“I DON’T FEAR GOD. I FEAR GOD’S PEOPLE”: HOW TEN ORTHODOX JEWISH LESBIAN WOMEN EXPERIENCE THE ORTHODOX JEWISH COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Informed by the critical ideology of feminist theory and psychology, this qualitative study provides an in-depth exploration into the experiences of Orthodox Jewish lesbian women. Aiming to redress the lack of literature on Orthodox Jewish lesbians, this investigation endeavors to understand how this collective navigates tight-knit communities while living at the intersection of identities assumed to be conflicting. Ten cisgendered Orthodox Jewish lesbians, ages 21 to 46, participated in phenomenologically oriented semi-structured interviews that offered women the platform to discuss various facets of gender, sexual orientation, religion, family, community, and identity. Through a grounded theory analysis of the data, three major thematic areas emerged: Orthodox Jewish lesbians experience multiple barriers; Orthodox Jewish lesbians rely on numerous coping strategies and systems to help manage these barriers; and Orthodox Jewish lesbians hope for communal change and improvement. Findings suggest that community, serving simultaneously as a source of both stress and resilience, is a powerful force in the lives of Orthodox Jewish lesbians. Driven by the data, the discussion features directions for future research as well as specific recommendations for clinical and community wide interventions that have broader implications for those working with religious sexual minorities.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to Uri Naftali, my Great Uncle Irving Schachter, who taught me by example what it means to fight passionately for social justice, no matter the social cost. I would also like to dedicate this work to the women who participated in this study. This project would not have been possible without their brave involvement. Their honesty, openness, and vulnerability inspired me to see this project as more than a graduate requirement, but a mission of sorts. Finally, and most importantly, I would like to dedicate this work to the beautiful children of participants Devorah, Batya, Miriam, and Sarah. You, the next generation, are living proof that love prevails.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT........................................................................................................................................... ii
DEDICATION........................................................................................................................................ iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS................................................................................................................... iv

Chapter I: Introduction and Background ......................................................................................... 1
  Statement of the Problem .................................................................................................................. 1
  Theoretical Approach ..................................................................................................................... 4

Chapter II: Review of the Literature ................................................................................................. 7
  Orthodox Judaism in Context ......................................................................................................... 9
  Contemporary Rabbinic and Communal Perspectives on Homosexuality .............................. 14
  The Gay Orthodox Jewish Experience: A Review of the Research ..................................... 26
  Implications for the Present Study ............................................................................................... 37

Chapter III: Methods ......................................................................................................................... 40
  Grounded Theory .......................................................................................................................... 41
  Participants .................................................................................................................................... 42
    Selection Criteria ....................................................................................................................... 42
    Recruitment ............................................................................................................................... 42
  Measures ......................................................................................................................................... 43
    Demographics questionnaire ........................................................................................................ 43
    Semi-structured interview .......................................................................................................... 43
  Procedures ...................................................................................................................................... 44
  Treatment of Data .......................................................................................................................... 44
  Data Analysis ................................................................................................................................ 45
ORTHODOX JEWISH LESBIAN WOMEN

The Primary Researcher’s Background, Experiences, and Biases ........................................ 46

Chapter IV: Results .................................................................................................................. 49

Demographics ......................................................................................................................... 49

Profiles ...................................................................................................................................... 50

Atara ......................................................................................................................................... 51
Ariella .......................................................................................................................................... 51
Hana ........................................................................................................................................... 51
Rivka ........................................................................................................................................... 52
Adina .......................................................................................................................................... 52
Devorah ...................................................................................................................................... 53
Batya ........................................................................................................................................... 53
Yael .............................................................................................................................................. 53
Miriam ....................................................................................................................................... 54
Sarah ......................................................................................................................................... 54

Theme I: Facing Barriers ......................................................................................................... 55

Subtheme 1: Barriers to Recognizing and Understanding Same-Sex Attraction
and Identity ................................................................................................................................. 55

Lacking a concept of and language for gayness ................................................................. 55
Lacking role models ............................................................................................................... 57
Heteronormativity and cultural expectations ...................................................................... 59
Disavowing same-sex attraction .......................................................................................... 59
Living a double life ................................................................................................................. 63

Subtheme II: Barriers to Coming Out ..................................................................................... 70
Blatant homophobic expressions from community and family .................. 70
Prejudice in the home ................................................................. 71
Fear that disclosure may adversely impact the family unit .................. 72
Fear of rejection ............................................................................. 78
Obeying instruction to keep sexuality a secret ................................. 82

Subtheme III: Barriers to Belonging ............................................. 85
Encountering overt rejection, homophobia, and heterosexism .......... 85
Encountering covert rejection, homophobia, and heterosexism ......... 97

Subtheme IV: Barriers to Visibility ................................................. 105
Gender meets sexuality .................................................................. 105
Erased from text .......................................................................... 107
Less visibility in Orthodox LGBTQ spaces ..................................... 107

Subtheme V: Barriers that Still Remain .......................................... 109
Intrapersonal barriers .................................................................... 109
Interpersonal barriers .................................................................... 113

Theme II: Coping with Barriers .................................................... 121
Subtheme I: Finding Affirming Religious Spaces ......................... 122
Subtheme II: Turning to Orthodox LGBTQ Jewish Communities for Support 129
Subtheme III: Using the Internet as a Source of Support ................. 131
Subtheme III: Creating Community Where Community was Absent .... 134
Subtheme V: Distancing Oneself from Painful Sources ................. 137
Subtheme VI: Cognitive Flexibility ............................................... 141

Theme III: Improvements for the Future ........................................ 156
Subtheme I: Change in Treatment of LGBTQ Individuals ......................... 156
Subtheme II: Change in Mindset and Mentality About LGBTQ Individuals .. 159
Subtheme III: The Rabbinate as a Prime Change Agent.......................... 164
Subtheme IV: Specific Solutions to Help Achieve Proactive Acceptance...... 166

Summary of research questions ............................................................ 168

Chapter V: Discussion ........................................................................ 169

Reflexivity Revisited ........................................................................... 170

Finding 1: Orthodox Jewish Lesbians Experienced Various Emotional Responses to Numerous Communal Barriers ................................................................. 172

Alienation, Isolation, and Loneliness ...................................................... 173

Fear ........................................................................................................ 178

Rejection ............................................................................................... 180

Abandonment and Anger ..................................................................... 183

Grief, Loss, and Mourning .................................................................. 185

Disempowerment and Invisibility ......................................................... 188

Finding 2: Orthodox Jewish Lesbians Relied on Numerous Coping Strategies and Systems to Help Manage Barriers ................................................................. 189

Finding and Creating Affirming Religious Spaces ............................... 190

Cognitive Flexibility ............................................................................ 193

Finding 3: Orthodox Jewish Lesbians Hope for Communal Improvement........ 196

Limitations of the Present Study ......................................................... 200

Implications ......................................................................................... 202

Implications 1: Future Research ......................................................... 202
Implication 2: The Practice of Psychotherapy with Orthodox Lesbian Patients

.............................. .......................................................... .................. 204
Intersecting identities ................................................................. 204
Sexual identity ............................................................................. 206
Gender identity ............................................................................ 208
Religious identity ......................................................................... 209
Communal identity ....................................................................... 210
Helping clients and their families find social support and resources ...... 211
The therapeutic stance ................................................................. 213
Grief, loss, and mourning............................................................. 213
Making space for ambiguity and ambivalence................................. 214
Microaggressions ......................................................................... 214

Implication 3: Movement toward a more accepting Orthodox Jewish

Community ................................................................................... 215
The power of nonverbal and verbal communication......................... 215
The power of the rabbinate ............................................................ 218
Conclusion .................................................................................... 219
References ................................................................................... 223
Appendix A: Recruitment Email ...................................................... 232
Appendix B: Phone Screening Script ................................................. 233
Appendix C: In-Person Interview ...................................................... 234
Appendix D: Consent for Audio Taping............................................. 237
Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire ......................................... 238
Appendix F: Semi-Structured Interview ................................................................. 239

Appendix G: Glossary of Hebrew and Yiddish Terms ........................................ 241
Chapter I: Introduction and Background

**Statement of the Problem**

"The fact must be faced that as we stand on the threshold of the twenty-first century, there is almost no Jewish community that does not have to contend with the challenges faced by gay men and lesbians and their families."

The above excerpt is taken from Rabbi Chaim Rapoport’s (2004, p. xvi) book, *Judaism and Homosexuality: An Authentic Orthodox View*. In one of the first works to address homosexuality from a traditional Orthodox Jewish perspective, Rapoport (2004) proves himself progressive as he combats the demonization of gay people and encourages gay Jews to engage in all areas of Jewish communal and ritual life. At the same time, however, he upholds the mainstream Orthodox position that homosexual behavior is prohibited (Stahl & Kushner, 2014). In doing so, he highlights the complexity that characterizes one of the most heated and contested topics ever debated in the history of the interpretation of Jewish law. As homosexuality has become “almost wholly normative” and “largely destigmatized within the dominant secular culture” as well as more embraced within other movements within Judaism, Orthodox rabbis continue to confront pressing questions posed by their community members (Halbertal & Koren, 2006, p. 45). More specifically, Jewish leaders have been forced to reckon with how Orthodox gay members who desire to remain within the community can “live both an Orthodox and gay lifestyle” (Safran, 2013, p.42).

While homosexuality has moved to a more central position in Jewish communal dialogue—a notable shift considering its existence was once denied altogether by the community—research regarding the Orthodox community’s attitudes toward
homosexuality is limited (Safran, 2013). Furthermore, few studies have been conducted with Jewish sexual minorities, with even fewer focusing on Orthodox Jewish sexual minorities. Almost all empirical studies that have been conducted on Orthodox samples have focused exclusively on the experience of gay men to the exclusion of other groups, including Orthodox Jewish lesbian women. While these studies have been helpful in capturing how Orthodox Jewish gay men navigate their multiple, conflicting identities, they do not speak to the experiences of Orthodox lesbians—a collective whom is in “a unique situation of having to contend both with issues of gender and sexuality in combination” (Alpert, 1992, p. 363). Furthermore, though a scant collection of literature focusing on Jewish lesbians exist—including Mushkat’s (1999) qualitative study on a sample of nine Jewish lesbians, Alpert’s (1997) in-depth challenge of Jewish text interpretation as it pertains to Jewish lesbians, and Abes’ (2011) exploratory study on a sample of Jewish lesbian college students—these works do not reflect the unique experience of those Jewish lesbians who identify as Orthodox.

Sexual orientation aside, women’s experience of Orthodoxy is assumed to be different from those of men, given that women are not offered the same opportunities for communal religious participation and leadership and have fewer ritual requirements under Orthodox Jewish law (Novich, 2014). According to Ariel (2007, p. 98), “Orthodox synagogue life tends to work in favor of men” given that “men alone conduct the services, read from the Torah, and perform cantorial work.” While men are provided opportunities to feel purposeful and important within the traditional synagogue environment, women are not afforded these same privileges. Naomi Seidman (cited in Kabakov, 2010, p. 32) states that for the American Jewish feminist, this “sexual
“segregation” is experienced as a form of “discrimination” where women are “relegated to the role of spectators, or at most, marginal participants.” Furthermore, according to Kabakov (2010), women’s sexuality in general and lesbianism in particular hold an ambiguous place within Judaism, with lesbian sexuality being nearly invisible within the rabbinic legal corpus. Unsurprisingly, many Orthodox lesbians maintain that while they are already regarded as "less than" in their communities based on gender, their status as individuals diminishes even further based on their sexuality (Dworkin, 1997).

Given this gap in the literature, which is compounded by the stark invisibility of an already marginalized collective, the present exploratory study aimed to qualitatively capture how Orthodox Jewish lesbian women experience the Orthodox community. The following questions guided this research:

- What does the Orthodox community mean to Orthodox Jewish lesbians?
- What role does the community play in the lives of Orthodox Jewish lesbians?
- What aspects of the community do Orthodox Jewish lesbians find challenging and/or stigmatizing?
- What aspects of the community do Orthodox Jewish lesbians find rewarding?
- How have Orthodox Jewish lesbians’ relationships with their respective communities changed and/or stayed the same since recognizing same-sex attraction?
- What experiences did Orthodox Jewish lesbians have while navigating disclosure of their sexuality?
• What factors have impacted Orthodox Jewish lesbians’ decisions to remain within the community rather than leave it?

• What changes would Orthodox Jewish lesbians like to see the community make, if at all, to better meet their needs as women who identify as lesbians?

Using grounded theory as its method of analysis, this study sought to capture how a group of individuals navigate tight-knit communities while living at the intersection of what are assumed to be conflicting identities.

**Theoretical Approach**

This phenomenologically oriented qualitative study is informed by the critical ideology of feminist theory and feminist psychology. Born out of a movement that dared women to speak out, feminist psychology has focused on eliciting the stories of people whose lives have been minimized or ignored under oppressive conditions. A feminist approach to research is committed to studying resilience and identifying agency in women and other marginalized groups that have been subjected to social constraint. It is also committed to considering an individual’s multiple identities and how these identities interact (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

This study underscores the distinct intersection of religion, gender, and sexual identity. As stated previously, Jewish lesbians are in the unique situation of having to contend both with issues of gender and sexuality in combination. Alpert (1992, p. 362) astutely captures the consequence of this contention:

Lesbians will never become truly integrated into the Jewish community without challenging the norm of complementarity between men and women in Jewish
tradition and contemporary Jewish culture… Complementarity is the notion that to be whole, women must be partners with men. Much of Judaism is based on the understanding that women exist only in relationship to men and primarily for the purpose of enabling the continuity of the species through childbearing. Unlike other traditions, Judaism has no role for the autonomous woman who has not in some way fulfilled her role as companion to a man.

Dworkin (1997) summarizes Alpert’s (1992) assertion by stating that Orthodox Jewish lesbians are devalued due to their gender and invisible due to their sexuality. They, thus, epitomize the “other,” as they are marginalized even among those on the margin.

In her works *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* and *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, bell hooks (2000, 1989) argues that it is through speech, visibility, and the sharing of experiences that members of marginalized groups can transform from objects to subjects in the eyes of the larger culture. According to hooks (1989, p. 43), whereas people as objects have their reality defined by others and “named only in ways that define one’s relationship to those who are subject,” as subjects, “people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, and name their history.” hooks (1989, p. 9) asserts that “moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed…a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice.”

Blending scholarship with activism, this study set out to foster “talking back,” or what hooks (1989) describes as an integral part of resistance by an oppressed and/or
marginalized group. By allowing women to describe and name their own reality, this work endeavored to facilitate “a significant step in the long process of self-recovery” (hooks, 1989, p. 26). This work did not strive to give voice to a collective, as that implies the collective who courageously participated in this study lacked a voice. Rather, this study aimed to provide a platform to share voices that have, for too long, gone unheard. Paralleling bell hooks’ theories about oppression, resilience, and talking back as a form of resistance, this study’s findings review the challenges that Orthodox Jewish lesbians have faced, the way these women have coped with these challenges, and the changes that Orthodox Jewish lesbians want to see in their communities moving forward.
Chapter II: Review of the Literature

According to Stahl and Kushner (2014), Jewish denominational views on homosexuality were mostly uniform until the late twentieth century. Like the other Abrahamic religions, including Christianity and Islam, Judaism condemned homosexuality on the basis of passages from the Old Testament (or Torah): “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind; it is an abomination” (Leviticus 18:22) and “A man who lies with a man as one lies with a woman, they have both done an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon themselves” (Leviticus 20:13). As homosexuality became a subject more explicitly discussed in secular society, however, perspectives on homosexuality evolved across the different Jewish denominations. In the past several decades, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative Jewish communities have witnessed “progress toward a more diverse and inclusive understanding of homosexuality” (Stahl & Kushner, 2014, p. 19). That said, progress has not been without its challenges (Stahl & Kushner, 2014), no singular "Jewish" view on homosexuality exists (Safran, 2013), and the Jewish community’s position regarding homosexuality remains inconsistent (Mushkat, 1999). Furthermore, just as Jewish denominations differ in the ways they interpret Jewish values and laws, each denomination has assumed a unique way of understanding and addressing homosexuality within a Jewish context (Safran, 2013). In the face of these changing perspectives, one attitude has remained a constant over time: The Orthodox Jewish community has held to a “literal and legally binding interpretation” of the verses from Leviticus (Stahl & Kushner, 2014, p. 20). In this interpretation, sexual activity between men is considered a to’evah, or abomination.
In addition to the above passages from Leviticus, other texts from the Torah have likewise been cited as basis for prohibiting homosexuality. First, homosexuality is considered an obstacle to procreation, one of the most important commandments in the Torah. Furthermore, non-procreative sex leads to an unnecessary spilling of the seed (sperm), another Torah prohibition. Other Rabbis have suggested that same-sex acts are forbidden because a man “will leave his wife to pursue a relationship with another man” and this “threatens the Jewish ideal of family life, marriage, and children that is articulated in the Torah” (Gold, 1992, p. 159). Because Orthodox Jews sees the Torah as divinely written (Greenberg, 2004), the prohibition against anal intercourse is considered not only severe, but also unchangeable (Novich, 2014). Though rabbinic authorities have historically responded to economic and social developments by revising and reforming Jewish laws, they have consistently resisted any modifications with regard to homosexuality (Halbertal & Koren, 2006). According to Rapoport (2004, p. 31), there has been “absolute unanimity throughout the entire rabbinic tradition as to the unequivocal meaning of the biblical injunction regarding male homosexual intercourse.” Though not explicitly forbidden in the Torah, female homosexual intercourse is, likewise, forbidden by Jewish law. In reviewing said prohibitions, Coyle and Rafalin (2000, p. 5) conclude that the “sinfulness attributed to same-sex activity appears to render it impossible to be both gay and an observant Orthodox Jew.”

