, 2020.
egalitarian place, it still suffered from secular misogyny.\textsuperscript{36} Still, in general, participants had few concerns about gender at Ramah.

When participants spoke of discomfort with gender roles in Jewish communities, they pointed not to Ramah but to practices found within Orthodox settings. The concerns that they raised about feeling uncomfortable and sidelined in community were the sorts of concerns that many Jewish feminist activists, including Rachel Adler and Judith Plaskow, have discussed, relating to how Orthodox Jewish law and tradition are based around the idea of women as the Other.\textsuperscript{37} When I asked them about traditions that bothered them, almost every participant spoke of either Orthodox gender roles or the presence of a \textit{mechitzah}, a physical barrier separating women from male prayer spaces. Sarah, whose family goes to Orthodox services semiregularly, was vocal about feeling uncomfortable in places where men and women are divided for prayer. As she put it:

I don’t feel uncomfortable as a queer Jewish woman, I feel uncomfortable . . . just feeling a little like a second-class citizen and having a dress code, having to wear skirts . . . covering your knees, having to wear shirts past your elbows, and . . . sitting in the back, or up in a balcony when you’re in an Orthodox Jewish synagogue, I just, I hate it, and at all those times I feel like I just want to rebel.\textsuperscript{38}

For Sarah, the experience of divided prayer was incredibly uncomfortable, making her feel as though she did not belong in the community and that she was diminished, lesser. Sarah felt wronged and angry because of this treatment, as she knew she should be allowed to participate fully in the community, a model of participation that she experienced at Ramah.

Sasha, whose family attended a Chabad synagogue, shared her experience with the difference in perceptions of that community between her and her dad. She noticed that the men prayed and were “having a good time [while] the women are watching children. . . . [My dad] didn’t understand my experiences. . . . Our experiences within that community were very different.”\textsuperscript{39} The gap between the experiences of men and women was noticed by multiple participants, all with references to Orthodox communities.

Some participants with experiences in Orthodox communities also noted that the standard set of expectations for Jewish women in those communities was difficult to handle. Coming to terms with the gap between what you desire and what the community expects you to be is very difficult. Anna relayed her frustrating experiences growing up in an Orthodox community:

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\textsuperscript{36} Interview 11, May 20, 2020.
\textsuperscript{37} Adler, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There”; Plaskow, “The Right Question Is Theological.”
\textsuperscript{38} Interview 1, April 3, 2020.
\textsuperscript{39} Interview 4, April 8, 2020.
As someone who wants to be considered smart and strong-willed and wants to have the same access that men would have, the Orthodox understanding that the laws don’t really allow for that was really difficult. . . . The idea of “This is what a Jewish woman looks like, this is what I’m going to be, and this is the ideal” certainly is not nearly as bad as it used to be, but it still can be very frustrating.  

Anna had similar issues as Sarah: the feeling of not being allowed full access to the community, and of separation and discomfort. Like Sarah, Anna also believed that she should be allowed full access as herself while living her life the way she wanted to live it. In contrast to the near-universal complaints about being a woman in the Orthodox Jewish community, the difficulties with gender at Ramah were very minimal. At Ramah, binary gender was not an issue that caused difficulty fitting into community.

Those outside the gender binary did, however, raise additional concerns regarding gender at Ramah. Ramah frequently has gender-segregated activities, and all campers sleep in gender-segregated bunks or large communal living areas. Both campers and staff live together in a bunk, and the individuals who live together in a bunk also tend to have camp activities together. With that frequent gender division, it can be difficult for a nonbinary individual to feel comfortable and fully accepted. Ellie, who is nonbinary, explained how gender divisions at Ramah made things uncomfortable:

There were points where it was awkward because I was in a girls’ bunk. I was a CIT for girls’ bunk. I lived in a girls’ bunk this past summer when I was working, as a live-in [counselor]. And that was kind of a sticking point, I’d say. But then again, it was just me, so there’s nothing that they could have done to make an accommodation because you can’t really accommodate one person.

