

Trans ally

Rabbi Mike Moskowitz to bring his 'Toyreh' on gender identity to Teaneck

By [JOANNE PALMER](#) | March 7, 2019, 12:28 pm



We all make assumptions.

We have to, if we are to make any sense of the world. If we had to make judgments that could not be based on information we've gleaned throughout our lives, we'd find ourselves like those unfortunate people who lose their memories entirely and have to be reminded of every experience and reintroduced to every friend and relative at every meeting.

So when you meet Rabbi Mike Moskowitz, when you see a man with a long, unruly beard, a big broad-brimmed black hat, a black coat, a white shirt, a dark tie, and long white tzitzit, you assume that he is as traditional, even right-wing Orthodox, as he appears to be. As entirely black and white. You'd be foolish not to make that assumption.

To some extent, you'd be right. "I'm a religious fundamentalist," he says. He has gotten smicha — ordination — three times in Israel; one came from the Mir Yeshiva in Israel. He has spent decades studying Jewish texts in kollel. He lives in Lakewood.

But you'd also be entirely wrong.

Rabbi Moskowitz, who will be teaching at Congregation Beth Sholom in Teaneck on Sunday, March 24 (see box), also is a strong defender of the rights of the entire LGBT community — that's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender — and focuses particularly on the trans community. He's scholar in residence for trans and queer Jewish studies at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in Manhattan, the world's largest LGBT synagogue.



Rabbi Moskowitz teaches at Rutgers Hillel last year.

As a “straight cis-gendered white man,” he says, he’s out of place, an outsider, in every world. (A cis-gender person is someone whose gender identity and the sex assigned at birth are the same.)

That sense of being an outsider started early for him, he said. Rabbi Moskowitz, 39, grew up Jewish but unaffiliated in Richmond, Virginia. “I was assigned secular at birth but came out as Orthodox in high school,” he joked — he’s warm and friendly, and although he never pokes fun at anyone but himself, he leavens his intensity with humor. “I was trying to uncover and discover the Divine intention,” he said. “I saw a lot of pain and suffering in the world, and for years I wondered why we were here, and I was looking for a frame to hold it.”

Back then, in high school, he was dating a non-Jewish girl. That did not please his mother, who talked him into going to a USY convention in West Virginia. Although the Conservative world to which USY belongs never became his world, that exposure to Judaism — and to social activism, through the mandate to “partner with God to perfect the world” — stuck with him. He finished high school in three years, and then off to Israel.

“I made a beeline for yeshiva,” he said. “I was 17; I made my way to Israel and then was deeply in that world for about 20 years. I did very well academically. I went from being functionally illiterate in Hebrew, Talmud, and any kind of Jewish texts to the Mir Yeshiva in a year and a half; I got my first smicha there at 22.”

He also married — and later divorced; he’s the father of four children — and moved to Lakewood, where he lived and learned at the Beth Medrash Gevoha for almost five years. “It was great,” he said.

Then he was invited back to Richmond, where he started an adult education program and was the mashpia — the spiritual adviser. “I loved it there,” he said. Among other things, “I loved running the koylel.” The what? “The koylel.” He’d already talked about his love for “Toyreh.” For what? “For Toyreh.” He has “a right-wing accent,” he said. “That’s how I learned it.” Many of the people with whom he now works ask to have some of his words translated, or at least repeated, very slowly. He finds that symptomatic of his life. “I do feel othered in just about every place I’m in,” he said. “But I’m optimistic that there will be communities of like-minded people in the future. The work is creating that community.”

Next, Rabbi Moskowitz moved to Manhattan, where he became the part-time rabbi at the Old Broadway Synagogue and one of three rabbis on the 13-clergy-person staff at Columbia’s chaplain’s office.

Questions about trans identity were not much on his mind, although the mandate to make the world a better place — to allow God’s work, as he sees it, to push through the snares that keep it from being uncovered and discovered — always was in his consciousness.

And then someone in his family transitioned, and that changed the focus of his work. “I wanted to support them.” Still, “the first time I had a real conversation with a trans person was just three years ago.” His need to provide support — and his clear understanding that there is a halachic mandate to do so — both hit him hard.