While many gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews believe that the Torah is a divine document and view rabbis as “custodians of the tradition” (Ariel, 2007), they also advocate for a more dynamic understanding of Jewish law as per the changing nature of society. Referencing other harsh biblical rulings that have been modified over time,
Orthodox Jewish sexual minorities have looked towards religious authorities to reinterpret the passages from Leviticus so they can better address present-day social issues (Schnoor, 2006). Furthermore, many of these individuals believe that the unwavering attitudes of the Orthodox rabbinic authority toward homosexuality stem more from an intolerance of the gay “lifestyle,” which goes against the Orthodox values of traditional family, than from a strict commitment to literal biblical interpretation (Antar, 2011). They, thus, call upon the rabbis to develop a new understanding of homosexuality and to come up with “halachic solutions” that would allow observant Jews to look upon gay and lesbian individuals “in more acceptable terms” (Ariel, 2007, p. 100). The ways in which the Orthodox Jewish community and rabbinate have responded to these appeals will be explored below. In an effort to supply a framework for these diverging responses, a brief overview of Orthodox Judaism and its internal sects will be presented first.

**Orthodox Judaism in Context**

The term "Orthodoxy" surfaced in the 19th century in Central Europe. It was used to distinguish between those Jews who stayed committed to practicing Jewish religious tradition as it was and those Jews who sought to change religious tradition based on the life changes Jews were undergoing in the wake of the emancipation. Nowadays, the term “Orthodox” refers to those who strictly follow the Jewish law in its traditional formulation (Gurock, 2009). According to Ostrov (1976, p. 147), Orthodox Jewry is defined by its “very effort to preserve a specific system of immutable values, norms, laws and institutions which represent an essential integrating force in individual, familial and communal identity.” For the Orthodox Jew, adhering to the traditional form of Judaism means committing oneself to a strict adherence to the Torah. Margolese (1998, p. 38)
summarizes strict adherence as follows:

Within the Torah, there are 613 mitzvot, or positive and negative commandments, which Jews must follow. The laws or halachot, which are concerned with the proper application of the mitzvot, govern a person’s relationship with God and with fellow humans. These halachot determine aspects of daily living, including business transactions, charity, family relationships, sexual behavior and observance of the holidays and dietary laws (Kashrut).

To review, Orthodox Jews believe that the principles of the Torah have been divinely ordained and are therefore immutable (Goldberg & Rayner, 1989). The books of the Torah have always been transmitted in parallel with an oral tradition, referred to as the Oral Law. Believed to be passed down from God to Moses at Mount Sinai, the Oral Law gives details to many of the concepts and procedures that are left without explanation and instruction in the Torah (Donin, 1991) and was eventually recorded in Jewish texts such as the Talmud. Orthodox Judaism is based upon this collective body of law, known as halacha. Halacha not only guides religious rituals, rules and beliefs, but also how a person conducts his day-to-day life and dealings with family, relationship and community (Mirkin & Okun, 2005).

For Orthodox Jews, the beliefs and traditions of the Jewish religion are ingrained to an extent that their global and religious identities are inseparable. In considering their lives a service to God and with a generous body of laws guiding their path, Orthodox Jews rely on firm principles and fixed rulings to orient themselves to the world (Wieselberg, 1992). Halbertal and Koren (2006, p. 47) describe this phenomenon well: “Because of both the encompassing and highly normative nature of halacha—one
regulation of every aspect of personal and public life through a voluminous and ever-evolving legal and meta-legal canon—its awareness infuses Orthodox communities and homes and minds, on levels ranging from the unconscious to the stridently overt.” Given the role that Jewish law plays in guiding their lives, Orthodox Jews’ psychological conflicts are often “refracted through the prism of religious identity and practice” (Ostrov, 1976, p. 147) and their understanding of the meaning of life and halacha are inseparable. In sum, the commandments bind all levels of the religious Jew’s experience (Kabakov, 2010).

As it does for other aspects of Jewish life (e.g., kosher dietary laws, prayer rituals etc.), Jewish law also provides guidelines for sexual relations between a husband and wife and specifies what role sex should play in the life of Jews (Antar, 2011). These guidelines deem sex appropriate when it is performed at permissible times, in the context of a heterosexual marriage, with the intent of strengthening the marital relationship, and in the service of procreation. When performed under these conditions, sex is considered a sanctified and holy act, as "be fruitful and multiply" is one of the first commandments of the Torah (Rapoport, 2004). In addition to being commanded to procreate, Jews likewise face the expectation to build and strengthen the Jewish nation. Deeply embedded in Jewish tradition, the expectation to procreate as a means of ensuring Jewish survival stems from the systematic and institutionalized marginalization, oppression, and persecution that Jews have experienced throughout the ages (Cohen, Aviv & Kelman, 2009). While the concern for Jewish survival is not unique to modern Jewish history, the Holocaust forced Jews to assume greater responsibility for Jewish survival. To illustrate the intense pressure Jews face to meet said responsibility, Unterman (1995, p. 68) likens
the failure to marry and have children to “communal treason.” Because homosexuality does not result in procreation, performing a gay or lesbian identity may be viewed as a denunciation of the mandate to restore the Jewish nation (Safran, 2013).

Along with its emphasis on group survival, Jewish tradition likewise stresses the importance of group solidarity—a value that often leaves American Orthodox Jews at odds with their host culture (Safran, 2013). While surrounded by a society that values autonomy, individualism, and self-fulfillment, Orthodox Jews are reared to prioritize community, interconnectedness, and deference to rabbinic authority (Mark, 2008). Similarly, unlike Western society, which is more forward-thinking in orientation, traditional Orthodox Jews prioritize the preservation of customs and values passed down from previous generations (Heilman, 2000). Given Orthodoxy’s commitment to sustaining tradition, it is unsurprising that lifestyles deemed discordant with Orthodox culture are undesired and, at times, denounced both by individual community members and by the Jewish community as a whole (Safran, 2013). A homosexual “lifestyle” is no exception.

While Orthodox Jews are, on the whole, dedicated to observing Jewish ritual practice and appear homogenous and close-knit on the surface, they do not comprise a homogenous group (Ariel, 2007). “Unlike other denominations, which have central organizational bodies” (Stahl & Kushner, 2014, p. 20), the Orthodox community is split into many different subsections, forming a spectrum that cannot be easily divided into neatly defined categories. Comprising many subgroups, Orthodoxy is a collective of observant Jews who differ in their worldview, rigor of practice, the extent to how much their behavior reflects a greater ease with and willingness to receive modern, westernized
culture and the value placed on secular, non-Jewish knowledge (Gurock, 2009). While these differences may remain undetected by outsiders, they remain significant for members of these subgroups (Wikler, 2001) and are especially important to consider in a discussion about Orthodoxy’s attitudes towards homosexuality. For the sake of brevity, this paper will strictly focus on two extremes of Orthodoxy’s spectrum, the Ultra-Orthodox and the Modern Orthodox.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews, also known as Hareidi Jews, practice strict adherence to traditional Jewish law while maintaining separation from non-Jewish society (Antar, 2011). Ultra-Orthodox Jews have historically lived in both enforced and self-imposed isolation from other collectives in an attempt to preserve their lifestyle and protect religious boundaries (Ostrov, 1976). Wieselberg (1992, p. 307) explains that this self-imposed isolation is due to their dedication to living “uncontaminated by contact with secular values except those necessary for employment and functions related to the state.” In other words, Ultra-Orthodox Jews remain separate from the host-culture in terms of both the environmental and the residential barriers they have built and reject Western secular society in order to ensure their religious endeavors stay pure. Different sub-groups within Ultra-Orthodoxy vary in how they define separation and view the modern world. While some sects believe that engagement with modern society is necessary for professional advancement and livelihood (Heilman, 2000), others separate themselves completely and live within their own community as much as possible.

Unlike Ultra-Orthodoxy, Modern Orthodoxy practices strict observance of Jewish law while also embracing secular knowledge as valuable (Antar, 2011). Attempting to “blend Jewish values and Jewish law with secular, mainstream society” (Safran, 2013,
Modern Orthodoxy accommodates interaction with western culture and the modern world. In application, this means that Modern Orthodox Jews appreciate the worth of secular studies and the value of higher education for all community members, irrespective of gender. Also, unlike Hareidi Judaism, Modern Orthodoxy is willing to consider revisiting questions of Jewish law through Talmudic arguments (Gurock, 2009) and offers more flexibility by considering individual dilemmas when applying Jewish law to individual and communal living (Glassgold, 2008). For example, in the past two decades, elements of the Modern Orthodox community have been more open to reevaluating Judaism’s traditional condemnatory approach to homosexuality (Safran, 2013).

**Contemporary Rabbinic and Communal Perspectives on Homosexuality**

Like other conservative communities, Jews who identify as Ultra-Orthodox often view homosexuality as a product of negative assimilation to modern culture (Safran, 2013). Furthermore, they fear the potential deleterious influences gay individuals may have on other members of the community. Consequently, many Orthodox Jews prefer that gay individuals be banned from their synagogues, communities, and even families. More often than not, Orthodox rabbis require that their gay and lesbian congregants suppress their same-sex feelings and desires. Some rabbis expect that gay men and lesbians refrain from sexual activity and remain celibate even if they continue to have same-sex attractions and feelings (Blechner, 2008). Other rabbis encourage gay individuals to push aside their feelings and desires and seek out a heterosexual relationship that can eventually lead to marriage and children.

In their article entitled “Does God Make Referrals? Orthodox Judaism and
Homosexuality,” Slomowitz and Feit (2015) discuss how homosexuality is seen not only as a forbidden practice within Ultra-Orthodoxy, but also as an impossible concept altogether. According to Slomowitz and Feit (2015), parts of the Ultra-Orthodox collective do not recognize the possibility of homosexual identity or orientation. To think of oneself as having a gay identity is to commit a “false, willful and rebellious act” (p. 101). To illustrate this idea, Slomowitz and Feit (2015, p. 102) cite Rabbi Avraham Edelstein (2013), an Ultra-Orthodox rabbi who states that “Judaism is opposed to defining people as gay,” “there is no word in Judaism for a gay person,” and “Judaism doesn’t define people based on sexual desire.” In Rabbi Edelstein’s brand of Judaism, therefore, gay individuals do not and cannot exist.

While some Ultra-Orthodox community members do not recognize homosexual orientation, others see homosexual orientation as a choice, and a choice that can be changed. Thus, many Ultra-Orthodox rabbis and community leaders advocate and promote conversion and/or reparative therapy, which is intended to change or "cure" one's sexual orientation, or at least to help one gain control over same-sex behaviors (Greenberg, 2004; Mark, 2008). Rabbi Goldberg (2007), for instance, states that, "People are not robbed of the freedom to choose to undergo therapy that empowers them to follow the norm" (p. 23). In addition to believing individuals can change or hide their sexual preference, Rabbi Goldberg sees little need in gay rights laws inasmuch as discrimination against homosexuals is “self-preventable.” Instead, he believes that "self-control, not legal protection, is the solution" (Goldberg, 2007, p. 26).

Rabbi Goldberg is one of many rabbis who advocates for reparative therapy. On December 26, 2011, a coalition exceeding 150 Orthodox rabbis, community organizers
and leaders released a declaration stating that according to the Torah, homosexuality is neither a genuine identity nor an acceptable “lifestyle” (The Committee for the Declaration on the Torah Approach to Homosexuality, 2011, para. 3). This same declaration likewise asserted that the “only Torah-approved course of action with regard to homosexuality” is repentance and psychological therapy (The Committee for the Declaration on the Torah Approach to Homosexuality, 2011, para. 1). Despite research that has come out about the deleterious impact of conversion and/or reparative therapies, rabbinic leadership has continued to endorse these types of therapies as “a solution for the gay problem” (Slomowitz & Feit, 2015, p. 102). Failures for these therapies to produce their desired outcome are often attributed to ineffective therapeutic technique, unrealistic expectations of change on the part of the therapist, poor patient commitment or motivation, or moral or spiritual failure (Yarhouse & Burkett, 2002). These perspectives support Novich’s (2014, p. 16) assertion that most Ultra-Orthodox circles view homosexuality as a “liberal ideology to be challenged, a character flaw to be corrected, or a disease that demands a cure.”

Unlike Ultra-Orthodoxy, which continues to accept a more literal interpretation of homosexuality as recorded in the Torah, parts of Modern Orthodoxy maintain that one’s understanding of Jewish law should be more culturally relevant and contextualized (Itzhaky & Kissil, 2015). Furthermore, even when more modern rabbis espouse the biblical prohibition of homosexual behavior, they have still shown increasing efforts to promote acceptance, sympathetic attitudes, and tolerance for gay and lesbian community members (Ariel, 2007; Safran, 2013). Rabbi Sherlo, for example, is among the growing number of Modern Orthodox rabbis who recognizes the conflict that Orthodox sexual
minorities experience between their sexual orientation and commitment to Jewish law. Though he believes anal sex is prohibited and that there is no way for Jewish law to allow such activity, Rabbi Sherlo asserts that a person who identifies as homosexual can be a “fully functioning member of the synagogue” (cited in Slomowitz & Feit, 2015, p. 102) and should not be excluded from the community. Similarly, Rabbi Chaim Rapoport (2004) maintains that gay individuals should not marry someone of the opposite gender. He even goes onto state that when counseling someone who identifies as gay, it is important to be sensitive to the “trauma and complexes they may be suffering as a result of the realization that they will probably not be able to get married” (p. 46).

Like Rabbis Sherlo and Rapoport, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach (2010A, 2010B) has also been changing Orthodoxy’s traditional discourse on homosexuality. Considered a more progressive Orthodox rabbi, Boteach asserts that Orthodox communities have long overemphasized the prohibitions from Leviticus and the commandment to be fruitful and multiply at the exclusion of other commandments. On that note, Rabbi Boteach advises the general public not to be preoccupied with what gay people are doing, but to instead focus on more important concerns, like raising children in a Jewish home and decreasing the divorce rate among heterosexual couples. Drawing distinctions between different types of sins in the Torah, he likewise classifies homosexuality as a religious sin (i.e. sins committed against God) rather than a moral one (i.e. sins committed against one’s fellow man). Lastly, Rabbi Boteach reminds the community that the term “abomination” surfaces nearly 122 times in the Torah, emphasizing that homosexuality is an “abomination” much like the act of eating non-kosher food (Deuteronomy 14:3) and bringing a blemished sacrifice on God’s altar (Deuteronomy 17:1).
In addition to progressive rabbinic perspectives shifting the community’s discourse on homosexuality, the turn of the twenty-first century witnessed the production of a documentary that helped move homosexuality “out of the closet and into the daylight” (Ariel, 2007, p.106). Dubowski’s (2001) film, *Trembling Before God*, intimately follows several gay male and female Orthodox Jews who have struggled to reconcile their love of Judaism with the Torah prohibition of homosexuality. The film also interviews rabbis and psychotherapists about Orthodox Jewish attitudes towards homosexuality. The individuals featured in the documentary vary: some have come out of the closet, and have, as a result, suffered the painful loss of family, friends, and community. Others have remained silent about their sexuality and speak of the pain and suffering that has accompanied living a closeted life. Among these interviewees is Rabbi Steven Greenberg, an Orthodox rabbi who openly identifies as gay. Prior to appearing in *Trembling Before God*, Rabbi Greenberg detailed his own struggles under a pseudonym, Rabbi Yaakov Levado (1993), in an article entitled, “*Gayness and God: Wrestlings of an Orthodox Rabbi*.” Rabbi Greenberg’s article and documentary appearance were just the starting points of a long rabbinic career dedicated toward advocating for the acceptance of Orthodox LGBTQ individuals.

What was particularly powerful about *Trembling Before God* was that it exposed the emotional turmoil gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews experience as they attempt to navigate their religious and sexual identities, an anguish that the Orthodox community had not previously seen. It likewise shed light onto the resilience of these marginalized individuals, who despite their inner torment, continue to embrace tradition and gain strength and comfort from their faith. By humanizing its subjects and helping audience
members tap into the dilemmas of gay individuals with more empathy and understanding, *Trembling Before God* helped transform “the gay Orthodox Jews from “them” into “us” (Ariel, 2007, p. 106). In turn, it paved the way for developing a more tolerant view of gay Orthodox community members. For example, Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, a well-respected rabbi of a large Modern Orthodox community, stated that the film inspired him to speak differently when discussing homosexuality in his Jewish sex education classes (Novich, 2014). Overall, the production and reception of *Trembling Before God* marked the beginning of an evolving relationship between both the Orthodox community and its gay members as well as between the Orthodox gay community and the secular gay community (Ariel, 2007). It also opened the door for gay Orthodox Jews to organize communally and give expression to their experiences in a manner they had not done prior—developments that will be reviewed below.

In 2009, Yeshiva University (YU), a flagship institution for Modern Orthodoxy, hosted a panel called “Being Gay in the Modern Orthodox World” that featured gay students and alumni discussing their struggles in the community. The panel neither addressed the *halachic* position toward homosexuality (Safran, 2013), nor attempted to amend the prohibition of homosexuality as seen through the lens of the Torah (Novich, 2014). Instead, it focused on trying to increase awareness of the harsh climate and poor treatment that Orthodox gay individuals are often forced to endure from the Orthodox community (Rifkin, 2010). With attendance that far exceeded expectation, having attracted several hundreds of students, faculty, and local community members, the panel’s turnout suggested that this was a valuable and substantive topic. In addition, it exposed a degree of interest, authenticity, and support that gay Orthodox Jews had not
previously witnessed (Stahl & Kushner, 2014). Rabbi Greenberg (mentioned above) described the event as a “game changer,” noting that the panel was “the first time an Orthodox institution was willing to hear the stories of gay people from within its community” (Novich, 2014, p. 25). It is worth mentioning that the panel was exclusively comprised of men and did not, therefore, give voice to the experience of Orthodox lesbian women.

While considered a marker of progress, the panel also elicited backlash by select parties (Novich, 2014). Soon after the event, the head of Yeshiva University’s rabbinical school, Rabbi Yona Reiss, together with the University’s president, Richard Joel, issued a statement reiterating the absolute prohibition of homosexual relationships (Rifkin, 2010). The statement also stated that though well-intentioned, public gatherings like the panel “could send the wrong message and obscure the Torah’s requirements of halachic behavior and due modesty” (Lipman, “Deeply Conflicting Views” section, para. 5). According to Novich (2014, p. 25), five roshei yeshiva (see Glossary) also issued a statement which asserted that, “homosexual activity constitutes an abomination” and that “publicizing or seeking legitimization even for the homosexual orientation runs contrary to Torah.” The document further states that these “basic truths regarding homosexual feelings and activity must be re-emphasized at any forum where “appropriate sympathy for such discreet individuals is being discussed” (“Deeply Conflicting Views” section, para. 4, 2009).