While Ellie felt discomfort regarding Ramah’s handling of their situation, they felt it was unfair to ask for change for just one person. In contrast, Anna, who has a nonbinary family member, argued that as more people come out as nonbinary and it becomes a more common part of living in this world, Ramah needs to change to keep up with the times and consider having gender-neutral bunks. Anna felt empowered to change the way Ramah handles nonbinary individuals and was certain that Ramah should change for them because nonbinary individuals must have a place in community.

41 Interview 7, April 26, 2020. CIT: counselor in training.
Experiences with Sexuality in Ramah Communities

The responses with regard to community at Ramah and sexuality generally fell into two camps. The most meaningful and memorable parts of Ramah were linked to community and how accepted the participants felt in the community at Ramah. About half of the participants described Ramah as incredibly welcoming and accepting, and as an excellent place to explore their sexuality. Sasha, a queer woman who was out at Ramah, was one of them, saying,

Without my amazingly supportive friends from Ramah, some of whom are also members of the LGBTQ community, I can’t say that I would have figured [my sexuality] out that quickly. Just having a supportive community of people who loved me was really, really great. And yeah, I guess… just figuring out these parts of myself within the Jewish community sort of helped me to tie both of those identities together.\(^{42}\)

Sasha felt fully accepted in Ramah’s community and never had doubts that she belonged there or that she could fully be herself there. Not every participant who found a welcoming community at Ramah was quite as effusive about their friends from Ramah helping them discover themselves, but in general, they considered Ramah a place of support and had no doubt that they would be accepted at Ramah. Gracie, for example, throughout my interview with her frequently referenced Ramah as one of the communities she felt safest and most welcome in. “I think Ramah was technically the first place I actually came out,” she told me. “I remember having some struggles at home [with being] accepted…. [A] Ramah counselor… talked to me before I went home, and he really helped me…. [Later, he] continued to meet with me, give me resources, and that’s what Ramah did for me. And I’m so thankful for that.”\(^{43}\) The staff and campers at Ramah created a supportive community that Gracie could rely on, and a place where she could feel safe and accepted. Gracie felt welcomed and accepted at Ramah, took that to be standard for what community should offer, and recognized the discrimination she faced elsewhere as the unusual situation. Gracie was confident that she belonged at Ramah and could belong in other Jewish communities elsewhere.

In contrast, some participants found a few close, supportive friends at Ramah but faced discrimination from the rest of their age group. Nora, a lesbian from Georgia, told me that her sexuality and coming out at Ramah “changed some of the interactions with other people at camp who weren’t necessarily outwardly homophobic but just kind of didn’t get certain things”\(^{44}\) and made previously easy social interaction awkward and mildly uncomfortable. The discrimination that Nora and others faced was generally mild, and not significant enough that they felt the staff should have done

\(^{42}\) Interview 4, May 8, 2020.
\(^{43}\) Interview 6, April 23, 2020.
\(^{44}\) Interview 8, April 26, 2020.
anything, but it still made Ramah feel less safe and comfortable. Interestingly, no matter their experiences with community at Ramah, all but one participant mentioned that they would not hide their sexuality at Ramah if they returned. Nora and the other participants with experiences like hers did not find Ramah to be the safe and welcoming place that it has the potential to be, but they felt that they could belong there, and they returned for multiple years as campers and staff members. They believed they had a place in Ramah’s community and that they could make the community a better one.

A number of the participants mentioned that they would have appreciated having facilitated discussions about sexuality at Ramah, rather than just talking about it on their own. Ramah already holds discussions about a variety of topics, including those that are controversial or very personal, and it would be welcome for staff to encourage campers to discuss sexuality and gender. Lily, who attended Ramah Poconos, said, “I think… communication is one of the biggest things, and not only… between the staff and the campers but also just to make sure that dialogue from camper to camper is respectful and open.”45 Discussions at Ramah happen in different groups and have different levels of staff involvement. Activities held with only a camper’s bunk tend to be personal, and while the counselors provide the space and structure to have the discussion, the content is mostly based on the campers. The goal there tends to be creating community and friendships, and getting to know other campers better. Other discussions involve the whole age group, with topics selected more carefully by the counselors. Sometimes an expert is brought in and the discussion will be less personal, more guided, and more focused on issues in the wider world and the Jewish community. The goal of those discussions is generally to increase the campers’ knowledge and give them multiple perspectives on a single issue. Participants suggested that both types of discussions would be helpful, with the more intimate discussions giving LGBTQ campers the opportunity but not the obligation to talk about themselves in a safe space and the larger group discussions teaching every camper about the LGBTQ Jewish community.