Remember, he calls himself a religious fundamentalist. That means, he said, that he believes that “Toyreh is eternal, infinite, immutable, and God gave it to Moishe on Mount Sinai 3,300 years ago.

“That would include conversations about LGBT equality and inclusion. I believe that we are called to uncover and discover the Divine will in these areas.

“That is our mission.”



Rabbi Moskowitz speaks at a protest at the Texas/Mexico border.

His role in this work is as an ally. “The voice of an ally is a fundamentally different voice” than the voice of a trans person, he said. “It is not a first-person narrative, but one of privilege. But being a straight white cis male ultra-Orthodox-presenting rabbi gets people to listen to me more, and I use that privilege to amplify the voices of the people who need to be heard.”



Last summer, Rabbi Moskowitz went to the Texas/Mexico border to support immigrants. The multifaith group here includes Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, dean of Hebrew College, Rabbi Stephanie Ruskay, associate dean of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and CBST's Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum.

There is an irony in his work. “For the trans experience to be affirmed and validated broadly, there needs to be a recognition that men and women are different,” he said. That recognition is part of the foundation of Orthodoxy; it is not part of the core beliefs of the progressive Jews among whom he often finds himself now.

Rabbi Moskowitz is very public. “I get a lot of hate mail,” he said. “It is easy to hate people.” But that hatred is most easily aimed at strangers, and “my single greatest source of optimism is that as it becomes safer for people to come out and speak their truths, it is just a matter of time before everyone realizes that there are people in their own lives, people they love, people in their own families, who identify as LGBT. And then it is a different conversation, because it is personal.”

But, Rabbi Moskowitz, it seems that there is much hatred newly unleashed in our world, much of it aimed specifically at transgender people. What do you make of that? How can you still hope? “Because transitions are difficult,” he said. “I think that our community, our society, or culture is in transition. It is awkward, and it is uncomfortable, and it is completely unresolved.” But no matter how long it takes to resolve feelings toward LGBT people, one thing that’s certain is that they won’t go back to what they once had been, because we know too much now. We know too many people now. It is not possible to unlearn what we know.



An active practitioner of what he calls allyship, Rabbi Moskowitz went to the North Jersey Pride celebration in Maplewood this summer.

Although Rabbi Moskowitz’s position at CBST — a position created entirely for him — is as scholar in residence, very little of his work is with members of the shul, although he does teach there, he said. Instead, he answers calls, emails, requests for help from around the country. When he does that work, he says, “I find myself connecting with people and things that are familiar to me, although I am grounded in a space that is unfamiliar” — the non-affiliated liberal synagogue, headed by Sharon Kleinbaum, its powerful senior rabbi. “The number of ultra-Orthodox folks who reach out to me is greater than folks from any other segment of society. “No one in the Reform or Conservative movement will reach out to a rabbi for guidance, and not many other people are working in the trans space.

“The trans phenomenon, I think, is new enough, especially in the Jewish context, that everyone is looking for vocabulary.

“The vast majority of the folks who reach out to me are Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox,” Rabbi Moskowitz continued. “They’re the parents of queer children, or the children of queer parents, or folks who are closeted in heteronormative marriages, who were told by their rabbis, before they married, that it’s okay that you identify as gay, just marry someone of the opposite gender. And that works for a day, or for a week, or for a month, or for years — and then it doesn’t.

“Dealing with the fallout of that rabbinic malpractice is the largest part of my job,” he said.

“Sharon wanted me to sit and learn all day, but there is no time to learn. The late night and the early morning often touch. Sometimes I don’t leave at all.”

Sometimes — often — his work involves countering misconceptions. “Someone wrote an article that conflated gender identity with sexual orientation,” he said; in fact, there is a great difference between being lesbian, gay, or bisexual, which has to do with who you love, and being transgender, which is even more basic because it’s about who you are.

Even the right-wing Orthodox world is changing, Rabbi Moskowitz said. “The baseline has shifted. There are ultra-Orthodox folks who still allow their children to come home once they’ve come out. There are a growing number of Orthodox synagogues that are becoming more inclusive, along a spectrum.