In spite of the above negative reactions, the YU panel was a catalyst for continued conversation, including one of the first “non-anonymous” articles in Yeshiva University’s school newspaper written by a gay student (Kirshstein, 2012) and the Statement of
Principles (2010), a document addressing the treatment of gay Orthodox individuals in the Orthodox community. Written by a collective of Orthodox rabbis, leaders, and educators, the Statement of Principles strove to “affirm the divine essence of all Jews, no matter their sexual orientation, and to emphasize the respect and dignity due to gay people in the Orthodox community” (Novich, 2014, p. 26). In addition to classifying the act of shaming gay people as a violation of the Torah, the statement also called upon synagogues and schools to welcome gay community members, stating that these individuals "should participate and count ritually, be eligible for ritual synagogue honors, and generally be treated in the same fashion and under the same halachic framework as another member" (Statement of Principles, 2010, p. 2). The statement also opposed both the “outing of individuals who want to remain private” and coercion to closet “those who desire to be open about their orientation” (p. 2). Lastly, it reads that "Halacha only prohibits homosexual acts; it does not prohibit orientation or feelings of same-sex attraction" (Statement of Principles, 2010, p. 1).

Overall, the Statement of Principles shed light on several aspects of the gay Orthodox experience and also proposed ways in which the community could show more tolerance. Beyond acknowledging that reparative therapies have been deemed ineffective and possibly harmful by most mental health professionals and rabbis, the Statement asserted that gay people have the “religious right to reject therapeutic approaches they reasonably see as useless or dangerous” (Statement of Principles, 2010, p. 1). It also discussed the suicidality that gay people in the community experience as well as the role that rabbis and mental health professionals are obligated to assume in order to help those struggling. Accruing over 200 signatures from Orthodox rabbis, educators, and mental
health professionals, the Statement represented an important shift toward communal conversations about inclusivity and the need for more empathy. That said, the statement still maintained that same-sex actions for both men and women is prohibited and affirmed heterosexual marriages as the “ideal and sole legitimate outlet for sexual expression” (para. 4). Emphasizing that Jewish law would not be able to support religious same-sex commitment ceremonies of any kind, the document, thus, signified a limit to how much gay people could be accepted in Orthodox communities. It should also be noted that many ultra-Orthodox subgroups did not sign the Statement (Etengoff, 2017).

In parallel with community leaders beginning to dialogue about how to better integrate their gay members into the community, the last decade has witnessed a growing number of Orthodox LGBTQ networks forming both in the United States and abroad (e.g., Bat Kol, Orthodykes, JQYouth, etc.). These support groups provide the opportunity for gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews to build relationships and feel less isolated in their experiences (Glassgold, 2008). Eshel, for example, was co-founded in 2010 by Rabbi Steven Greenberg (referenced above) to provide support resources for LGBTQ Orthodox community members and their families. In addition to creating community programming for these members, Eshel also aims to increase the Orthodox community’s understanding of LGBTQ issues through educational initiatives. Of Eshel’s many accomplishments, its first-ever retreat, which welcomed nearly 140 people of various sexual and gender identities, is among its most notable. This retreat was a milestone in that it signified the Orthodox LGBTQ community’s ability to organize and have members support each other’s efforts to stay connected to their religious identities while also exploring their sexual identities (Novich, 2014). Jewish Queer Youth (JQY) is another nonprofit
organization supporting and empowering LGBTQ young people in the Jewish community, with a special focus on teens and young adults from Orthodox communities.

In addition to in-person support groups, the internet has been an effective means of helping gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews discuss their sexuality in a safe forum and communicate anonymously with potential peers and prospective romantic partners (Antar, 2011). In speaking about the benefits of Internet forums, Mordechai Levovitz (2012), co-founder of JQY, stated the following:

The key in surviving as an Orthodox LGBT is not feeling alone…A big mistake that a lot of people make about being Orthodox and LGBT is that there is a huge risk for suicide and self-harm, but not because of the prohibition in the Torah. It’s because of loneliness and shame. People don’t kill themselves because of a verse, they kill themselves because they feel alone. The Internet kind of saved people. It didn’t make you any more wrong or right, but it stopped the isolation. You feel less shame when you’re not the only one.

Serving as a “comforting shoulder to lean on in cyberspace,” Sarah Weil (cited by Udasin, 2010) likewise saw the value of Internet resources for LGBTQ Orthodox Jews. Having translated a Hebrew website into English to provide resources for lesbian Orthodox women living outside of Israel, Weil felt she was creating a “life net”—a cross between a lifeline and safety net. Channeling similar sentiments, the web-based “It Gets Better Project” was directed by Dan Savage in November 2010 to help LGBTQ youth know they are not alone and have resources. Five gay Jewish men from the Orthodox community posted a video on YouTube as part of the project and used it as a platform to inspire hope by way of discussing various challenges they have overcome. As of January
2018, the video reached as many as 152,086 views. In addition, *DEVOUT*, a short documentary following the lives of seven women attempting to reconcile their “alternative” sexuality with their commitment to Orthodoxy, was published on YouTube in May 2014. Directed by two Columbia University journalism students, Diana Neille and Sana Gulzar, *DEVOUT* was neither as publicized nor as transformative as *Trembling Before God*.

To what extent the growing number of in-person and online Orthodox LGBTQ Jewish support groups reflect the Orthodox Jewish community’s evolving stance towards acceptance and inclusion remains unclear. To review, rabbinic rulings regarding homosexuality have ranged from rejecting both homosexual behavior and the gay individual to strictly rejecting homosexual behavior while accepting the gay individual (Halbertal & Koren, 2006; Safran, 2013). Furthermore, even when more progressive rabbis have offered “*halachic* loopholes for gay men and women” (Ariel, 2007, p.205), these newer approaches have not been readily accepted by more conservative Orthodox leaders and communities (Safran, 2013). Though religious communities have been called upon by leaders to be more empathic to their gay community members, compassion alone does not offer a practical solution to gay religious Jews who are hoping to live meaningful and satisfying lives while embodying both their gay and religious identities. Having studied the effects of positive and religious coping strategies on mental health in a sample of gay and bisexual religious Jewish men, Shilo, Yossef, and Savaya (2016, p. 1554) capture this precise challenge when they assert the following:

*Although empathy by religious congregations is important, gay men are condemned to solitude and lonely lives, without a biblical solution to their desire*
for intimate same-sex relationships, no way to constitute their own families, and a constant struggle between their identity and rabbinical instructions.

Jewish law aside, the last decade has witnessed an increasing effort by Modern Orthodox communities to provide their LGBT members with a platform to speak about their experiences in the community (Stahl & Kushner, 2014) as well as attempts at building more tolerance. Since Yeshiva University’s 2009 panel, Torah in Motion, a nonprofit organization based in Toronto, hosted two panels in May and December 2016 entitled “The LGBT Community and Orthodoxy” and “Sinai and Sexuality: LGBT Jews Talk about G-d, Torah and Personal Identity.” Both discussions were dedicated to understanding how young, observant LGBT Jews understand and live with the challenges, tensions, and opportunities of encountering Judaism. The Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, an Open Orthodox synagogue based in New York, similarly hosted a panel in 2016 entitled “Frum and Gay: Building a Jewish Future Outside the Closet,” which sought to understand how Orthodox institutions, schools, and synagogues can ensure viable futures for their gay community members.

Paralleling these advancements have been strides that the gay Orthodox community is making to form its own network and gain its own voice; a voice that includes “elements of the gay culture at large yet carries its own unique components derived from an observance of Jewish tradition” and a commitment to faith and community (Ariel, 2007, p. 106). Nevertheless, progress is still needed: While gay Orthodox Jews have begun carving out spaces for themselves as discourse around their inclusion has increased, the Biblical and Talmudic prohibitions of homosexuality still remain. Additionally, while gay Orthodox men have increasingly been afforded public
forums to discuss their experiences as evidenced by the YU all-male gay panel, Orthodox lesbians have not been provided similar platforms to be heard.

**The Gay Orthodox Jewish Experience: A Review of the Research**

Because their sexual and religious identities are deemed incompatible, the Orthodox Jewish gay individual who hopes to remain faithful to his/her religious tradition faces several challenges (Antar, 2012). While previous studies have focused on religious gay men and lesbians’ ability to synthesize their conflicting identities (Yarhouse, 2001; Yip, 1999), such a process seems less likely for Orthodox Jews, for whom religion is so deeply embedded in their overall identity formation (Antar, 2012). Halbertal and Koren (2006, p.38) capture this distinctive quality well:

For Orthodox Jewish gays and lesbians, religion represents a far more encompassing web of beliefs, values, ritual practices and social and familial connections that cannot easily be uncoupled from the individual’s deepest sense of being. Precisely because of the profound and pervasive impact of religion on their overall identity formation, Orthodox Jews provide an extreme and heretofore invisible counterpoint to previous assessments, a revealing window into the spectrum of cases in which the conflicting claims of same sex attraction and other deeply held valuative frameworks face each other in all their irreducible and irreconcilable differences.

Given the unique “complexity behind both the identity formation and experience of Orthodox Jewish gay and lesbian individuals” (Safran, 2013, p. 55), the following section will review the handful of studies that have investigated this particular collective’s experiences. More specifically, it will present qualitative research that has
investigated how Orthodox gay and lesbian individuals have navigated conflicts surrounding their religion and sexuality.

Coyle and Rafalin (2000) conducted one of the first qualitative works to capture the nature and source of religious and sexual identity conflict in a sample of gay, predominantly Progressive Jewish men. Additionally, these researchers were interested in the ways in which identity conflict and threat were managed and resolved as well as the psychological implications that resulted from such strategies. The majority of participants in Coyle and Rafalin’s study attributed identity conflict and threat to Judaism’s negative outlook on homosexuality. All but one of the participants expressed struggling to reconcile their Jewish and gay identities at some point over the course of their lives. Half the sample reported that upon revealing their sexuality to their parents, the primary concern expressed revolved around the continuation of their family and of the Jewish people. In other words, parents worried that their sons would not marry or have children. Some participants attributed their decision for non-disclosure to their parents’ experience in the Holocaust, with one participant stating “I think the fact that my father lost so much family in the Holocaust was… I was going to continue that family and having a son was very important and having the name was very important” (p. 22). The authors reported that negative responses—including disbelief, distress, disgust, verbal abuse and refusal to discuss the subject—by close friends, rabbis, parental friends, colleagues, and acquaintances were reported more often than positive reactions. Negative reactions by parents, in particular, reportedly caused feelings of intense guilt and regret among participants.

Significant to the present study, Coyle and Rafalin (2000) reported that the only
participants in their sample who remained completely closeted in their social circles were those four men who identified as Orthodox. These participants attributed their decision not to disclose to Orthodoxy’s negative outlook on homosexuality. One participant reported fearing that should his rabbi and community discover his sexuality, he would be pathologized or forced into marrying a woman in order to be “sorted out.” This participant was also concerned that his disclosure might compromise his parents’ position in the community, stating “I feel that my parents who are quite respected within the community would be ostracized and I do not wish to see them being hurt” (p. 25). Those who tried to keep their sexual orientation private from their Jewish communities spoke of a variety of strategies. One strategy involved complying with communal expectations by pursuing heterosexual dating. One man married a woman, though authors noted this relationship did not endure. Another strategy involved men detaching themselves from the community in order to avoid discussion about sexuality and relationships. These strategies came at a psychological cost, with some participants reporting “dissatisfaction at having to lie and maintain distance from others” (p. 25) when they otherwise gain pleasure from their involvement in the community. One participant effectively captures this experience in the following statement (p. 33):

The general homophobia in the Jewish community can make it difficult to be gay, yet I still have feelings of loyalty toward the community. I don’t love Judaism any the less for it, what I do find difficult to reconcile is that my congregationalists in synagogue would probably ostracize me if they knew I was gay.

Overall, the incompatibility between their sexuality and their religious beliefs and values left the four Orthodox Jewish men in Coyle and Rafalin’s study struggling to
remain openly committed to both identities. In distancing themselves from others and lying about their authentic sexual identities, these gay Orthodox men reported feeling isolated, lonely, and a general sense of wariness within their relationships.

While Coyle & Rafalin’s (2000) study sheds light onto the methods that gay Jewish men utilize to manage, compartmentalize, and/or minimize the conflict between identities they deemed incompatible, the sample mainly comprised men from more progressive Jewish communities and cannot be extended to the gay Orthodox experience. The same is true of Schnoor’s (2006) study, which qualitatively investigated identity negotiation and construction amongst gay Jewish men in Toronto. Overall, Schnoor (2006) hypothesized that gay Jewish men inherently face difficulties with identity construction because their Jewishness and gayness come into conflict.

Four primary negotiation strategies emerged as respondents in Schnoor’s (2006) study discussed ways they managed these difficulties. More traditionally minded and carrying much shame and guilt about their gayness, the “Jewish lifestylers” attempted to repress their gay sexual orientation so that it did not disrupt their Jewish lives and commitment to tradition. More secular, the “gay lifestylers” significantly inhibited their Jewish identities in order to perform exclusively gay identities. Feeling that both identities should be emphasized, the “gay-Jewish commuters” traveled freely between gay-specific contexts and Jewish-specific contexts, performing each identity depending on their surrounding environment. Lastly, the “gay-Jewish integrators” viewed themselves as having multiple qualities and identities, with neither identity assuming priority over the other. Gay-Jewish integrators, thus, performed both their gay and Jewish selves throughout all of their social worlds in the hopes of achieving identity
integration. They managed to do so by challenging Jewish theological outlooks on homosexuality, using Jewish values to help them navigate gay culture, engaging in gay Jewish organizations, and focusing on similarities between Judaism and homosexuality. While Schnoor’s (2006) study adds to our understanding about the processes gay Jewish men undergo in order to maintain their Jewishness while accepting their gayness, this study only included one Orthodox man in its sample and, therefore, does not adequately capture the gay Orthodox experience. The remainder of this section will be dedicated to qualitative works that exclusively focused on gay Orthodox Jewish samples.

In one of the first studies of its kind, Itzhaky and Kissil (2015) qualitatively explored the lived experiences of closeted gay men living in ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities. All but one of Itzhaky and Kissil’s twenty-two-person sample were married and nineteen reported having children. All members reported keeping their sexuality a secret in order to avoid adverse consequences that disclosure would cause them and their families, which according to the sample included being shunned and excommunicated. This is best reflected by a participant who stated that should his community find out about his sexuality, his adolescent children “would be removed from the educational programs” they were enrolled in and “would not be able to get married” (p. 634).

Four dominant themes emerged when participants in Itzhaky and Kissil’s study spoke of their experiences within and perceptions of the Orthodox community. First, participants described feeling emotional distress—including shame, guilt, disgust, and self-hatred—due to their gayness. One participant stated that he felt “defective” and as though he was “not a whole human being” while another spoke of despising himself for
his sins. This emotional struggle was framed as an “ongoing, continuous process” that has not yet met any form of resolution (p. 630). As was found in Coyle and Rafalin’s (2000) study, several of these participants mentioned that they thought about killing themselves at one point, with a few having attempted suicide. This finding is consistent with other works that detail how shame and self-hatred can develop in individuals who live with a “socially devalued sexual identity” (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000, p. 19) coupled with limited social support and feelings of rejection. When extreme enough, these feelings can develop into suicidal thoughts, gestures, intent, or attempts. While there are no formal statistics available on the Orthodox community's suicide rate (Rapoport, 2004), research has frequently found a distinctly higher incidence of suicidality among gay and lesbian young adults as compared to their heterosexual counterparts (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). The suicide rate for Orthodox sexual minorities is expected to be even higher than the gay community in general given the more restrictive and tight knit atmosphere of Orthodox communities.

A second theme that emerged in Itzhaky and Kissil’s study was the unequivocal need to hide one’s sexuality: because participants could not accept or tolerate their own gayness, they believed that nobody in their religious communities or families would likewise be able to accept or tolerate their gayness. Other forms of coping included denying one’s gayness, using rituals to “cleanse the gay away,” employing compensatory actions to repent for “possible behavior that brought the homosexuality on them” (p. 632), and pursuing heterosexual relationships. In terms of the latter coping method, participants reported marrying women in order to ward off scrutiny from the community, knowing that if they were to remain single, the community would become suspicious of
their sexuality. Many of these participants expressed that these coping mechanisms came with a cost: lying about their sexuality and hiding from their loved ones resulted in feeling guilty, lonely, disconnected, and without support. Thus, feeling a lack of satisfaction in their familial relationships surfaced as yet another salient theme in Itzhaky and Kissil’s study.

Finally, Itzhaky and Kissil (2015) found that their sample of gay closeted men felt ambivalent towards the Orthodox Jewish community. On the one hand, participants spoke of the community as a force that has fostered feelings of gratitude, belonging, appreciation, continuity, predictability, and structure. To most of these men, the Orthodox community provides them and their families with many of their needs—be it educational, social, financial and religious—and is the only world in which they feel comfort. On the other hand, being in the community also generated intense fear that if discovered for who they are, these men and their families would incur negative consequences. Unwilling to lose the only home they have ever known, the Orthodox Jewish men in Itzhaky and Kissil’s study prefer to make every effort to ensure that their sexual orientation remains concealed. To this sample of gay Orthodox closeted men, losing the orthodox community would mean losing their way of life and their families.