One of the participants (Emily), however, raised the point that Ramah is in part an early education facility and that although younger children should not be prevented from learning about the LGBTQ community, they may be too young to discuss these topics with the gravity the topics deserve, though in the older age groups, discussing different sexualities is certainly appropriate and relevant. Anna and Ellie both mentioned the fact that in older age groups, there is a “hookup culture.” Anna, who is asexual, talked about how, “when you get older, [there were] more hookups. It just was always so… sexual, because… for a lot of kids, that’s what happens naturally. But when you are not sure you feel that way, you feel very much out of place.” Participants felt that talking about the variations in sexuality and gender identity that exist would

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45 Interview 9, April 28, 20/20.
assuage any feelings of being out of place and would make campers safer and more comfortable.

When I asked participants about concerns related to gender and sexuality at Ramah and in Judaism as a whole, most concerns that came up around Ramah were about sexuality, and most concerns about Judaism as a whole focused on gender. This could be due to my phrasing of interview questions and the context in which they were asked, but even when I asked specifically about experiences with gender at Ramah, relatively few concerns were raised, as discussed above. The main topics that came up were transgender issues and issues with the gender binary. By contrast, issues with sexuality at Ramah were more frequently discussed than those in the other Jewish communities, but there were still some difficulties with acknowledging sexuality in the Jewish community.

The complaints that participants had about sexuality in the broader Jewish community were different from those about Ramah, focusing on invisibility or a lack of acknowledgment rather than on interpersonal issues. For one, the overlap between gender and sexuality can make feeling visible in community more difficult. Jenna, a bisexual who grew up in a Chabad community, shared that even getting an answer about why homosexuality for women is considered wrong can be difficult and alienating:

Growing up in a Chabad community, being a woman, I often felt overlooked. And then, on top of that, sexuality, because not only is there a belief that homosexuality is wrong, but then it gets more complicated because for women, it’s not stated that’s wrong in the Torah, it’s explained to mean that it’s wrong because the Egyptians did it. And, it’s just no one . . . gives you a straight answer; they’re just like, you know what it says.46

Jenna felt that she should belong in Jewish community, and was excluded on a basis that was not even properly explained. The sense of invisibility brought about by this was very discomfiting.

Another common difficulty with uncomfortable Jewish traditions surrounding sexuality was a feeling that there are no traditions, or no history, for those who are not straight. As Gracie put it, “Jewish tradition assumes that gay people don’t exist. Most of . . . Jewish tradition bases around a man and a woman. So, there is no existence of me.”47 The gap in history and traditions that apply to the queer community is also a separation from community, and an exclusion. The sense of the weight of history is a large part of feeling connected to Jewish tradition, and to be excluded from that can feel as though any acceptance in community is provisional at best. At Ramah, the issues with sexuality tended to be discrimination or a lack of understanding from

46 Interview 10, April 29, 2020.
47 Interview 6, April 23, 2020.
other campers, rather than feeling invisible. Issues with others’ reactions to homosexuality were more commonly mentioned as an issue at Ramah than an issue in the wider Jewish community.

The Importance of Community

Several of the participants defined Jewish tradition in terms of community and emphasized how connections and relationships with others kept them involved as a part of Judaism. This theme was very present in participants’ descriptions of Ramah and how Ramah influenced their connection to Judaism. A common idea was that Jewish tradition is a connection between you and others in the present, and you and ancestors in the past. Gracie explained:

[Jewish tradition] is something to be kept. Just because of how many generations have done the same thing over and over. It’s a way to feel connected to the people that came before you through physical action. That’s what’s great about it, that it’s an actual physical, like you have to do something, it’s [a] reminder of how you are Jewish.