“The good news is that there is enough awareness that there is at least some space, where there hadn’t been before. It used to be that the outside world forced someone in the closet to stay in the closet; you couldn’t come out in a religious context but you couldn’t come out in the secular context either.” Now, though, with coming out in the outside world becoming less traumatic — although for some people in some places it remains traumatic — it’s harder to stay fully closeted even inside. And also, “it’s easier not only for people to leave the ultra-Orthodox community, but also to come back. A person who’s OTD” — off the derech, the path that marks the journey of a traditional Jewish life — “very often still is welcome back at family simchas. In a family of 12 children, two might be secular, and one might be intermarried, and one might be gay.” And it’s harder for even members of insular communities not to know that, because it’s hard to keep even members of insular communities away from the internet.

“So it really is personal,” Rabbi Moskowitz said. “It’s one thing to hate when it’s them versus us, but not when you know that the them really is us. So it’s us versus us.”

He returns to his own story.

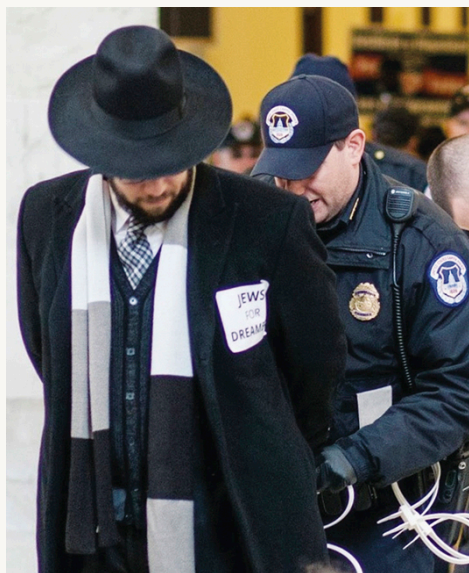
An incident when he still was at Columbia but already had begun advocating for trans people affected him greatly. “There was a student who was really struggling, and one day I got a text from him,” Rabbi Moskowitz said. “Remember, the suicide rates for trans people are sky high.” (Last year, the American Academy of Pediatrics put out a study that said that “more than half of transgender male teens who participated in the survey reported attempting suicide in their lifetime, while 29.9 percent of transgender female teens said they attempted suicide. Among non-binary youth, 41.8 percent of respondents stated that they had attempted suicide at some point in their lives.” That’s just one of many studies that report similar results.)

That Columbia student had left home, in a different state, presenting as the gender assigned at birth, and showed up in college no longer presenting in that way. Rabbi Moskowitz was one of the very few people whom the student had trusted with that secret. A second text, that followed the first one quickly, said “I really appreciate your existence.” Knowing that he could provide that student with some safety, some feeling of security to counter the stronger feeling of being afraid to be known, listening to the “personal narrative of someone who is afraid to go outside, lest they be discovered for who they are,” propelled him forward. “I have no regrets,” Rabbi Moskowitz said.

He gave what he calls his “coming out talk” at the Old Broadway Shul on Chanukah three years ago. “It was a question of how much faith in God do I have, to say what I want to say, no matter what the consequences might be,” he said. Those consequences were swift and sharp. “I was let go from both jobs shortly thereafter.”

That was hard. “I was unemployed for a year and a half,” he said. “I couldn’t get a job, until I finally got one managing a deli in Lakewood.” But he continued his advocacy work.

Rabbi Moskowitz does not restrict his love or concern to Jews or the LGBT community. He is active in many causes more often associated with the progressive Jewish world; he’s also written and protested about immigrants’ rights.



In January of 2018, during protests at airports and at the borders against actions the new Trump administration

In January 2017, Rabbi Moskowitz was arrested in D.C. for protesting the lack of protection for DACA recipients. The sticker on his coat says "Jews for Dreamers."

brought against immigrants, "I got arrested for civil disobedience," Rabbi Moskowitz said. "And Rabbi Kleinbaum was in my police wagon. There were a bunch of male rabbis on one side of a metal mechitza" — in this case not a barrier for use in religious services but a wall to which handcuffs can be attached — "and five women on the other. All rabbis or Jewish lay leaders.