Like Itzhaky and Kissil (2015), Novich (2014) was also interested in studying the experiences of Jewish gay men who are involved with the Orthodox community. Using focus groups to collect data from twenty-four gay, community-involved Jewish men, Novich (2014) began each group by inquiring, “What is it like to be a gay man in the Orthodox Jewish Community?” Novich (2014) found that when participants spoke about their experiences in the community, they did so by discussing four distinct, but
overlapping, domains: the self, social, familial, and communal. In the self-domain, participants expressed internalized sexual stigma, which proved deleterious for the psychological well-being of select participants. Similar to the gay-Jewish commuters in Schnoor’s (2006) study and those men in Coyle and Rafalin’s (2000) study who relied on compartmentalization, the gay men in Novich’s study had a challenging time integrating their gay and Orthodox identities. As a result, some participants became disconnected from their rabbis and Orthodox values. Unsurprisingly, participants expressed experiencing feelings of “otherness” in the social domain and noted the need to approach disclosure (when to come out and to whom) with intentionality so as to minimize adverse consequences.

When it came to the family domain, participants reported receiving negative reactions from family that resulted in strained relationships. They also expressed feeling as though they were burdens on their families for having caused embarrassment and/or potential damage for unmarried siblings looking to find a partner. Furthermore, participants spoke about the current barriers they face for future family planning. More specifically, they spoke of lacking communal support in securing partners, recognizing these partnerships, sanctioning marriages and celebrating family life cycles events. This finding was consistent with Cohen, Aviv, and Kelman’s (2009) assertion that Jewish organizations have largely failed to recognize and address the unique needs that gay Jews have when it comes to social services, reproduction and family formation, aging, and legal rights. Novich (2014, p. 79) noted that for the gay men in his sample, the “concept of family, both of origin and of future, is wrought with possible dangers and foreseen dead ends.”
Impacting the self both directly and as mediated through the social and family forces, the community domain in Novich’s study proved particularly influential. The sample of men in Novich’s study reported a wide range of homonegative experiences in the community, including homophobia, exclusion, rejection, stigma, hostility, and alienation. To review, homonegativity is a term that broadly identifies negative reactions to homosexuality. Participants in Novich’s study likewise reported a lack of proper sex education and mentorship. The former has left many Orthodox gay men vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted sexual experiences, while the latter has left gay, religious individuals unsure of how to navigate dating, marriage, and parenting. Despite feeling oppressed by the community, the sample in Novich’s (2014) study maintained positive connections to their religion, culture and communities while varying in their level of observance. Novich (2014, p. 83) framed this “surprising” finding as ambivalence, “such that the participants love Orthodoxy for all it offers them while simultaneously feeling disappointed or angry at Orthodoxy for the conflict and challenges it causes them surrounding their sexuality.”

Noting a similar conflicted set of feelings in their Jerusalem-based sample, Halbertal and Koren (2006) qualitatively studied the struggle of identity conflict and synthesis in a group of gay Orthodox men and women. More specifically, Halbertal and Koren (2006, p.44) found that Orthodox gay and lesbian individuals expressed struggling to stay committed to “a tradition that delegitimizes, condemns and punishes homosexuality” and whose rabbinic leadership appears to influence Orthodoxy’s negative attitude towards homosexual individuals. Many of the participants asserted that after approaching rabbis for help to either become heterosexual or find a way to live as gay
within a religious framework, they left with a sense of “guilt, reproach, and with a tool kit of bizarre methods toward a cure” (p. 52). Participants explained that because rabbis believe that homosexuality would not be made a prohibition if it were not something that could be controlled, the burden of change fell upon gay individuals and not on prevailing narratives within Orthodox Jewish culture. Neither seeing themselves as “curable” nor regarding change as a feasible alternative, participants ultimately felt abandoned and alienated by the religious establishment. Overall, Halbertal and Koren (2006) found that four themes emerged when participants spoke of their subjective experiences of identity synthesis: (1) Participants endorsed denial at first about their gay/lesbian identity, a phenomenon which these authors refer to as “knowing and not-knowing”; (2) Participants experienced challenges and ramifications when and after disclosing to family, friends and community; (3) Participants experienced internalized homophobia from both Judaism’s approach to homosexuality and mainstream Western culture; and (4) Almost all participants spoke about themselves as both inherently religious and gay, as if each were “unchosen” parts of themselves that were both intrinsic to their being.

Though based on her clinical work and not formally derived from research, Mark’s (2008) description of the gay Orthodox experience parallels many of the themes that emerged in the above qualitative works. In her article, “Identities in Conflict: Forging an Orthodox Gay Identity,” Mark (2008, p. 179) discusses the “unique philosophical, psychological, and social tensions that can arise for Orthodox gay people.” She does so in order to illuminate the clinical implications for working with this collective. Mark (2008) notes that because gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews feel rejected by God and fear rejection from their family, friends, and communities, they are unable to
ORTHODOX JEWISH LESBIAN WOMEN

give expression to their sexuality within traditional religious settings. Furthermore, because of their limited contact with the secular world, they are often uncomfortable seeking out secular gay communities and support resources. In the face of this conflict, many gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews struggle both with "coming out" and with integrating a positive sexual identity into their overall identity. Due to the evident conflict that Orthodox gay and lesbian individuals endure, Mark (2008) outlines core areas that this collective typically brings into treatment. These core areas include internalized homophobia, feelings of being abandoned and/or punished by God as well as feelings of anger towards God and the community. They likewise may have difficulty forging an identity that includes a gay sexual orientation, endorse fear or grief over the loss of close relationships, and may be experiencing great pressure to conform to communal norms in order to avoid bringing shame and reputational damage upon their families.

Like Mark (2008), Glassgold (2008) used her clinical work as basis for highlighting the psychological consequences of being gay and Orthodox. What is unique about Glassgold’s (2008) piece as compared to the above works, however, is that it exclusively focuses on the lesbian Orthodox experience. In “Bridging the Divide: Integrating Lesbian Identity and Orthodox Judaism,” Glassgold (2008) presents an overview of her treatment with Chaya, an Orthodox lesbian woman. When she first entered treatment, Chaya could not entertain the possibility of being gay, having viewed gayness and religiosity as opposing forces. Chaya likewise feared that owning her lesbian identity would result in expulsion and excommunication from her Orthodox community. As is the case for many observant Jews, Chaya regarded the communal
aspects of Orthodoxy as inseparable from her religious beliefs. To Chaya, acknowledging her gayness meant potentially losing connection with her community. As a result, a good portion of Glassgold’s work with Chaya centered on helping her strategize how she would disclose her sexuality to her inner circle of friends while maintaining ties with the community.

**Implications for the Present Study**

Beyond being valuable for where clinical interventions with gay Orthodox Jews are concerned, Glassgold’s (2008) article is pioneering in that it exclusively sheds light onto the lesbian Orthodox experience. Unlike the handful of researchers who have only focused on gay Orthodox men and authors who mixed gay women and men in their sample, Glassgold (2008) tackles issues that are unique to gay Orthodox women. First, Glassgold states that much of what is written about female sexuality in Jewish texts “are not from actual experiences, but from what is observable by men or assumed by them” (Biale, 1984, p. 196). Second, she elaborates on the absence of lesbian sexuality in the Torah, noting how the verses in Leviticus explicitly refer to sexual behaviors between men. In doing so, she highlights how the discussion of rabbinic views on homosexuality all too often involves only the texts concerning men. Not having their sexuality mentioned in the Torah, i.e. the fundamental source of Jewish Law, often leaves lesbian women in the dark about their sexuality. This was exemplified by the case of Chaya, who reportedly received little guidance from religious leaders who proved unknowledgeable about lesbian sexuality and behavior.

The idea that the experiences and reality of women, and especially lesbians, have been largely invisible and unarticulated in Jewish normative tradition is central in
Kabakov’s (2010) book, *Keep Your Wives Away from Them: Orthodox Women, Unorthodox Desires*. A collection of fourteen essays written by women who identify themselves as part of the LGBTQ community, Kabakov’s anthology shows that while invisible, LGBTQ women are by no means absent from the community. One of Kabakov’s essayists, Elaine Chapnik, states that while the invisibility of lesbianism in the Torah may pain some lesbians, it may comfort others who are looking to stay “under the radar screen of rabbinic opprobrium” (p. 81). Chapnik identifies with those who experience pain in the face of invisibility, stating, “While I might wish the rabbis hadn’t proclaimed any pejorative attitudes toward lesbians, it felt worse to be made invisible. It is far better to be in the text and banned than not to be mentioned at all” (p. 81).

The present exploratory study aims to shed light on a hitherto invisible collective. More specifically, it aims to redress the lack of literature on Orthodox Jewish lesbians by gaining a better understanding of how they experience the Orthodox community. Several of the authors mentioned above have highlighted how essential it is to consider the social context of Jewish identity; how even when conflicting identities can be addressed at an individual level, the communal context may still implicitly or explicitly challenge how one navigates identity conflict. In Itzhaky and Kissil’s (2015) study, for example, Orthodox gay men considered the community so indispensable that they could not find any other options to live their lives openly as gay men. Coyle and Rafalin (2000, p. 36) similarly assert that gay “individuals will need to find contexts in which a revised Jewish identify will be valued and supported.” Given the importance of community, mental health professionals who are trying to address the needs of this marginalized population need to better understand the unique social, cultural, and communal contexts in which
Orthodox Jewish lesbians find themselves. By providing Orthodox Jewish lesbians the platform to speak about their experiences in the community as well as detail the ways in which the community can improve, this study ultimately aims to increase understanding of this group within the community so as to enhance the possibility for communal dialogue; an essential step needed for communal change.
Chapter III: Methods

Qualitative Research

The current study employed a qualitative research methodology in order to shed light on the experiences of women who identity as Orthodox Jewish lesbians. This chapter will discuss the use of qualitative methodology and its appropriateness for exploring the multitude of experiences produced by intersecting religious and sexual identities. Criteria for recruitment, participant composition, questions utilized in the semi-structured interview, and data analysis procedures will also be discussed.

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 12), qualitative methodologies allow researchers the opportunity to immerse themselves within the “inner experience of participants to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture.” A qualitative methodology featuring a phenomenological oriented interview was utilized in the present study to elicit a richer and deeper account of individual’s lived experiences. This in-depth approach was important for investigating the present population given the lack of existing research specific to the experiences of Orthodox Jewish lesbians. Though a number of researchers have explored the potential conflicts between gay identity and Jewish identity, sparse studies focus on Orthodox Jewish sexual minorities and even fewer strictly concentrate on the Orthodox lesbian experience.

Qualitative methodology was also deemed logistically feasible given the tight-knit community under study and the relatively small sample of women projected to participate. Furthermore, as compared to quantitative research, a qualitative method of analysis is more exploratory, flexible, and open-ended in nature and seeks to generate rather than test hypotheses. The themes that come to light through a qualitative
investigation of a particular phenomenon can then be used to generate hypotheses for further study, allowing the researcher to follow-up on the intricacies of the data.

Finally, a qualitative approach was utilized in the present study in order to empower individuals within oppressive systems to recognize their own strength and ability to be agents of change (Etengoff, 2017). Referencing Wright (2009), Etengoff (2017, p.169) notes that “minority resilience may be linked to the narrative opportunity to express both personal and collective concerns.” By providing Orthodox Jewish lesbians the platform to articulate improvements the community can make to better address their needs as religious and lesbian, this study sought to facilitate a process that bell hooks (1989) refers to as “talking back”—an act of resistance by a marginalized and oppressed group that helps to facilitate the process of resilience.

**Grounded Theory**

Data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Grounded theory allows for the analysis of process and the construction of theory based on qualitative data. Unlike other methods of analysis that are derived from grand, abstract theory, grounded theory aims to develop new theories that are “grounded” in the data. In this approach, the theory is derived from the data through analysis. The end goal of grounded theory analysis is not to confirm or disconfirm a theory, but to develop a theory that is an adequate and sensitive representation of the data. The aim of the current study was to elicit rich narrative data about the specific experiences of Orthodox Jewish lesbians rather than to build a generalizable theory about this population that might be applied to other studies. Therefore, its methodology does not represent pure grounded
theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), but is, nonetheless, still guided by the procedures associated with grounded theory. These procedures are outlined in more detail below.

Participants

Selection Criteria

Women over the age of 18 who identified as lesbian and Orthodox Jewish were eligible for this study. In addition, participants needed to identify as cisgender, or women who were born of that sex, in order to qualify for participation. Individuals who identified as transgender or transsexual were not included in this study, as they were expected to have different communal experiences given Jewish law’s divergent treatment of gender and sexual orientation (Novich, 2014). Participants also needed to identify as lesbian in order to be eligible for participation. While being attracted to members of both genders in a heteronormative culture such as Orthodoxy presents challenges, the experiences of bisexual women were expected to be different from those who are predominantly or exclusively attracted to other women. As was the case in Novich’s (2014) study, the present investigation excluded individuals who identified as bisexual given the possibility that they may pursue and “enjoy a traditional family and communal Orthodox Jewish life by marrying someone of the opposite sex” (p. 51). Lastly, participants needed to consider themselves Orthodox, as women with other denominational identifications (e.g., Reform, Conservative) were expected to have a different set of experiences.

Recruitment

Half of the sample was recruited via networking. A recruitment advertisement was posted on the private Facebook pages of various Orthodox LGBTQ networks, including Jewish Queer Youth, Eshel, and Netivot. The advertisement stated the study’s
intended aim and participation criteria. Interested participants were instructed to contact the principal investigator for a phone screening (see Appendix B). Remaining study participants were recruited via a snowball sampling where existing participants recruited prospective participants from among their social groups.

**Measures**

**Demographics questionnaire.** (see Appendix E). Participants were asked to complete a demographic sheet, which gathered information about their age, gender, and religious background. Information regarding their current religious involvement, relationship status and gender of partner, if applicable, was gathered during the interview.

**Semi-structured interview.** (see Appendix F) The current study employed a semi-structured interview, which expanded upon the questions raised by Novich (2014). The interview guide was pilot tested to determine whether the questions elicited the type of data sought for this study and to gage a realistic amount of time that the interview would take. The test subject, an Orthodox gay cisgender male psychologist, was known to the researcher and has served as an important source of information about the Orthodox LGBTQ community. The semi-structured interview comprised open-ended, phenomenological questions about how Orthodox Jewish lesbians experience community. More specifically, women were asked questions about what role the community plays in their lives; what aspects of the community they find challenging and/or stigmatizing; what aspects of the community they find rewarding; how their relationship with the community has changed or stayed the same since recognizing their same-sex attraction; what experiences they have had while navigating disclosure about their sexuality; what factors have impacted their decisions to remain within the
community rather than leave it; and what changes they would like to see the community make, if at all, to better meet their needs as women who identify as lesbian.

**Procedures**

Interested participants were instructed to contact the principal investigator for a phone screening, which was then utilized to ensure prospective participants met inclusion criteria and to inform participants about the purpose of the research and what participation entailed. Individuals deemed ineligible were provided with an explanation as to why and were thanked for their time and interest. For those who were interested and eligible for participation, an in-person interview was arranged at a location of the participant’s choosing to ensure comfort and convenience. Seven interviews were conducted at participants’ homes while three were conducted at participants’ place of work. At the beginning of each interview, the participants’ written informed consent for participation and audio-recording was obtained. All participants were interviewed using the semi-structured interview protocol, and all interviews were audio-taped. Each interview lasted approximately two and a half to three hours.

**Treatment of Data**

Participants were assigned a case number in order to protect their identity, and no identifying information was attached to the study data or audiotapes obtained. Copies of the consent form that participants signed were kept in a locked cabinet. To maintain confidentiality, consent forms were kept separate from hard copies of the interview data, audio recordings and interview transcripts, which were kept in another secure location. Interviews were transcribed by the principal investigator exclusively. No identifying information was attached to the transcriptions or audio recordings. All electronic files
containing transcripts or audio recordings of the interviews were kept on the principal investigator’s computer and were password protected. Any audio recordings, interview transcripts, or other data collected from the participants will be kept in a locked file cabinet or password protected computer files for three years after the completion of the study. After three years, all documents with identifying information and all audio records will be destroyed by the principal investigator.

**Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The data analytics of grounded theory consist of three phases of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During open coding, the data was broken into smaller categories by grouping and labeling similar concepts, phrases, words, and patterns together. The data obtained was continuously compared to the emergent categories in order to determine reliability in data coding, with the process continuing until there was no more emerging categories that could be identified. This was accomplished by a repeated reading and re-reading of the data, which allowed for both the emergence of subcategories and dimensional qualities and for a more refined organization of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Once the data was grouped through open coding, the analysis proceeded to axial coding, the second phase of analysis. This phase consisted of identifying relationships between the categories that were previously identified via open coding and involved considering the conditions, contexts, strategies and consequences that govern the different categories. The goal of the axial coding is to identify causal relationships, which will ultimately allow the researcher to construct a theory that captures the relationships among the data’s categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The
construction of theory takes place during the final phase, or selective coding. In this phase, the categories and relationships identified during open and axial coding are combined and abstracted in order to create core categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the current study, subject responses were collapsed into concepts and categories at the level of open coding, and then further refined at the level of axial coding. Finally, during selective coding, they were developed into more general themes.

**The Primary Researcher’s Background, Experiences, and Biases**

Because the researcher is an intricate part of the research process, and of qualitative inquiry in particular, it is important to disclose and examine the cultural identity, subjectivity, bias, and attitude of the researcher. According to Creswell (1998), cultural self-exploration on the part of the researcher should be continuous so as to ascertain how the researcher’s own cultural perspective affects the construction and deconstruction of data and theory. In order to assist the principal investigator in taking a reflexive approach throughout all phases of the current study, the following questions outlined by Landgridge (2007) were used as a guidepost: (a) Why am I carrying out this research?; (b) What do I hope to achieve with this research?; (c) Who am I and how might I influence the research I am conducting?; and (d) How might the findings impact the participant?

As a clinical psychology doctoral student, I had numerous opportunities to work with LGBTQ persons using individual and group psychotherapy modalities across various treatment settings. As a heterosexual ally who is interested in the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals, I regularly attend workshops and conferences on LGBTQ issues, microaggressions, multiculturalism, and social justice. My identity as a
Modern Orthodox Jewish woman and third generation Holocaust survivor has shaped my desire and dedication to understanding resilience in populations who are persecuted and victimized. As a feminist who has previously conducted feminist psychological research, I have experience eliciting the narratives of people whose lives and stories have been minimized or ignored. Thus, to this project, I bring a personal and professional commitment to better understanding and serving oppressed populations. In so doing, I also aimed to identify and confront my own set of privileges, heteronormative beliefs, and misguided assumptions.