Feeling accepted and safe in the communities you belong in is incredibly important and is extremely relevant to having a positive experience in Judaism. Most participants explained that feeling accepted in a community—any community—was very important and often determined whether they would remain in that community at all. Ellie firmly stated, “I’m not going to participate in an anti-Semitic queer community, just the same as I’m not going to participate in a queerphobic Jewish community. I’m not going to do it. . . . If I don’t feel welcome, I’m not going to stay.”48 Remaining in a place that makes you feel unsafe is difficult, and most participants would not force themselves to do so. If Jewish communities don’t welcome those with diverse identities, those people will not make themselves smaller in order to belong. Most participants do feel accepted in their Jewish communities, however, and some participate very regularly.

Participants frequently mentioned that it was welcome when they felt safe enough to be open about their sexuality. Coming out can be difficult and scary, and it leaves a person open to negative reactions. A common thread among interviewees was the idea that they did not regularly reveal their sexuality, leaving it in the dark almost as a default. Rachel, an outspoken bisexual, explained, “So it’s more like ‘if you ask, I’ll tell you,’ but I’m not gonna just put it out there, cuz I don’t feel the need to do that.”49 Other participants agreed with Rachel, expressing that they did not feel it was necessary to come out and that it was easier not to share.

48 Interview 7, April 26, 2020.
49 Interview 5, April 16, 2020.
Others, such as Ellie, a pansexual nonbinary, had different reasons for keeping quiet. Ellie opened up about how talking about their gender identity was difficult because they “didn’t want to have to come out over and over and over again, and have people ask questions.” Another participant, Anna, who is asexual, had a similar reason for hiding her sexuality. She explained that asexuality is “certainly not the thing that a lot of people have heard of; a lot don’t even believe it if they have heard of it. So, if you are heteroromantic asexual . . . it’s really easy to hide.”

Given all of these difficulties, being in a space where they feel safe and welcome enough to open up about their sexuality is very important and meaningful. Most participants had at least one community or group of people they felt comfortable opening up to, and many had come out in their Jewish communities. Several participants, including Sasha, Ellie, Nora, and Rachel, came out at Ramah while they were campers there. Coming out in Jewish community and at Ramah indicated that participants do feel safe, comfortable, and welcomed at Ramah and in their Jewish communities at home.

A major factor in feeling comfortable in a community was having commonalities with the other people in that community. Several participants mentioned feeling more comfortable and more likely to come out in communities that were mostly composed of younger participants. When asked about commonalities between communities she feels comfortable in, Gracie said, “Maybe . . . this generation is a little bit more open and accepting than the previous generation. I think it’s an age thing.” Having an easily recognizable commonality between members of the community can make it easier for participants to feel safe and to open up about their identities. Sasha, a queer woman, discussed how she sought out spaces with other women and younger participants because she felt more comfortable there and had more in common with other members of those communities. As she put it, “When you’re young and everything is scary, and identifying as different groups is new, having other people who are your age and who identify similarly to you is nice.” The sensation of connectedness and a base level of commonality also showed up for multiple participants with regard to Jewish communities. Sasha and Rachel both talked about how being part of clubs that coincidentally had a large number of Jewish women and queer Jewish women made them feel very welcomed, safe, and included. Ramah represents a community in which the members have many commonalities. At Ramah, campers tend to interact mostly with others their own age or close to it, and all campers are Jewish. These factors are part of what made Ramah a welcoming community to the interviewees.

50 Interview 7, April 26, 2020.
52 Interview 6, April 23, 2020.
53 Interview 4, April 8, 2020.
The importance of acceptance within community is also evident in the reasoning for why discovering their sexuality did not significantly change participants’ impressions of Judaism or Ramah. Although the reasoning varied greatly, the most common was that they were not worried about being excluded. Participants already had the sense that they belonged in Jewish community and that there was space for them within their community. Mary talked about how they knew that “my synagogue is also pretty supportive of [the LGBTQ community],” so figuring out their sexuality and gender identity did not change how they thought about Judaism. When asked about sexuality and her thoughts about Ramah, Sasha said, “Having a supportive community of people who loved me was really, really great,” and that she never doubted her place in Ramah’s community. Sasha did not change how she perceived Ramah because she had no need to.