"We were handcuffed there for hours, and Rabbi Kleinbaum asked, 'Does anyone have a Toyreh to share?'" He did. He delivered it to a literally "captive audience," he said. It was about clothing and gender. "She is a pioneer in the area, and she hadn't heard anything new in years, and thought she wouldn't, and her mind was blown," he said. "She said, 'We have to find a job for you.'" It took a few months, but she did.

He's unconcerned about the shul not being Orthodox. "The Jewish people are not all Orthodox," he said. "They're all in the image of God, and God is very varied. We all are God's children, and one's affiliation does not make one more or less important to God."

We each are made by God, he said, "and there is no shame in being who God made you, as God put you in the world. What we do with that, with how God made us, that we own, but how God made us is not a choice."

Although he does not feel comfortable at being told that he resembles the prophets — something that he is told frequently, and dismisses just as frequently — "I can't turn it off," he said. "I feel like I was put into this world to contribute my voice to the conversation. I feel that there is no free will about this. I have no choice. I am way past that point."

It's very much part of the Jewish tradition, he said. "One thing about being Jewish is that we are meant to remember what it is like to be dehumanized. We should never forget and always fight for those who are being demonized."

Still, how can he have made such a huge change in his life? Or is it really no change at all, just the next logical turn in his path? In some ways, he said, it is a logical continuation. "The same open-mindedness and searching for truth that allowed me to become observant to begin with has allowed me the flexibility and the willingness to sacrifice so I can continue on the journey of searching for the truth."

In Teaneck, Rabbi Moskowitz will "talk about allyship as a spiritual practice," he said. He will offer a text study about gender, followed by a conversation. "It will be between Purim," with its themes of discovering and uncovering, of masks and the truths that lie beneath them, "and Pesach," which of course is about freedom. "The text study will be about Purim and clothing.



Rabbi Moskowitz speaks at a panel with Dr. Joy Ladin, who holds the David and Ruth Gottesman Chair in English at Yeshiva University's Stern College. She's YU's first openly transgender professor.

“For me, the rabbinic voice always has been more successful than the prophetic voice, and I will use that voice to show how we can be an ally, working within Jewish law. This, for me, is what being an ally is. This is what the sources say in supporting the trans experience, and supporting wearing gender-affirming clothing.”

He also has two things to promote.

The first is a conference set for Beth Simchat Torah from Friday, March 29, through Sunday, March 31, called Trans Jews Are Here: A Convening. The second is his new, just-about-to-be published book, “Textual Activism.” “It’s about combining rabbinic texts and sources and methodologies with really progressive values,” he said. “It’s a recognition that a lot of bridgework is necessary to give the Toyreh the ability to speak in the present tense to the problems of our time.”

The book includes essays on “welfare fraud in the ultra-Orthodox world to the children’s victim act to climate change to abortion, approached through the rabbinic lens, and even through mystical texts. There’s also a lot on LGB and primarily trans issues.

“For example, I write about how to be a better straight ally to the trans community by calling trans folks by their own names, and reframing the biblical prohibition against wearing misgendered clothes,” he said.

Rabbi Moskowitz writes a lot — “I try to write something at least every week,” he said — and he is published in a wide range of Jewish outlets. He also has a website, www.rabbimikemoskowitz.com, where he posts a great deal of his work.

“God runs the world,” he concluded. “I feel blessed to have the agency and the platform for the work I do. And I hope that it becomes obsolete. I hope that there is an expiration date.”

If that happens, if trans people become so accepted that they will not need his allyship, then what? “I had a life before this, and I will have a life after it,” he said. “I have other skills.

“I feel that my life has been divinely orchestrated, and that I have been given the chance to make this unique contribution to the world. I feel blessed by God, and blessed to have the community and supporters that I have.

“CBST has been so kind to me. It is a huge blessing.”

Who: Rabbi Mike Moskowitz

What: Offers “Gender Identity: A Text Study & Conversation”

When: On Sunday, March 24, at 8 p.m.

Where: At Congregation Beth Sholom, 354 Maitland Ave., Teaneck

How much: \$15 for preregistered Beth Sholom members; \$18 preregistered nonmembers; \$20 at the door; \$36 for dairy reception and talk (reception starts at 7)

To register and for more information: www.cbsteaneck.org

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