I did not enter graduate school aspiring to study the experiences of Orthodox Jewish lesbian women. This interest stemmed from a series of events that started with a sentence I scanned in a Jewish newspaper article: “When an Orthodox child comes out of the closet, his/her parents go in.” I felt pained as I read this and began imagining the multiple layers of fear and loneliness experienced by both Orthodox LGBTQ children and their parents. Feeling moved to learn how I could better address the unique needs of fellow LGBTQ community members, I participated in a Sabbath gathering hosted by Eshel, an organization committed to creating welcoming Orthodox communities. While at the gathering, I attended a seminar facilitated by two Orthodox gay men who work in the mental health field and take it upon themselves to discuss the unique mental health needs of Orthodox LGBTQ youth. As I looked around the seminar space, I became acutely aware that the room was dominated by men. With the exception of myself, the Rabbi’s wife, and one woman who later identified herself queer, there were no women to be seen. I left the seminar wondering, “Where are all the women?” Consulting literature, I found no studies that specifically addressed the unique experiences of Orthodox Jewish
lesbians. Once again, women were completely invisible. This study was, thus, born out of my aspiration to add the silenced voices of Orthodox Jewish lesbians to a field of research that has left them behind.

As a member of the Modern Orthodox community, I considered how my personal identity had the potential to mediate the research process in ways both helpful and possibly problematic. In terms of the former, I was familiar with the religious terminology of both the texts and religious phenomenon referenced by my participants, as well as the rabbis they quote and the social context in which they live. I, therefore, did not require extensive explanations of narratives, which allowed me to build rapport with participants rather rapidly. As a heterosexual woman, however, I remained attuned to the ways in which I am both estranged from and protected against the experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and rejection reported by my participants. Staying aware of my own privilege was essential while listening to the iterations of pain, struggle, and anguish that wove throughout women’s testimonies.
Chapter IV: Results

The women interviewed for this study spoke deeply and at length about their experiences navigating the community as Orthodox Jewish lesbians. In the course of data analysis, a number of themes common to participants emerged. Themes were created from statements that were shared by multiple participants and could be abstracted and labeled. Three themes emerged consistently across participants’ narratives: (1) Orthodox Jewish lesbians faced numerous barriers; (2) Orthodox Jewish lesbians relied on various coping strategies and systems to help manage these barriers; and (3) Orthodox Jewish lesbians identified ways in which the Orthodox community can improve to better address the needs of its gay members. Within each theme, several subthemes emerged. Direct quotations of participant narratives are provided in each theme/subtheme to help ground the data. The symbols < > are used within quotes to enclose select words that have been substituted for a participants' original terms. Substitutions were made when the participant's original words included content that might identify the participant or another individual. In addition, italics were used to indicate Hebrew and Yiddish phrases used by participants. Translations of phrases can be found in the Appendix G glossary. Prior to delving into the results, participant demographics and profiles will be detailed below.

Demographics

To protect the confidentiality of participants, demographic information will be presented here in aggregate form. The age of participants ranged from 21 to 46 and the mean age was 32.1 (SD= 8.28). All of the participants (100%) identified as cisgender women and currently live in the northeastern part of North America. Seven of the participants (70%) reported being religious, or frum (see Glossary) from birth. Three of
the participants (30%) reported that they are *ba’al teshuva*, which refers to someone who adopts Orthodox religious practice on his or her own, not as a result of being raised that way. One of the women who identified as a *ba’al teshuva* reported being embedded within a more conservative Orthodox community for a portion of her life. None of the participants identified as having an ultra-Orthodox (e.g., Hassidic or *Hareidi*) background that is usually associated with intentional efforts to segregate oneself from the secular world. At the time of interview, all ten participants (100%) identified as Orthodox Jewish and reported varied degrees of involvement and engagement within the Orthodox Jewish community.

At the time of interview, nine of the participants (90%) reported being in a serious, committed same-sex relationship and one participant (10%) reported being single and dating. Of those nine women who were in relationships, four women were civilly married and had children and two women had plans of imminent engagement. In order to facilitate inclusion of participants with a range of coming-out dis/comfort, participants were not required to have disclosed their sexual orientation to their complete family at the time of participation. All ten women were fully out to their immediate family. At the time of interview, four of the ten participants (40 %) had not yet disclosed their sexuality to extended family and community members who attended their parent’s synagogue.

**Profiles**

To give the reader a better understanding of these women, a brief overview of each participant is provided below. Each profile contains only the most salient glimpses into the rich, personal history of each participant. All names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.
Atara

Atara, in her late twenties, identified as a ba’al teshuva. At the outset of our interview, Atara stated, “I actually didn't grow up Orthodox. My family became Orthodox when I was 11 years old, which was my own choice and my family followed me.” Atara has served in multiple leadership positions in the Orthodox community across a variety of settings. Atara has also been instrumental in helping Orthodox leadership gain a better understanding of the challenges that Orthodox LGBTQ youth face. At the time of interview, Atara was in the process of getting engaged to an Orthodox woman she had been dating for several years.

Ariella

Ariella, in her late twenties, identified as frum from birth. She has served in multiple leadership positions in the Orthodox community and currently works in a leadership position for an Orthodox Jewish organization. Ariella has long been dedicated to bettering the Orthodox community through both professional and personal endeavors. At the time of interview, Ariella was in the process of getting engaged to a formerly Orthodox woman she had been dating for several years.

Hana

Hana, in her mid-twenties, identified as a ba’al teshuva. She is the product of intermarriage, was raised “Christian for the most part,” and developed an interest in Judaism during her teenage years. Because neither parent was religious, Hana relied on various Orthodox communities and figures to help teach and connect her with religious practice. At one point, Hana immersed herself in the culture by living with an ultra-Orthodox family. Hana was living, working, and going to school within a more
conservative Orthodox community when she began acknowledging her sexual identity. Though she is no longer employed by this community and has largely distanced herself from it, Hana continues to live in the same neighborhood and discloses her sexuality to community members only when asked. At the time of interview, Hana had been in a committed relationship with a woman who identified as Reform Jewish.

**Rivka**

Rivka, in her late twenties, identified as a *ba’al teshuva* and explained that her family became religious when she was around 6 years old. Rivka herself became more religious during her late teens after studying in a seminary in Israel, where she and her family eventually moved. Rivka ultimately left Israel in her mid-twenties after feeling as though she could not live there as a religious lesbian. In deference to her parents, Rivka continues to keep her sexuality a secret from her extended family. At the time of interview, Rivka was single and actively dating women.

**Adina**

Adina, in her early twenties, identified as *frum* from birth. When describing her observance, Adina stated, “I do find myself hard on the left side of Orthodoxy. I *daven* (see Glossary) in a partnership *minyan* and would be very happy to use a *Rabba* (see Glossary) as my *poseket* (see Glossary).” In other words, Adina’s observance is egalitarian and feminist in leaning. Adina is a college student. She has kept her sexuality a secret from the Orthodox community on campus out of fear of judgement. She has, likewise, kept her sexuality a secret from her extended family due to both instruction from her mother and the fear that her parents will be judged poorly. At the time of
interview, Adina had been in a six month long relationship with a formerly Orthodox woman.

**Devorah**

Devorah, in her late thirties, identified as *frum* from birth. She is civilly married to Batya, another participant in this study. At the time of interview, she and Batya had been together for ten years and have a one-year-old son. Devorah described herself as “Left Wing Modern Orthodox” and shared more progressive ideas about her understanding of Jewish law and religious observance. Devorah described her upbringing as nonconventional, as her parents got divorced and her father was Conservative Jewish and non-observant. Though Devorah is open about her sexuality to those who ask, she does not spontaneously offer information about herself out of respect to her wife, whose family is uncomfortable with Batya’s sexuality being known in the community.

**Batya**

Batya, in her mid-thirties, identified as *frum* from birth and is married to Devorah, another participant in this study. She and Devorah have a one-year-old son. When describing her observance, Batya stated, “I will always remain Orthodox, but the Orthodox community may not view me that way.” The daughter of a rabbi, Batya grew up in a more right-wing conservative community. Batya hides her sexuality out of respect to her family, fearing that disclosing her sexuality might ruin her family’s reputation and status in their ultra-Orthodox community.

**Yael**

Yael, in her late twenties, identified as *frum* from birth. When describing her observance, Yael stated, “I would say I identify as Orthodox, even though Orthodox
communities might protest that identity since I don’t really fit that prototype in some of my practices—mainly, that I’m egalitarian. But I attend an egalitarian synagogue that also calls itself Orthodox.” In other words, Yael’s observance is egalitarian and feminist in leaning. Yael is the daughter of an Orthodox pulpit rabbi and was asked by her parents not to come out to her extended family or home community. Yael, thus, conceals her sexuality from these particular people/contexts out of respect for her parents. Salient throughout Yael’s interview was her love of Judaism and Jewish education. She has held several leadership positions in the Orthodox community and currently teaches Judaic studies at a progressive egalitarian Jewish day school. At the time of interview, Yael had been in a year long relationship with a woman who identifies as Reform Jewish.

Miriam

Miriam, in her mid-forties, identified as frum from birth. She has a daughter with a man who she was married to for eleven years and who she has since divorced. Five years ago, Miriam married her Orthodox Jewish female partner of ten years. When describing her observance, Miriam stated that she is “Modern Orthodox.” She described a nonconventional Jewish upbringing whereby her mother and Orthodox rabbi father got divorced. Miriam has long been committed to enhancing Jewish community and hosts a minyan in her home that meets every Shabbat.

Sarah

Sarah, in her mid-forties, identified as frum from birth. When describing her observance, Sarah stated, “I am Orthodox. I can’t imagine identifying as anything else, as I’m Orthodox before I am anything else.” Sarah is the mother of twelve-year-old twin daughters and a five-year-old son. She parents these children with her Orthodox Jewish
wife of six years. Though there are no contexts in which she is currently closeted, it should be noted that Sarah spent many years avoiding community members for fear of rejection. Sarah’s newfound ability to feel open stems from recent experiences of acceptance that will be explored in full below.

**Theme I: Facing Barriers**

**Subtheme 1: Barriers to Recognizing and Understanding Same-Sex Attraction and Identity**

The task of understanding sexuality transcends the mere recognition of attraction. It entails relying on language to make meaning of sexual feelings so that one can begin to establish a coherent sexual identity. This task becomes all the more complicated when the community in which one lives considers sexuality, and same-sex sexuality in particular, taboo. Such was the case for the majority of women interviewed in this study. Participants described events and feelings that they recognized, in retrospect, as evidence of their lesbianism. At the time when these feelings and events transpired, however, participants felt as though they were anomalies among, and isolated from, their same-sex peers. This section will review the barriers that the women in this study faced in recognizing and understanding same-sex attraction and sexual identity.

**Lacking a concept of and language for gayness.** Four out of the ten women reported having no concept of or language for gayness due to their socialization. These women expressed not realizing that gayness “existed” or “was an option” and, therefore, could not process their experience of same-sex attraction accordingly. Ariella aptly captured her experience in the following passage:
In Jewish Day School, or at least the one that I went to, being gay was not an option. It's like I didn't even know it existed...Had someone spoken about it to me and explained to me what someone who's gay might feel like when they're with women or whatever, I would have been like, “Yeah that's me,” but because it was never ever, ever, ever mentioned, I just didn't consider it. It was not in my world...I didn't even have language for feeling turned on.

Miriam, Hana, and Atara expressed similar sentiments regarding the dearth of language around gayness:

**Miriam:** I guess I just couldn't verbalize it because I didn't know what it was. I just thought I was a tomboy. I didn't process it. I just wasn't processing that way because it didn't make sense to me because we didn't have the language. I didn't think that frum people had that language.

**Hana:** I always grew up with this idea that being gay or lesbian was an insult. It wasn’t really a thing—like “bitch” and “bastard.” They have definitions, but they're not really, we don't really talk about them. No one really is, or if they are, we don't acknowledge it.

**Atara:** Growing up I never had the language for it. It didn’t even cross my mind that I could be attracted to other girls, I guess. It wasn't anything anyone talked about. I never had a baseline for my feelings because I never understood that I was having crushes on girls, on women.

Atara’s lack of a concept of gayness becomes all the more remarkable when she later revealed growing up with a lesbian cousin in her family. Even as a late teenager, Atara assumed her cousin’s partner was purely a roommate. She explained:
No one ever talked to me about it, and so there was one time when I, when I had this weird epiphany when I was like, "Oh my god. They're together." No one ever told me. I just remember that it just crossed my mind one day.

Ariella, Atara, Miriam, and Hana alluded to the notion that homosexuality was silenced at home, in school, and in the broader community. When homosexuality did surface, it was in connection with a negative slur, as evidenced by Hana’s statement. This silencing made it difficult for women to first become aware of same-sex attraction, let alone explore, experience, understand, or process it.

**Lacking role models.** In additional to lacking a language or concept of gayness, many women discussed lacking role models or frames of reference for same-sex romantic and sexual relationships. With no visible women who were attracted to and/or in relationships with women in their Orthodox communities, over half the sample of participants reported feeling “weird,” as though they were a deviation from the norm:

**Sarah:** I always felt like people would think I was weird because when I, when I was twenty, there were no people in my community, in our community, that were gay. It wasn’t talked about… They [gay women] all left, and like I said there were a few that didn’t leave, but they were struggling. They were completely closeted.

**Atara:** I felt like I was the only one in the world like me … I didn't think that there could be other people like me, especially in the Orthodox world.

**Miriam:** I was like, "Okay, I guess I am gay, you know, and have been gay." I guess just in a frum sheltered environment you don't process this way right? You don't think about that because you don't know anybody that's gay. Thirty years ago in the frum world, who heard of such a thing?
Yael: I have no role models… I don't think those role models exist… I didn't have that role model to show me that you could be gay and in the Orthodox community.

Devorah: Five years ago, I truly believed that my lesbianism was really a result of unresolved issues stemming from growing up in a dysfunctional family. I had yet to meet a healthy, normal lesbian. They all had some kind of screwyness going on in the background: either a broken family or abuse of some sort. Something was off, or some kind of mental illness (um) no healthy normal person (um) so I thought it was a result of my (uh) I guess my sickness or my circumstance.

Adina: I didn't know that there were other frum gay women. I said to my girlfriend, "There are NO other frum gay girls." My girlfriend is not frum and she's like, "That's not true." Her sister works at Eshel. She's like, "My sister knows tons of them." I was like, "Okay, but where are they? Why don't I know them? Like, why are they not here?"

The above excerpts demonstrate that the women lacked role models who could help guide them in how to process and proceed with expressing same-sex attraction. They likewise lacked information regarding how to manage sexual orientation disclosure as well as how to develop, foster, and sustain same-sex relationships while living in the Orthodox Jewish community. This information was absent because it ran completely counter to the heterosexual story line that Orthodox women are expected to follow. All of the ten women discussed how within the Orthodox Jewish community, marriage is seen as a cultural and traditional imperative connected to reproductive obligation and the
creation of family. Feeling “weird” is, thus, a symptom of a heteronormative culture that promotes heterosexuality as the dominant and “normal” way of being, making non-heterosexuality “abnormal.”

**Heteronormativity and cultural expectations.** Three out of the ten women specifically referenced the cultural expectation of heterosexual marriage and the “traditional family” as a factor that complicated coming to terms with their sexuality.

**Sarah:** I grew up feeling very different than everybody else, you know, very different than my friends and (um), you know, it was a lot of pressure in the Jewish community to get married, have kids, and, you know, live that typical Jewish life and I just, it wasn’t something that I was interested in. Obviously, I was gay, so I (um) I think I kind of stayed more to myself growing up knowing that I was different even before I came out.

**Miriam:** What I knew was that men and women got married and they had children and you know…You don't process it, so I just followed along the way of my friends and I dated guys and I married my ex-husband and I went along with the way I was going. That was the way it was. It was just a process.

**Rivka:** I think a lot of my confusion just had to do with like the next stage of my life, with the expectation that like I would be dating and all that stuff and I just was like, "Mmm not really interested."

**Disavowing same-sex attraction.** Without a concept of lesbianism or any role models for guidance, many of the women tried to ignore, disavow, suppress, and change the same-sex attraction that left them feeling confused, afraid, ashamed, and isolated. Because religious identity and familial/cultural expectations were of utmost importance
to these women at one point, the denial of same-sex feelings became more critical than negotiating the developmental tasks needed to foster healthy romantic relationships. Nine out of the ten women reported trying to “be straight” at one point in time and attempting to achieve this goal by dating men. Atara’s account of initially rejecting her sexuality is especially powerful and poignant:

Well after shana bet (see Glossary) when I noticed, when I like realized, I kind of pushed that out of my head for a really long time. I recognized it, and then I was like, "No." And so, for a bunch of years, I actually just totally didn't (um) like I just disregarded it completely, but like kinda at that point I knew in in the back of my mind. I just refused to acknowledge it… I just, this was something about myself that I really hated and really didn't want to be true. Like for as long as I can remember, I just remember being like, “This is not me.” Like whatever it is, I would rather die than have this be the case that this was my reality in life (um) and so like I would go on shidduch (see Glossary) dates with men. I knew it inside, but even I, like, I couldn't even tell my own therapist because it was so, like, I can't say this out loud because then it will be real and I can't have this be anything that's real. So, like, I would go on these dates with men and at the end of every single date, I would hate myself more.

Taken out of context, one may overlook what it is that Atara spent years painstakingly trying to deny. Referring to her gayness as “that,” “it,” and “this,” Atara does not once name the reality that she “noticed,” “realized,” “recognized,” “tried to push away,” “disregarded,” “refused to acknowledge,” and “hated.” Instead, Atara’s gayness suspends midair in between each sentence. The same word she cannot utter to her
therapist remains unarticulated during this portion of the interview. Though absent, this word carries much weight as Atara suggests that she once considered death as a preferred alternative to living life as an Orthodox lesbian. She couches this insinuation in between describing the hatred she once had for her gayness and the self-hate that developed as a result of trying to undo it.