Belonging in Community and Personal Empowerment

Despite all of the ways that participants could feel unwelcome, they generally had a strong sensation of belonging in Jewish community. Even if certain communities had felt uncomfortable or unsafe, participants knew that they belonged in the Jewish community as a whole. Nora talked about how the “idea that you can be Jewish and LGBT has always kind of been something that I understood.” In general, participants felt very accepted and safe in their home synagogues or other Jewish communities, including Ramah. All but two of the participants currently felt no conflict between their gender, sexuality, and Judaism as a whole, and most had never felt any conflict at all. Ellie mentioned, “So for me, there was never a moment where I was like, wait, I didn’t know that you could be Jewish and gay.” This is a great contrast to the common trend within earlier writings by queer Jews, in which they frequently discuss the feeling that their sexuality is wrong, or the necessity of choosing between Judaism and their sexuality.

The idea of not feeling any conflict in being Jewish and queer also applied to the participants’ feelings around representation. Many felt that representation was welcome but was not necessary for them to feel connected to the Jewish community and its history. Sarah explained this with an analogy to physics, her college major: “I studied physics … and there haven’t been a lot of female physicists, and I still think a lot of the male physicists did some really cool stuff. And I think they’re really cool, and I still want to go into physics.”

54 Interview 2, April 5, 2020.
55 Interview 4, April 8, 2020.
56 Interview 8, April 26, 2020.
57 Interview 7, April 26, 2020.
58 Torton Beck, Nice Jewish Girls.
59 Interview 1, April 3, 2020.
The idea that representation was a welcome and exciting bonus was echoed by many other participants as well. This is not to say that representation should not be encouraged or that it does not need to be discussed at all, just that it was not required to foster a sensation of belonging in community. All participants agreed that it would be worthwhile and meaningful for Ramah to include queer female representation, modern or historical, as part of their experience. One caveat that Anna brought up around queer representation was that queer role models should not be interpreted into existence, or excavated. She explained:

I want to acknowledge that yes, the Torah lacks representation of me. It lacks representation of me, of people like me, and it lacks that awareness. And I think that if we pretend that awareness is there, we kind of ignore a bit of the problem. And at the same time, why don’t we go forward, acknowledge that we have a new awareness of queer people, or women having rights and education. And with that, move forward to create a Judaism that works for today but it’s… still compliant with Jewish law.60

Anna was especially in favor of representing modern queer figures, especially queer Jewish women, but felt that while representation is important and welcome, it should not be used to ignore the gaps that exist. Anna’s opinion was an interesting contrast to the other participants’ and stood in tension with the efforts by Jewish feminist and queer activists to uncover role models and to reinterpret texts in more inclusive ways.61

Other participants stressed that it was reassuring and inspiring to have role models they could identify with. Emily, a lesbian, talked about her college rabbi, who is married to another woman, saying that “seeing [her rabbi], in the position that she’s in, was definitely super-helpful because, you know, she is a gay woman who is a rabbi, which is so cool…. She’s sort of just a calming presence.”62 Emily enjoyed having others like her around and in visible positions, as well as knowing that others like her exist in the world, but her sensation of belonging was not conditional on representation. Additionally, almost every participant said that it would have been beneficial and meaningful for Ramah to discuss historical and modern queer Jewish figures. Representation simply makes it easier to know that you are not alone and that you belong in community.

In general, the participants in this study felt that they belonged in Jewish community and that their sexuality was not at odds with most Jewish communities. Some participants also felt empowered to change Jewish community and tradition. A common response to the question about who holds the authority to change Jewish

61 Shapiro, “Lie With Me”; Hirsh, “In Search of Role Models”; Raveh, Feminist Rereadings of Rabbinic Literature; Goldstein, The Women’s Torah Commentary; Alpert, Like Bread on the Seder Plate, 46–52.
62 Interview 3, April 7, 2020.
tradition was that tradition is personal and you are in control of how you practice religion. Emily explained, “I think religion is highly personal. And anybody can look at what the Torah says and say, ‘This is how I’m going to live my life, and I think God would be okay with that.’ . . . I definitely think every individual person has the power to decide how they interpret everything . . . I think we can all make our own studies and draw conclusions.”63 While some participants indicated that rabbis, the Conservative movement’s rabbinical organization, or other authority figures were necessary for changing tradition, especially on a community level, many believed they could change and control their own personal traditions.