Ariella, likewise, described a long and seemingly torturous process of dating men that left her feeling depressed and disconnected:

I went out with over fifty guys and I was like in six-month long relationships, in three-month long relationships… I just never had feelings. I just never got to a point where I wanted to touch someone or marry someone...I always ended up breaking up with them because I just never…I dated guys like intensely, and I like was miserable-like consciously and subconsciously not connecting, not feeling attracted.

Rivka described a similar lack of connection and attraction to the men that she dated while attending an all-women’s religious college:

When I was in <name of religious college>, I went on dates with guys. It felt like I was dating my nephew, who is four and a half years younger than me. Especially at that point, I was very religious and I was like, “This is not a thing. I am not marrying a woman. I am not interested in a woman. I'm going to marry a man and that's going to be my life because, no, like that's not, that's not happening.” And that's what I just kept telling myself. I walked into therapy with the mindset that I'm bisexual and I need to just figure out how to clamp down on this feeling I was having towards women because I needed to marry a man.
Paralleling Atara’s “this is not me,” Rivka initially reacted to her same-sex attraction by telling herself “this is not a thing.” Rivka likewise comments on her “very religious” status at the time she rejected her sexuality. This was a similar theme for Hana and Yael, who referenced religious immersion as a means of combating their own same-sex attraction:

**Hana:** I was like trying to convince myself I was straight, so I got back into religion. I was like literally doing everything to a T, like this is the right path. I'm gonna try and follow it. I just wanted any excuse to be able to keep living this life because this was the only version of adulthood I ever knew. It was the only path I ever knew, and I wanted to believe or do anything that would like keep me on that path. So, I think for the better part of my first year of grad school I was, you know, in the *shidduch* system… I never actually went on any dates because I was very good at finding something that was wrong with people, and it took me a few months to realize that it wasn't, you know, that there weren’t things wrong with the guys. The guys were wrong to begin with.

**Yael:** I'd be like, “Oh, I kind of get why people would like someone of the same gender,” but it wasn’t an option. I never pursued it… I dated men and everything… Before I went to more progressive spaces, I was a <name of position> at <name of Jewish institution> I kept keeping myself in these Orthodox things I think because I was desperately trying to hold onto them and felt like they were going to slip away. A lot of people leave Orthodoxy as soon as they find out that they feel this way and I understand that and I feel like I did the
opposite. I tried to immerse myself in it, which I think probably made it worse...It was like a very depressing time for me.

In discussing their attempts to disavow same-sex attraction by way of dating men and strengthening religious commitment, these five women reveal that the sheer act of acknowledging same-sex attraction, let alone exploring it, felt too painful and threatening. Accepting the reality that one had attractions and/or feelings for a woman came with severe risks. For Atara, it meant the potential loss of the self, both metaphorically and literally. For Hana and Yael, it meant the potential loss of the only lives they had ever known. Though detrimental to their mental health, conforming to communal and familial expectations by way of covering sexuality in heterosexual relationships felt safer for a period of time. Nevertheless, no matter how hard they denied same-sex attractions, urges and impulses continued to emerge as these women matured and aged.

**Living a double life.** Unable to completely reject their same-sex attraction and frightened to face the potentially negative consequences of disclosure, all ten women admitted to pursuing same-sex relationships in secret at one point in time. In the excerpt below, Yael captures both the highs and lows of living what several participants described as a “double life."

I kind of lived in this like double world. Starting in the Fall of 2010, I was a secret. I was a closeted lesbian in the Orthodox community…Privately, I was with a woman emotionally, and we were in the Orthodox community and we almost had this perfect world that no one knew about because we got to be together and we got to be in the community that we wanted, but no one else knew about
it…We both like sporadically dated guys to keep up an image that we were in the dating world, but we couldn't sustain it … It was a secret from our families. The big reveal to her parents was a NIGHTMARE… I'm trying to just convey that like every time that there was a secret, and then someone like ripped off the Band-Aid, there was a new wave of horror. I wasn't a healthy person at the time … I had been depressed and anorexic. I was not okay (um) and I still smiled and led activities.

Rivka, too, reflected upon the emotional toll that living a double life took on her as she navigated both living in a deeply religious town in Israel and exploring her same-sex attraction. Similar to Yael, she described the conflicting ways in which she presented in her private world versus her outside one:

I met some people potentially for like dates and whatnot, but any part of that like didn't exist when it came to like my home life. I lived with my parents for two years in Israel and it was hard… I had kind of like this double life. I have those two identities…I have what I present to others, which is like everything is hunky-dory in my life, and then I had kind of like what was inside of me, which was like this monster that was just constantly having to be pushed down because I was getting very sad and depressed and lonely and not understanding or seeing what my future was and like on the outside it's like, "Yeah everything is great," but on the inside, I just felt very empty and I didn't feel fulfilled in ways that I know I needed. Being closeted, that put a lot of strain on me… I wasn't happy and I needed to do something about it, which resulted in me leaving Israel.
Feeling depressed, lonely, unfulfilled, and empty, Rivka ultimately left Israel in order to cope with the dejection and hopelessness that surfaced as a result of living a double life. Alternatively, Atara relied on suppression, stating “I think I stopped myself from allowing anything to show because otherwise I would just let everything out.” Below, she briefly described the process of living a double life while in a leadership position at an all-women’s religious college:

I felt like everyone in the school knew who I was, but nobody knew me. I was like the fake leader of these people, and that also contributed to really negative feelings about myself...I'm leading these people, but I'm leading with a lie and that's really, I really, really like I have a hard time lying in life in general. I think honesty is something that I always live by and with, so that was a really difficult thing for me.

The above excerpts highlight how in one life, the women were aware that they were lesbians, and sometimes even lived as lesbians. In their other lives, they continued to give the outward appearance to their families and friends that they were heterosexual. The pain experienced during this process was perhaps best reflected in Rivka’s poignant likening of her gayness to a “monster” that she felt required caging.

The isolation that resulted from being closeted was equally difficult to manage as detailed by four out of the ten women:

Sarah: This process was very difficult emotionally, feeling so alone. I mean truly alone until I met my first Jewish girlfriend. Until that point, it was like there was no part of me that was settled. It was just very, it’s a very unsettling feeling of like, “Who am I?” Where do I identify? Am I really supposed to just repress these
[same-sex] feelings and just get married [to a male]? Or am I just not supposed to be religious and be gay?”

**Atara:** I felt so alone. I isolated myself from my friends. I had totally like cut ties with friends, not on purpose, but because I kinda felt like, again this perceived rejection where I was like, "No one will understand. No one will be my friend anymore." And so I just can’t relate to them and they can't relate to me and I can never tell them.

**Ariella:** I was isolated from everyone at that point when we [Ariella and her ex-girlfriend] broke up. I was pretty much suicidal at that point. I like didn't know how I would get out of bed. I felt like completely alone…Going through a breakup is hard, this was like a two-year relationship, and like a closeted relationship is even harder. This was the first time I ever fell in love with someone. My first time experiencing real heartbreak, and nobody knew about it… Usually when you go through a breakup that intense, you have like this whole support system, which I didn't have, so like when I was in a really, really, really dark place, I realized I had to build one and tell some close friends.

**Devorah:** All my relationships have been in secret. My first girlfriend, no one knew about. Other than going to the [support] group and a therapist, no one knew that relationship existed. So, I was completely isolated and alone on that one (um) and whatever post break-up meltdown that came… On my own, I managed through that.

In the above excerpts, Sarah, Atara, Ariella, and Devorah review the isolation that was experienced at various stages of hiding. Sarah described feeling alone while
emotionally and mentally navigating her conflicting religious and sexual identities. Atara detailed distancing herself from others out of fear of rejection when she began pursuing same-sex relationships. Ariella and Devorah both expressed feeling isolated after ending their first same-sex relationships, which were hidden from friends and family. Ariella endured what Devorah referred to as a “post break-up meltdown,” disclosing that she felt suicidal and in a “really, really, really, dark place” after her break-up.

Having no support to help cope with one’s first heartbreak was equally as painful as not having people with whom to celebrate one’s first experience with falling in love or entering into a relationship. Ariella captures this loss as she described meeting her now fiancé:

It was just the happiest day I ever had as a gay person, but like no one in my life knew about it, like none of my family members, none of the friends that I grew up with, like knew about it…so it was like really strange.

Atara and Rivka echoed similar sentiments as they described instances in which they so badly wanted to discuss exciting aspects of their lives with others, but found it too challenging:

**Atara:** It was complicated…Being in a relationship was exciting, but I couldn't tell people, so people would be like, “How's it going?” and I’d be like, "Oh, it's really good" and they'd be like, "Why? What's so good?" And I was like “Oh, like, life is good- nothing really.” That was hard. It's hard to not be able to share the exciting things with people because I felt like I couldn't share that with them.

**Rivka:** She [mom] was like, "Why did you go to bed at 4 AM?" And I can't be like, "Because I went on an incredible first date with someone and like I want to
tell you all about it.” I was just like, "I was hanging out with a friend and went to bed late.”

The need to hide one’s gayness added another layer to the emotional struggle that these women had already endured after acknowledging same-sex attraction. Lying to family, friends, and community members denied women the ability to be and express their true selves. Keeping secrets, likewise, made people feel distanced from their families and friends and dissatisfied in their relationships. According to Yael, secrecy was destructive in more ways than one:

I think the secrecy ate up our relationship…We both acted absolutely crazy and the secrecy made us crazy. Having a secret is a terrible thing. A secret that eats away at you, whatever it is, whether it's your sexuality, whether it's that you have a depression like whether you have voices in your head, I don't know, having a secret that you can’t talk to someone about, building up inside of you, it kills a part of you, and I do think that happened…A part of me faded during that time.

In playing different roles in the different worlds she occupied while living a double life, Yael described losing a piece of herself. She, likewise, believes that the secrecy consumed, and therefore destroyed, her romantic relationship. Atara, Devorah, and Batya cited similar experiences. They not only felt that keeping secrets damaged connections with friends, but that secrets also placed undue strain on their relationships with their respective girlfriends, partners, and wives:

**Atara:** I had to like rebuild up all these relationships with all these people from before in my life because I just totally shut them out.

**Devorah:** Starting a life with someone for so many years and to kind of leave
that part of your life out... it’s going to stifle a meaningful relationship with friends... I was aware that by withholding certain information or being isolated in certain senses what that would, how that would play out... I did so with full knowledge (um) so I really can’t blame anyone. That was my choice.

Batya: Our whole relationship really developed in the closet, which looking back on it now, we’re still sort of coming out of the damage of that closet. I don’t think that's a very healthy way to have a relationship um... I think on the outside, if you're trying to prove to everybody that you're just friends and nothing else is going on, you treat each other a certain way, but you’re supposed to treat your partner, your lover, your special person differently, but you can’t in public, and so that really does affect the way you actually treat them... It does alter sort of the feel of the relationship.

In concluding her reflection upon years spent in the closet, Atara’s voice became stern and her countenance serious as she echoed her peers’ sentiments about the destructiveness of secrets:

That was a really negative part of my life that I try to... I have left that behind, but it's important in the story in terms of like, it's important for people to come out... It's a lifesaving thing to encourage people to come out and to be honest with themselves and with others because otherwise it's so incredibly damaging... You should come out because you're hurting people if you don't, and you're hurting yourself.

Atara frames the act of encouraging others to come out as a “lifesaving thing” inasmuch as secrets are a matter of life and death. She cautioned that to keep sexuality a
secret would not only hurt others, but would also hurt the self. Though she shared that she had left that negative, secretive part of her life behind, it was clear from her wording that pain still remains. Atara’s use of “I try” eloquently captures the struggle that each woman in this study encountered as they sought to make sense of their same-sex attraction and ultimately understand their gayness. It also reflects the courage needed to overcome the many barriers of coming out, which will be explored in the section below.

**Subtheme II: Barriers to Coming Out**

Participants encountered several challenges while managing varying degree of openness and disclosure about their sexual identity. When considering coming out, each participant needed to pragmatically make decisions about risk, timing, location, audience, and the delivery. This process was highly anxiety-producing, with four out of the ten women reporting that they experienced acute anxiety prior to significant disclosures. The women explained that much of this anxiety stemmed from the fear that disclosure would result in rejection. Fear was rooted in multiple sources.

**Blatant homophobic expressions from community and family.** The blatant and overt homophobic messages that three out of the ten participants received as youth from their communities and families while growing up laid the groundwork for fear of disclosure. Participants reported hearing the belief that to be gay is to sin and, even more disturbingly, it is deserving of violent reactions in some cases:

**Hana:** When I used to tell people in my community where I worked when I was doing my internship at <name of Orthodox LGBTQ organization>, for a while I would say, "Oh, my school just placed me here yada, yada, yada." [In response] I got the standard, "I don't know how you work with sinners all day. You must have
such a big heart.” “That's so awful why would your school put you there?” and “Ugh, it’s Shabbos. Let’s not talk about such awful things.”

**Rivka:** My brother-in-law is homophobic like I can't even explain to you. He thinks that all the ills of the world are because of gay people. When there was that like stabbing attack two years ago or a year ago at the Jerusalem parade, like he was like celebrating the fact that that happened.

**Deborah:** My father, who is as conservative as you can get, won't fill up his car in the state of Massachusetts because they're liberal Democrats and he doesn't want to support them (um) and thinks that all gays should be shot.

**Prejudice in the home.** Four out of ten women recalled that hearing and seeing traces of parents’ prejudice toward LGBTQ individuals while growing up fostered their fear of coming out. In the below excerpt, Atara reflects upon what it was like to witness her parents’ initial rejection of Atara’s cousin, a lesbian who celebrated a same-sex wedding a few years ago. In discussing the impact of her cousin being ostracized at a time when Atara, herself, was processing her sexuality, Atara alluded to questioning her parents’ unconditional love and acceptance:

I just remember it wasn’t a thing that my family spoke about and then when same-sex marriage became legal in <name of state>, they got married and my parents didn't go to the wedding and they didn't talk for a long time, which contributed a lot to my anxiety during like really difficult times. Because they didn't go to my cousin’s wedding, I thought like, "Oh my god, they're never gonna come to my wedding if I even have a wedding.”
Yael, Hana, and Adina likewise reflected upon growing up hearing comments made by parents that either ridiculed or demeaned gay people. These comments made each of the women reluctant to disclose their sexuality:

**Yael:** My mom is amazing, but like my parents growing up, obviously, they didn't know they had a gay child, and they made comments like, you know, (um) I wouldn’t say they made derogatory comments, but they made comments. They made it clear that they opposed it, and I felt angry that they had made me live in fear of like telling them.

**Hana:** I had a teacher come out in 5th grade, and my mom was like laughing about it like, “Which one wears the dress at home?”

**Adina:** We always spoke about like homosexuality in the house because I was very like into talking about it from a halachic perspective, from a social perspective, from a political perspective, and I would always push my parents on it, and my dad always said, “If one of my kids came out, I would obviously love them, but it would just be very hard for me because I would know that their life is going to be harder.”

**Fear that disclosure may adversely impact the family unit.** Nine out of the ten women expressed concern about the negative consequences their families might weather should their gayness ever be revealed to their broader family and community. Though the degree and manifestations of this concern varied between participants, it became clear that most women silenced their sexuality at one point in time in order to protect the perceived needs and expectations of family and community members. Participants internalized the message that preserving the comfort of others was of paramount
importance, even if it resulted in sacrificing their own. Sarah captured this rather succinctly while detailing the several years she kept her sexuality a secret as a synagogue member: “If it makes you uncomfortable for me to say that I’m gay, then I won’t say that I’m gay.” Adina, similarly, stated that she plans on keeping her sexuality hidden from her mother’s family and is “committed to being able to attend family functions without making anyone uncomfortable.” Below, she explained her position:

My mom's sisters all live in <name of religious town> and they're just not the type of people who would be happy about this. They're gonna like make my sexuality a thing about my parents’ parenting. They're going to be like, "You guys raised a really liberal daughter, so she thinks this is okay.” That just breaks my heart that my parents will have to go through something like that. I hate the idea that they’ll have to walk into shul and be the parents of “that gay girl.” So being in a public relationship with a woman is hard for me from that perspective…

Like Adina, several participants expressed fear that disclosure or publicizing their same-sex relationships would result in their nuclear family being condemned, ostracized, and/or excommunicated by their extended family members and respective communities. Several participants described a particular concern that coming out might damage their family’s reputation or adversely affect the marriage prospects of their single, heterosexual family members. Below, Rivka articulated these concerns:

I just have to be cognizant of the fact that it's not just my life that is affected by me being gay. It affects a lot of other people. It affects my parents. It affects their reputation and how they live in their community- people talking about them. For my older sister, for all of my siblings, for their kids, for their shidduch
prospects... because it’s like if someone finds out "Oh, she has a gay- they have a
gay aunt,” like nobody wants to marry into that problematic family, so it's like, it's
just, I recognize that like you know there is a ripple effect and I have to
be careful how I navigate that because my family is probably one of the most
important things in my life...I've already caused enough hurt so I don't want to
add to it. I want to try and take away as much or contain it as much as I can. So if
that means to not come out to people in my family when right now it really
doesn't make a difference to me whether I do or don’t, then I'm okay.

Rivka worries that coming out will have a “ripple effect.” It may not only
threaten her parents’ standing in the community, should community members find out,
but also potentially ruin the marriage possibilities of her nieces and nephews. Like Rivka,
Batya was also preoccupied with containing the hurt that coming out might cause her
family. Below, she discussed how disclosing her sexuality would “ruin the lives” of
multiple family members: her father who was working as a principal of a Jewish day
school, her brother who was engaged to marry the daughter of a prominent Rabbi, and
her heterosexual sister who was single at the time.

When I first realized that I was gay, I remember my initial thoughts were "I just
don’t want to hurt my family." I was so worried about what it would mean for
them and I didn't want to hurt my father or my parents or my sister's shidduch
possibilities...Two weeks before we found out that we were pregnant, my
younger brother got engaged. I knew that if it got out that a) I was gay or b) that
we were pregnant, that shidduch would fall apart. They were already engaged and
I knew that her parents would call it off… I was just terrified of those things, of ruining their lives and so we were really closeted together for a long time.