Another common theme was that the new generation is especially empowered to change tradition: “As the next generation, we are responsible for changing things. If and when they need to be changed . . . it’s the responsibility of our generation.”64 This idea was echoed in many different interviews. Many participants acknowledged a gap in the history of LGBTQ Jews, and the space that needs to be carved out to create an improved community and tradition. Emily argued, “Something that our generation can do a good job of is forging that path for our children and our grandchildren.” Many participants believed that change can happen now, in their generation, and could be spearheaded by them; they don’t need to wait for change to happen, or to argue so someone else should cause change. In this vein, Jenna believed that simply acknowledging that “there are a million different kinds of people, and a million different kinds of identities in every sense of the word, and that they exist in every community”65 will help to create change in the world. Rachel agreed with this idea and mentioned that she felt as though she were changing her community through living openly as herself within it, even if it was only in small ways.

The concept of being empowered to change tradition was also included in many of the participants’ definitions of Jewish tradition itself. Several mentioned the importance of questioning as a part of Jewish tradition. Nora explained, “The fact that there is so much variation and so much room for debate, for pushing the envelope, or for questioning things has always been a huge part of [Jewish tradition] for me.”66 Others talked about how they felt uncomfortable with those who accepted the word of Torah as written without question, or the word of a rabbi as the only possible authority, and how they would generally avoid spaces where they felt that was the case. Emily talked about how it felt exclusionary and made her uncomfortable, saying that she feels uncomfortable with “anything talking about super-literal readings of the Torah, or the very, very old traditions . . . feeling [that] the literal words in the Torah are what should guide our day-to-day behaviors—I’m not part of that. That does not include me,

63 Interview 3, April 7, 2020.
64 Interview 10, April 29, 2020.
66 Interview 8, April 26, 2020.
you know. So I think being able to interpret things more loosely is a good way to include more people.”67 Emily’s ideas about the importance of community showed up in many other interviews. Even while participants stressed the right of individuals to determine the shape of Jewish tradition, their definitions of Jewish tradition included a welcoming and diverse community.

The sensation of being empowered to change community and tradition also extended to Ramah. Anna, who had been a staff member, discussed how she attempted to create a safe space and to be welcoming to other queer campers she encountered. “Camp is supposed to be a safe space for these kids,”68 she explained. She felt that Ramah should be a welcoming, safe community and that not enough effort was being put forth to create that kind of haven. In contrast, Ellie argued that change has to come from the campers, not from the administration or counselors. In response to my question about how Ramah could do better with regard to gender and sexuality, they stated, “I think that [change] has to come from the campers, just to be open to listening to it.”69

Anna, along with other participants who had been staff members, argued that Ramah should provide more staff training on the topics of gender and sexuality. Not all of them were bunk staff, so they did not all receive the same training, but most mentioned that they did not feel that the staff training around the subject of sexuality and gender was sufficient. Mary, who was a staff member at Ramah Darom, mentioned that without training, it can be difficult to feel prepared to support a camper who comes out to you. Jenna, who was a specialty counselor rather than a bunk counselor, argued that it was important for every staff member to receive training on the topic of sexuality and gender, as every counselor interacts with the campers in some way and sexuality can be a very sensitive issue that is easy to get wrong, accidentally hurting someone:

It’s important that everyone hears that, and not just the counselors, because even specialists . . . interact with the kids, so much. And it leaves a lot of room for misunderstanding and for people to be uneducated on the topic and end up unintentionally negatively impacting a camper.70

From her perspective, more in-depth staff training would help counselors feel prepared and could make Ramah a safer and more comfortable place for campers. Anna explained how in her time as a staff member, “I tried to create [a safe space] at camp. . . . Camp was supposed to be a safe space for these kids,”71 but she felt as though

67 Interview 3, April 7, 2020.
69 Interview 7, April 26, 2020.
70 Interview 10, April 29, 2020.
some other counselors acted in potentially damaging ways. More training and discussion around the subject could help with that as well.