Batya’s wife, Devorah, shares her perspective on what it was like to keep her sexuality and pregnancy a secret in support of Batya’s feeling the need to remain closeted for her family:

I had to hide my pregnancy till after Batya’s brother got married… I wear a fleece the entire summer and nobody knew I was pregnant… I don't think we realized how big of a deal it is to hide a pregnancy the entire time... I couldn't exercise, which is my go-to, so I lost all my coping skills… There was all that wonderful behavior of a hormonal pregnant lady and there was no one to share it with… The sacrifices we've made for her siblings… We have to hide our relationship… We’re not on Facebook… You wouldn't even know I'm married or have a kid. There's no public presence of us…

Though Devorah ultimately relies on humor as she described the painful process of hiding a pregnancy, it is clear that she felt overwhelmed and alone without her typical coping regimen and social support network. She framed this act as one of the many sacrifices she has made to help protect Batya’s family. Using the present perfect tense, Devorah conveyed that she and Batya continue to remain closeted. Thus, she continues to make sacrifices by having no pictures of family on social media. While this secret helps to protect Batya’s family, Devorah feels it denies her family of creation the public presence that heterosexual families are privileged with.

The power of public presence was something Atara strongly considered and grappled with prior to coming out. To Atara, coming out meant not just making a
statement but becoming one, asserting, “I recognize that me being in a place is a statement and therefore that meant that the people in my life were making statements by allowing me in that space because of what I represented.” This became particularly complicated for Atara as she navigated sexual disclosure as the director of a Jewish youth camp. To Atara, camp was the equivalent of home. Just as participants described the fear of hurting one’s family, Atara detailed the risk of possibly putting her camp at risk:

Interestingly, camp is one of the things that stopped me from coming out earlier on. Camp was a place that I felt was a home to me and I felt a responsibility towards camp. I felt protective of camp. There was a long, long time where I thought, "If I come out, I’m gonna be hurting camp…What if people don’t want to come back to camp because of me? What if I hurt the business or what if I gave the camp a bad reputation?"

Though the above statements highlight Atara’s concerns about the emotional impact of hurting her camp’s business, three out of the ten participants also focused on the economic and logistical fears related to coming out.

For Hana, discussing her concerns about coming out reminded her about a period of time she thought sexual disclosure would result in her losing a place to live and work. To date, encountering people from her neighborhood often reactivates those fears:

It brings back all of those fears about losing my housing, losing my job, all of that stuff, like it comes back so quickly any time I run into someone from the community…I was living in the community, going to school and the community, I was working in the community. I had two jobs to help just afford everything. At this point, I was living with a family and my roommate from
seminary. We rented a room together from this family so like if I came out, I
would have lost my housing, and I couldn't really afford much else, so it was, it
was touch-and-go.

Atara was equally concerned that coming out would threaten her housing
situation, stating, “I had a roommate who was really religious and I was terrified of
telling her because I thought she was going to move out.” Ariella, likewise, expressed
fear that she would be ejected from her parent’s home should she disclose her sexuality.
She planned accordingly.

I moved things out of my house in case like I just didn't know… I thought that if I
told my parents my world would fall apart and I wouldn’t be able to function… I
thought they were going to like cut me off. I just didn't know what was going to
happen and I was like, "Uh, I'm going to tell them when I graduate because like if
I tell them during school like I won't be able to finish school.”

With time, both Atara and Ariella discovered that their fear of being dislodged
was unfounded, as friends and family ultimately proved to be supportive and accepting.
Whether Hana would have been met with a similar reaction remains unknown as Hana
remains closeted in her neighborhood. Having spent years being dependent on her very
conservative community for both housing and finances, Hana felt it too unsafe to come
out. Describing what sounds like a reaction to trauma, Hana maintains that encountering
people from her past activates old fears that being outed would result in her being
abandoned and left with no home or means to support herself. Though now financially
independent from the community in which she still resides, Hana continues to keep her
sexuality a secret due to fear of rejection—a fear that will be explored below.
Fear of rejection. Most women were reluctant to reveal their sexual orientation due to the fear that immediate and extended family members, bosses, educators, religious friends, community leaders, and rabbis would either reject, stigmatize, or negatively judge them. Some participants worried that they would lose their families and/or be exiled from their communities altogether. Others worried not about facing negative consequences, per say, but of gaining unwanted attention. Adina elaborated upon this latter fear:

I never felt scared before about what people in the community would think of me and now I'm actively, I'm not shaking in my bed at night, but I'm like uncomfortable and really nervous about people in the community finding out… I don't think anyone would say anything mean. I just think there would just be so much looking at my girlfriend and I and then talking about us afterwards…This is why I told my girlfriend that we will never go to <name of community> together because I never want to walk in and have like somebody turn around and whisper to the person next to them, "Oh, that's Adina’s girlfriend.” While the community is very accepting of gay people, I just don't know what it would be like to be gay in that public kind of way…There’s just no precedent.

Adina’s account reflects that at the core of unwanted attention is a fear of the unknown. Adina sees that her community is accepting of religious gay people, whom she later specifies as gay men. Because there are no religious women who publically identify as lesbian in her community, she cannot imagine what her life would look like should she decide to come out. A salient theme throughout Adina’s interview was the fear of setting a precedent that she is not ready to set. Left to her imagination about how the community
will treat her, Adina develops anxiety. According to Atara, the fear that lays groundwork for this anxiety has become internalized and ultimately projected:

I think in the Orthodox community there's this baseline assumption that Orthodox spaces are homophobic because there are so many Orthodox people and leaders and institutions that speak out against like, you know, homosexuality, that speak out and say homosexuality is an abomination…. I always felt like every Orthodox room that I walked into like I, I, kind of call it "perceived rejection" or "projected rejection" right that like I already felt rejected even without giving people the chance to actually reject me… The assumption is always that you wouldn't welcome me if you, that I wouldn't be welcomed or accepted here and that everyone here would not like me if you knew who I really was.

The idea of projected rejection resonates deeply with Sarah, who describes many years of leaving synagogue early so as to avoid a host of negative reactions that she assumed other congregants would have. She even anticipated being excommunicated:

I had kids. I was leaving before adon olam (see Glossary). I was running out the door right before prayer was over so nobody could say to me, "Hey what's your story? Where is your husband?" I didn’t want anyone asking me questions…I stayed to myself. I really did. I anticipated people going, “Ew.” I anticipated shock, disbelief, like nasty, you know (um). I anticipated not being accepted by friends. I really anticipated (um) what’s the word I’m looking for? Ostracized really… It was just my own fears, nothing rational.

Though Sarah conceptualized this fear of rejection as irrational, Batya saw it as based in reality and, therefore, firmly chose a position in how to manage her anxiety:
Devorah will tell me that I often shy away from that final confrontation where they say to me, "You are not wanted." She believes in pushing the envelope, to show up to shul and apply as a family and let them tell you that you can't come and I'm, I am of the opinion of, I find that painful. So I'd rather not do that because I know what's going to happen and I don't, I don't need it to happen to know that it's really going to happen.

Similar to Batya, Atara, Ariella, and Yael also believed that pushing the envelope, let alone coming out, might result in painful consequences within the community. These three women reported specific fears that their leadership positions within various Orthodox educational institutions would become untenable should their sexual identity become known:

**Atara:** I can't come out because I am, like, first of all, I was in a leadership position there. I was <name of position> at <name of religious college> and I remember thinking like if the people in this place - like the people that I’m leading- if they knew who I really was, like I would, like, I wouldn't be accepted here and I wouldn't be able to be their leader.

**Ariella:** I was involved in Jewish communal leadership. It was my passion. I always wanted it to be my profession, but I thought that wasn’t on the table anymore, that no Jewish institution would want me (um) and I was like nervous to be like rejected by my community and my family… I also wanted to come out and like I thought coming out in a Jewish organization would be challenging … No Modern Orthodox Jewish institution like really wants a gay person, an out gay person working for them… I have a friend who works at <name of a Jewish
institution> and her gayness is super complicated…I have gay friends working in Jewish institutions, but they can't be out there.

**Yael:** A big struggle I went through is that I loved and was so passionate about Jewish learning and I felt like I was gonna be an outcast if anyone found out. I wasn't gonna be that role model for Jewish education that I desperately wanted to be that and I think that's why I was single for a long time between relationships or like dating men and unhappy…I never felt safe with my identity at <names of Jewish institutions> even though there were other people like going through those experiences at the time…So I always kind of had in the back of my mind that maybe I wanted to head towards a pluralistic or more open kind of school. I didn't feel like I could come out when I was in an Orthodox setting.

Atara, Ariella, and Yael all believed that they would no longer be able to fulfill their passion for Jewish education and communal leadership should they share their true selves. What is perhaps most devastating about these three women’s accounts is how desperately they wanted to give to a community they believed did not, in turn, want them. Equally as painful for participants was the realization that their parents, peers, and bosses expressed similar fears or rejection from the community. This concept has elsewhere been referred to as parents “hiding in the closet when their children come out.” Because the parents, peers, and bosses of participants worried about the potential negative consequences of disclosure, participants were often asked to keep their sexuality a secret. On these occasions, participants did not remain closeted due to the perceived expectations of others, but out respect for actual instruction and request.
**Obeying instruction to keep sexuality a secret.** After rendering significant disclosures, eight out of the ten women continued to remain closeted for varying periods of time at the instruction and/or request of family, peers, and work personnel. Being asked to remain silent about sexuality not only served as a barrier for the women to continue coming out, but it also kept them from being their true selves. Laughing as if to indicate disbelief, Yael shared that she was asked not to disclose her sexuality to her home community and to extended family members, including grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins:

After I told them, they were basically like, "You can never tell anyone," and I was like, "Do you want me to live my life or, like, not live?”…My aunts and uncles are very liberal and the ones who know now, which is a few of them, are extremely supportive, but my parents don't know how to talk about it with them, so they don't want me to tell the family…The only place that I'm not out because I'm not allowed to be is in my <name of community>…. My grandparents, I haven’t told, and I avoid being alone with my grandfather because I’m scared he's gonna ask me about dating life and I don’t wanna lie.

Seven additional participants capture similar sentiments in the below statements:

**Rivka:** My parents just don't want people knowing.

**Adina:** Well, my mom, we agreed that we wouldn't tell anyone on my mom’s side… I think that she [mom] doesn't want to discuss my sexuality with her sisters and her parents, (um) so that's family, and also my parent's friends.
Sarah: I was told, “Don’t tell grandma. She will be devastated.” That’s how my mother viewed it. My grandmother was old school, you know? Very, very old-school, like you get married, you have children.

Batya: My parents were in a complete panic that my father's boss, the head of the yeshiva, will find out and that my father would lose his job because people would not want to trust their children to somebody who has a gay daughter because, clearly, he must have done something wrong as a parent. How can you trust your children with this person?

Devorah: I have a sister in Israel. We were supposed to go there for Sukkos, but we had to find alternate housing because she didn't want to tell her kids the situation… They're not allowed to ask me any questions, and I'm not allowed to talk about it. That's part of the deal… I was uninvited from [my nephew’s] Bar Mitzvah because I was pregnant, and she thought they would pick up on that and she didn't want to have to explain because she's trying to fit in and conform and she needs others’ acceptance.

Atara: I wanted to have <name of girlfriend> come for Shabbos one week…I said, "Listen, I have a girlfriend that I’ve been dating for many months and I would like for her to come for Shabbat," and he [boss] was like, “Let me get back to you” and then he had a meeting with all the camp rabbis and they all decided that she could not come for the weekend… I had a meeting with the director and I was like, "I don't feel good about this. I’m not okay with your answer" and he was like, "Well, we have to think about like people's comfort levels and I was like, "Well, what if camp is my home and I feel uncomfortable there now?" and at
some point he called and was like, "I decided to override the rabbis," and so then <name of girlfriend> came for Shabbat but like under the guise of being the dance specialist who would be teaching there on Sunday…It was this unspoken rule that like whoever didn’t know [she was my girlfriend] just knew this random new dance person was coming and so that happened for two years.

**Hana:** My roommate from seminary who I lived with for a long time after seminary as well…she's very much like, "Okay, this doesn't affect me now that we're not sharing a room together and don't tell the other roommate."

This section explored the barriers that women encountered as they negotiated the coming out process. The women reported that the homophobic and/or prejudiced messages they received from their communities and parents about homosexuality while growing up led them to believe that they would be rejected should they disclose their sexual orientation. In addition, participants recalled stories of community members who suffered negative consequences when their same-sex attraction was revealed. Hearing about these experiences, in addition to being asked by parents and community members to keep their sexuality a secret, reinforced the notion that the community is punitive and responds to its LGBTQ members with hostility. These messages, thus, made it challenging for the women to feel ready or to be able to reveal their true selves. Coming out required battling anticipated rejection towards not just themselves but their families. Though some of these anxieties did, in fact, turn out to be mere assumptions, many women came to realize they were justified in fearing negative reactions from family and community members. The following section reviews the real challenges that the women
experienced in their respective families and communities after disclosing their sexual identities.

**Subtheme III: Barriers to Belonging**

Participants endured a wide range of homonegative experiences after disclosing their sexuality to their families, peers, and communities. Though some narratives illustrate overt, explicit, intentional, and direct discriminatory attempts made by others, many of the women detailed incidents that on the surface seem subtle, indirect, covert, and unintentional. These latter experiences of marginalization will be referred to as microaggressions. To review, microaggressions are subtle messages that communicate a denigrating message to an attended target and may be delivered in the form of snubs, dismissive looks, gestures, and tones (Sue et al., 2007a; Sue et al., 2007b). Taken together, these overt and covert experiences of marginalization caused all ten women to question their sense of belongingness across multiple Orthodox Jewish contexts.

**Encountering overt rejection, homophobia, and heterosexism.** Seven out of ten women reported that they were overtly rejected by family members after disclosing their sexuality. Rivka reported that she strategically came out to her oldest sister first thinking it might be easiest given their close bond. She described the experience as very difficult:

She basically told me she doesn't want to know about this part of my life. She doesn't want her children involved in this part of my life… My sister was just like, "No." She's like, "No, I never ever want to know about any of this in your life" and she told me straight out, “Don't come to me to talk about it.”

With pain in her voice, Rivka recalled how she was similarly rejected by her parents:
When I came out to my mom, she didn't acknowledge my existence for a week. She didn't talk to me. She didn't look at me. I would be in the room. She would get up and leave, which was really difficult considering we lived in the same house. I remember when I said the words, “I'm gay” to my mom, my dad let out this completely guttural cry. That was the first time I ever saw my father cry.”

According to Rivka, both her parents “made it very clear that this part of her life has no place in their lives” and that they “do not want to know.” Yael revealed a similar experience after she came out to her parents. After she left a letter in her parent’s mailbox detailing her sexuality, her father did not speak to her for several weeks. When Yael’s father did eventually make contact, he made it clear that neither he nor Yael’s mother would ever attend her wedding should she plan to have one. Batya, too, encountered a similar response from her parents with regard to her wedding. Batya laughed to counteract the pain as she recalled her wedding day:

It was probably the worst day of my life that I can think of… I underestimated how painful it was going to be for my family not to be there and I just fell apart at the wedding itself so (um) it was hard. It was actually a really hard day.

Participants also described having their sexuality ignored or denied altogether by family members, and often times, mothers, in particular. Adina grew tearful as she described a scenario that left her feeling particularly invisible:

I was video chatting with <name of girlfriend> and my mother walked into the room and she always says hi to any of my friends when I'm video chatting them and she was like, "Who are you talking to?" And I was like, "It's <name of girlfriend>," and she was like, "Hi," and then she left the room… I cried so
much after that happened. I was so upset and I said to my dad, "It's so unfair, you know, if I were dating a guy, Ima (see Glossary) would have all these questions and she would want to know.”

The lack of curiosity Adina witnessed was later confirmed as her mother’s overall discomfort with Adina’s sexuality. To Adina, this lack of curiosity felt like her mother’s attempt to conceal Adina’s sexuality, an act that felt to Adina more painful than any other type of rejection. Rivka expressed a similar experience with her mother who “continues to pretend” that Rivka neither dates nor “does any of that stuff.” Miriam echoed this sentiment when describing a period of time when her mother ignored Miriam’s wife’s existence by way of only asking about Miriam’s whereabouts. This made Miriam feel as though her mother was “missing out on half her life.” As for Devorah, her family simply believes that she is not gay altogether, but rather impressionable:

> My family believes that I'm not really gay. They believe Batya is manipulative and codependent on me and made me codependent on her and that's how I got sucked into this gay relationship… That I am weak and easily manipulated.

This is the story that my family will tell you if you ask them today. That is what they'll still say.

In addition to having their sexuality be rejected or denied by family, many participants reported that their girlfriends, wives, partners, and families of creation were rejected by their families of origin and rabbinic leaders. Batya shared that her parents were firmly instructed by their rabbis to neither “have anything do with” nor “to acknowledge the existence of Batya’s family, wife or any children that might come from the relationship.” As a result, Batya was told by her family that though she is “loved and
always welcomed,” the same is not true for her family of creation. Batya added, “My family will still send me invitations, but to me alone… so that’s another way of knowing you're not welcomed.” Her siblings adopted the same approach:

I think my parents’ decision to not recognize my family really gave license to all of my siblings to do something they were very uncomfortable with… I think it sort of gave them a backbone to do something that I think they know deep down is wrong.

Other participants described how their girlfriends and partners were excluded from family and/or community functions. Yael related an incident whereby her girlfriend, whom her father refers to as her “friend,” was not invited to her sister’s wedding:

I found out that all my cousins’ boyfriends, like all their significant others, were invited to my sister’s wedding including one who just started dating two months before. I was really mad. Inviting all their significant others to the wedding and not mine, who I’ve been in a serious relationship with for a while!