Not every participant, or even every participant who was on staff, agreed with the recommendation of further staff training, however. Ellie argued that changes imposed from above would never work long-term and that moving to a more accepting environment has to come from the campers. A common theme among participants, mostly those who had not been staff, was that there wasn’t anything they would have wanted the staff to intervene on, even if they had negative experiences. Even when directly prompted, participants did not report anything they felt the staff should have done. More staff training could give Ramah staff the context for intervening in a helpful manner, but it could also give them the tools to stay out of more minor issues and let the campers figure out what they need.

Ellie also shared the story of holding a Q&A session for the rest of their age group when they came out as pansexual nonbinary at Ramah. They did explain that it was only to prevent awkward and uncomfortable conversations later but that it was mostly successful in creating a more knowledgeable and accepting community. The other campers changed their behavior to better reflect Ellie’s gender identity, at least to Ellie’s face. Nora, who went to a different Ramah camp, also held a Q&A session with the other people in her age group and had a positive experience doing so. She talked about how she and her friends “decided to have a little LGBT Q&A. We sat… in the center of a circle, and everyone’s just asking questions, and it was really nice, actually, and felt very accepting.”

Talking about sexuality and being willing to answer questions demonstrated that Nora and Ellie felt safe and comfortable enough to be open about their gender and sexuality, and also that they wanted to increase others’ understanding of the issues.

Conclusion

The individuals I interviewed felt accepted at Ramah and in the larger Jewish community and did not feel limited by either their sexuality or their gender. They felt empowered to change their communities and their surroundings, and some of them acted to improve their communities. In contrast to many of the Jews discussed in Schnoor’s research, they did not feel that being queer and being Jewish were mutually exclusive. Whereas Schnoor found that a significant portion of participants in his study chose to ignore their Jewish identity and embrace a queer lifestyle or vice versa, none of the participants in my study considered blocking off a part of their identity. Similar to the participants in Abes’s study, they were working toward

72 Interview 8, April 26, 2020.
73 Compare my conclusions with those of Schnoor, “Being Gay and Jewish.”
74 Schnoor, “Being Gay and Jewish.”
integrating their Jewish and queer identities and did not consider their identities to be mutually exclusive.\(^\text{75}\)

To the participants in this study, it was completely normal to be LGBTQ Jewish women; however, even though they felt accepted in general, they still experienced instances of discrimination and alienation. They experienced problematic expectations and limitations for women in Orthodox Jewish communities, and they saw a lack of representation and recognition of LGBTQ Jewish figures, as well as some discrimination, in both Conservative and Orthodox settings. Even so, the experiences of those I interviewed demonstrate that Jewish community is becoming more accepting and welcoming to LGBTQ Jews and that the Ramah Camping Network is a part of this process. As mentioned above, one of Abes’s participants, Beth, stopped identifying as a Conservative Jew because she did not believe she could be properly accepted in the Conservative Jewish community.\(^\text{76}\) In contrast, those I interviewed continued to belong to the Conservative movement and experienced a similar or greater level of acceptance than Beth and Leah felt in the Reform Jewish community. Even if they experienced discrimination, many of the participants believed that they could change their communities for the better, and remained.

Overall, the participants in this study felt welcomed in Jewish community and found places where they were accepted. They also felt empowered to change the communities they were part of for the better, making the places they spent time in safer and more diverse. Their views on authority in Judaism and Jewish tradition itself fit with a Judaism that would welcome them and was more diverse, and most were confident in the fact that they belonged fully in Jewish community. Although the individuals I interviewed were not always accepted and did face discrimination and uncomfortable situations, they faced much less than many Jews discussed in earlier literature. Ramah provided an excellent example of the potential for a welcoming and accepting Jewish community and an example of how community can be made more welcoming and affirming.

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\(^{75}\) Abes, “Exploring the Relationship.”

\(^{76}\) Abes, 217.
References