Yael continued to explain that as the sister-of-the bride she felt all the more hurt considering neither her cousins nor their boyfriends were close with the wedding party. Yael expressed that she felt she was being discriminated against. Miriam described a similar incident whereby she was asked to not bring her partner to her child’s yeshiva school dinner:

<Name of rabbi> called me and said, "This is really new for us. I don't know that this is a good idea. I think you're going to get push back. Please just come. We want you to come. Please don't bring <name of wife>."
Unlike Yael, who unequivocally expressed feeling “mad,” Miriam disavowed her anger and, despite stating multiple times that she felt hurt in response to the Rabbi’s request, minimized her pain. Instead of labeling the experience as discriminatory, she communicated understanding the rabbi’s position:

I think it was just so new for them they didn't know what the lashing out was going to be… I was hurt, but I understood and I think that's something that's very tough for the gay community in general that's religious. They want change immediately, but change comes over time and I think that what happens here with us is that we have to be a little bit more understanding that this is a process.

Miriam assumed a similarly open stance towards her mother, who per Miriam, became less accepting of her same-sex partnership after moving into Miriam and her partner’s community:

I think that the seeing, that actually seeing our relationship versus coming in every once in a while was very different in realizing that we were getting married. Our friends were supportive of us. People acknowledged publicly that this was a, you know, a gay home…I think that's what was hard for her.

Atara observed a comparable shift in her boss after she decided to come out publically in a progressive Jewish newspaper:

I actually told him years before I came out to anyone else…He's really like a family member to me… It was relatively easy for him to ignore it when I wasn't like out to everyone else, but then, when I, when I called him about this article he was like, "Okay, I support you and also did you mention <name of work place> or not?"
The above narratives highlight the different reception between a person’s private gay identity versus their publicized one. Devorah portrayed this as she posited, “You can love the gay. You just can’t love the gay relationship”:

I know some of the talk is that the community might be more open and welcoming of you if you don't shove it in their face, so if you're going to be gay, be gay to yourselves. You don't need to announce that “this is my wife” ... We have a gay friend on the next block. He was invited to a Shabbat meal, but he wasn’t allowed to bring his husband because that would kind of be approving, so you can love the gay, you just can’t love the gay relationship... You can have a random gay person at your meal. There’s nothing wrong with that, but once you have a couple...

Miriam learned this the hurtful way when her synagogue membership was revoked after her hyphenated last name, or what Miriam referred to as “the appearance of the creation of a marital state,” became publicized in her synagogue:

When I hyphenated my name, I was told by the rabbi that I could not put it on anything official in the shul and so we gave tzedaka (see Glossary) or sponsored things in my partner’s name or in my daughter’s name. When the shul became more technologically advanced, we were told to update our info into the shul Cloud. When I did, it automatically put my hyphenated name into the online directory without my intending to. I then found out that my membership was revoked. I was told I could go to shul to pray if I wanted, but that I couldn’t be a member... We come into a meeting with the rabbi, <my wife> goes, "So the first time that you are speaking to me in nearly ten years is to tell me that my partner can't be a member of the
that she helped build and has been a member of for nineteen years, is that what I'm understanding here?” and he's like, “She can't be a member. You can be a member. You can all come through you,” and <my wife> was like, "I'm taking my membership, thank you so very much” and that was the end of it. We haven't gone back. We don't go back…We were left without a shul.

In the above passage, Miriam alluded to the pain of being ejected from a synagogue where she was an active member for nineteen years. Not only did she give charity to the synagogue, but Miriam also contributed to the community by serving as a sisterhood member and a charity team leader. Eventually, pain turned to panic as Miriam navigated the process of getting her daughter accepted into a religious high school without having a synagogue affiliation. She explained, “I panicked. <Name of rabbi> took away my membership right before I had to fill out applications for <name of daughter>’s high school, and in each of those applications, you are required to list a shul you are affiliated with. I had none. I was having a heart attack.”

Like Miriam, Devorah and Batya worried about whether or not they would find a religious nursery that would accept their son. By the time they sat down for this interview, Batya and Devorah reported that their son was rejected by several schools. Batya elaborated:

The local Jewish day schools won’t take him. He got rejected from three places because he has two moms. Do I think that the head of the school cares whether or not he has two moms? No, but she has a reputation to protect and the parents will pull their kids out of the school…This is another way that you know you’re not welcome.
Sarah, too, experienced much stress over getting her children into a religious elementary school. Sarah’s children were initially enrolled in yeshiva, but were expelled after a series of stressful events that began with a parent overhearing Sarah’s child refer to Sarah’s partner as “mommy”:

One of the parents overheard this and went to <name of principal> and said,

“What is going on, what do we have here? We have lesbians in the school? We have gay people?” So apparently she was outraged and went back to <name of community> and told everybody, “This can’t be accepted. I don’t send my children to yeshiva so that they can be in this kind of environment. We should all pull out our children, we should have a protest.” So, I later learn how there were protests and people wanting to withdraw their kids and withdraw funding and all of this because they want me out of the school.

Sarah described initially feeling supported by the principal until he requested that Sarah’s partner not visit school grounds:

I was like, “Well how, how do I do that to the kids, like all of a sudden they can’t have this person that they look at as a parent come to the school?” It just didn’t sit well with me. It was like almost a rejection of my gayness…So here are all the fears coming to fruition. I’m being rejected, but it’s not me, it’s my kids.

Sarah spent the majority of her interview detailing desperate attempts at getting her children accepted into a different yeshiva. Altogether, Sarah was rejected by eight Orthodox schools before ultimately placing her children into a Conservative Jewish day school. Most of these rejections were allegedly never made by the school principals, themselves, but by an elusive board who expressed concern that accepting Sarah’s twins
might result in other parents’ withdrawing their children. In addition to weathering numerous rejections, Sarah recalled callous comments made by various rabbis and school personnel. One of the first rabbi-principals Sarah met with encouraged her to contact a Conservative school since “that type of school likely had the type of acceptance” Sarah was looking for. At a different school, Sarah’s children were offered enrollment on the condition that Sarah and her children remain closeted. Being closeted would require that Sarah’s children neither had any playdates nor invited peers to their bat mitzvah. To Sarah, this was a “deal breaker,” not for her sake, but for the sake of her children:

I never felt that rejection, but the mother in me was infuriated and sad and just so angry. If I could, I would put a cage around my children, and just repel everybody that can potentially hurt them and that’s really all it was about for me.

The narratives of Miriam, Batya, Devorah, and Sarah highlight the many challenges that the women encountered as they tried to carve out space for themselves and their families within various Orthodox infrastructures. What was perhaps most troubling for these women was that the acts of marginalization they were subjected to were not simply witnessed by spiritual leaders, but all too often perpetuated by them. This was certainly the case for Batya, who felt the rabbis had waged “emotional warfare” on her and her family of creation:

One of the things that the rabbis had told my parents when my parents first told them about the situation and asked them for advice was that my siblings would have to mention it [sexual orientation] to their future spouses so as to not mislead them into marriage…It was a form of emotional warfare, you know. Get me to back off from this whole gay thing because otherwise I'm going to ruin a match.
I'm going to ruin their chances…That's really what it was. It was definitely a form of emotional warfare. Another thing that the rabbis basically said to my parents was, “What a nebach (see Glossary) Batya is that she thinks somebody else’s kid is hers?” Can you imagine? Does this rabbi say that to people who adopt kids? It’s kind of painting me with the insane brush…It’s playing with every dirty trick.

Though not using the same evocative language, four additional participants recalled experiencing poor treatment at the hands of rabbis:

**Yael:** I went to his speech and he basically gave this horrible- I couldn’t believe I was sitting in it, a rosh yeshiva (see Glossary) from <name of religious university> came and said how these people need to be alone, they're not- it's a toevah (see Glossary), it's not okay…The fact that anyone from <name of religious university> who doesn’t a) have a mental health background and is just a rabbi and b) used the types of wording that he used to people sitting in the room including me who ended up being an LGBTQ person and I was not the only one…I honestly believe <name of religious university> should have given an apology …As like the flagship institution of Modern Orthodoxy, I would say they’re not where they need to be because of the climate of the roshei yeshiva at <name of religious university>.

**Sarah:** I wound up calling my rabbi and I said to him, “You know, I’ve been a member. I’ve been contributing. I’ve been giving you tzedaka any chance I got…I don't know what to do. The kids don't belong in a Conservative school. Can you maybe, if somebody, maybe if somebody calls you, maybe you could give them a good word, you know, of who I am? I’m very quiet. I'm very respectful. I’m not
in your face.” He basically said, “If anybody calls me, I’m happy to say that you are a wonderful person.” I felt so rejected, I couldn’t even believe it … You won’t even go to a Conservative shul. You won’t walk into a Conservative shul, but my kids, who are members of your shul are going to a Conservative school and you’re not making the phone call for me?!

**Devorah:** We've had rabbis not willing to answer our halachic questions because we're gay. One rabbi who was willing to answer a question regarding our son’s *pidyon haben* (see Glossary) stated, "I’m willing to answer the question, but I don’t want to be the go-to-gay rabbi.”

**Hana:** Usually people are coming to ask me for [halachic] advice… I didn’t have anyone to ask when I was figuring this out for myself.

While some women did not frame their experiences of rejection as a matter of cruelty, many disclosed incidences of being excluded, shunned, and ostracized by various communal structures, social groups, and family members:

**Atara:** It has been really complicated in camp…I used to speak on Friday nights to the oldest division. They have like inspirational speeches. I used to talk about my religious journey of becoming religious and then I had discovered that they didn't want me to speak. The camp rabbi would come into the office and be like, "Who do you think would be a good speaker this week?" And then he would list all these people and I, at some point, I went up to the rabbi and was like, "Are you aware that I used to, that people have told me I was the best speaker that they heard when they were campers? Are you avoiding me on purpose?" He was like "Yeah, I was told not to ask you to speak."
Batya: My cousin won’t eat any of the food at my home, and the most bizarre part about it all, and it just makes me laugh, is she, like, before she knew I was gay, she would call me with like, "I put the spoon in this pot, what do I do?"…She used to ask me when she had issues or questions, when she wasn’t sure what to do and now all of a sudden, she can't eat in my kitchen… She's a little bit of a difficult person (um). I shouldn't say difficult. She's unkind.

Miriam: The envelope comes for the shul dinner and I pick it up and it's empty. It’s missing the invite. It was a blank envelope with just a return envelope. No invite. No raffle ticket for <name of wife.> I look at this and I go, "You've got to be kidding me."

Devorah: Shul congregants haven't been so nice to us. We go to the single/young married shul in the area comprised of people in their 20s-30s, many of whom I grew up going to school with… The other mothers in the mommy and me group don't talk to us. Every time we go to shul, I hear through the grapevine from a friend of mine that goes to that same shul how people asked her why we showed up. Every week my friend gets these questions, some of which are coming from the shul president’s wife. While I have no problem with people discussing me behind my back and, in fact, it only enforces me to want to go back the following week, but Batya does mind. It makes for an uncomfortable situation that we might assume for ourselves, but wouldn't want to subject our son to once he's older and can understand.

Thus far, this section has reviewed the hostile and denigrating messages that were overtly communicated to women on both the individual and communal level by way of
hurtful actions and non-actions. The duration of this section will review microaggressions, or the subtle types of demeaning verbal and nonverbal communication that the women received as a result of their sexuality.

**Encountering covert rejection, homophobia, and heterosexism.** Though often unconscious, accidental, or out of the immediate awareness of the sender, women reported receiving messages about their sexuality that were negative in nature. Below, some examples are cited:

**Ariella:** There's this woman who was my teacher and we were like sitting next to each other at a bridal shower…. It felt like she was afraid to ask like any questions about my life for fear of like getting into the answers, so I always felt uncomfortable…I think once she realized that I work for a <name of Jewish organization> she realized that like I'm not like this lesbian alien, but like sometimes I feel like she thinks that.

**Atara:** Sometimes a person is obviously uncomfortable around me like that person in camp who used to hug me every time she saw me and was so excited and now like stays five feet away from me and makes small talk and moves on… I know that that person is uncomfortable because now they know I’m gay.

**Miriam:** When we [partner and Miriam] started living together, I had run into this woman in a toy store after Shabbos and I said, “Hello, shavua tov (see Glossary)” and she looked at me and she wouldn't respond and her two children were there, one of whom goes to school with my daughter and I looked at her and I realized what the issue was…
In addition to observing behavioral shifts that felt rejecting, half the sample reported feeling hurt by family, friends, and rabbis who asserted the flawed mentality that gayness is a choice and can, therefore, be unchosen. Sarah described that after coming out to her mother, she was “bombarded by phone calls” pleading with her to pursue conversion therapy through JONAH, or Jews Offering New Alternatives to Homosexuality. It should be noted that this organization was shut down in 2015 after being found guilty of fraudulent business practices for using scientifically questionable methods.

Rivka expressed similar sentiments as she discussed how her parents “are very much of the philosophy that they can pray away the gay” and believe they can help Rivka find a “cure.” Rivka added that her parents do not believe she has “tried hard enough” and that she “just has not met the right man yet.” She elaborates further:

My dad is very into, “Every action has a consequence.” He told me, "You're making this decision, and you're going to have to deal with the consequences, you know, you have to be prepared for that, you know, we’re not going to be, like, welcoming.” In their head, I can choose not to be gay, but I am choosing to be gay, and, therefore, I must be prepared to live with, you know, whatever the outcome is, or the backlash is to that decision that I'm making... I have to be prepared for that backlash…for their anger.

Though Yael’s father did not espouse the precise idea that sexuality is a choice, he did assert that Yael has a choice about whether or not she will choose to pursue a “gay lifestyle.” Per her father, Yael “has an option and that option is being alone.” As she
recalled this suggestion, Yael looked stunned and pained as she remarked, “My own father said that to me.”

Though less explicitly rejecting, participants reported hearing similar messages from friends and rabbis that insinuated their sexuality could be changed:

**Atara:** I had a really hard time with it… In the beginning, I could never say, "I'm gay." I would say like, "I think I'm not attracted to men" and so then the response would be, "Okay like are you attracted to women?" and I'd say, “Yeah I think so,” And then they would say, "Okay but do you think you could ever be attracted to men?" For me, that question felt like a horrible question. It was like, it took so much courage for me to even say, "I think I'm not attracted to men" and for them to say, "Well, could you ever…”

**Hana:** I spoke with my rabbi and rebbetzin (see Glossary) who I had been accidentally outed to… I was very close to them at the time…We had a sit down and [they said] you know, “This could be because of your childhood. Clearly you've had a past and that has influenced your sexuality…We can connect you to a therapist” … I understand that they were doing it out of a place of love and it was well-intentioned, but I think I still carry a lot of that fear with me. If they had said, “It's okay to be Orthodox here. Don't worry about shidduchim,” I think I could have had a few more years of my life where I wasn't freaked out and panicked and trying to force myself into this mold that I didn't fit into.

Not fitting the traditional gender and communal mold was another way in which women felt unwelcomed in the community. Unless she is married and has children, the Orthodox Jewish woman is neither considered a complete adult nor a full member of the
community. This was a message that was repeatedly reinforced for the women throughout their socialization. As these five excerpts reflect, it was also a message that left the women feeling alienated and much like “outcasts:”

**Atara:** There were other ways in which I knew that I wasn't welcomed somewhere so like in certain classes when teachers would say, "Oh and when you find your, you know, the man that you’re gonna marry, you're gonna go through this, this, and this...” I had rabbis and teachers throughout all of my education who all said, "And girls, when you find your husbands and they're gonna be a *baal chesed* and a *baal Torah* (see Glossary)”… I always used to sit in the classroom and always felt like a little bit crushed every time by every single thing…There’s this concept of death by a thousand tiny paper cuts where there is not one blow necessarily that's like the crushing thing, but they're just so many little things like over and over and over and over again.

**Yael:** You're an outcast because you're not following the, you don't fit; you just don't fit and you're not doing all the things you should be doing and you're not wanting the things you should be wanting, and yet you are, like, I did want all those things—I wanted to get married and you know have a lot of kids.

**Devorah:** Unless you really have a husband (pause), rather unless you're like a married family unit, you're not really part of the community… so we were never really really part of a community in that sense.

**Hana:** I’m still a girl and unmarried, you know. I'm not a full member of the community until I get married and have kids. I know 40-year-old girls and 21-year-old women.
Sarah: At my mother’s shul, there were too many questions: “Are you married? Why aren’t you married? Do you want to meet somebody? and I have a guy for you!” There was one guy in shul. He kept saying to me, you know, “You have to meet somebody, you have to meet somebody” and “It’s such a shame you’re not married, you have kids” … It was a battle, it was, you know? It’s hard to grow up just not feeling like you belong anywhere…I wasn’t depressed, but there was always that piece that wasn’t at peace.

In addition to feeling aliened for not adhering to communal norms, the women also reported feeling rejected not only by scripture, which reviews laws of family purity that are only relevant to the heterosexual couple and family, but also by those religious educators who taught scripture:

Hana: When I was in seminary, I was taught keeping Shabbat and keeping kosher was better for the family. It's better for the kids. It's better for everyone to be raised with some kind of structure and this is the structure that you should use because you're Jewish…All the other mitzvot were kind of tinged by this idea that you're going to get married and have kids… I mean that was the whole goal, that was the whole purpose- the expectation of how life should run…

Hana continues:

In seminary, we learn that there are three mitzvahs unique to Jewish women: challah (see Glossary), nidah (see Glossary) and hadlakat neirot (see Glossary). I light candles, [bake] challah. I've done both. I do both, but um nidah, I’m never gonna do and it kinda feels like I’m only two thirds of an observant Jewish woman. I’m less than. I miss out on the female experience of being observant by
virtue of the fact that I don’t have the same religious obligation to mikveh (see Glossary). I am an outsider in my Orthodox community because I can’t share what is considered to be an essentially female rite of passage; I can’t join my hetero-partnered peers in the female space of the mikveh…. There's a whole communal aspect to it that I'm not part of, this whole network of women, like a sub community of women who talk about women’s issues and so on and so forth, and you're not part of that until you're married [to a male].

Atara: There were unspoken things not even by people, but by like halacha that were like "oh you're definitely not welcome here”… Even though I wasn't out to myself then, in retrospect, I was rejected by my highs school teachers who were teaching me Taharat Hamishpacha (see Glossary)…those rules will just never apply to me unless I make them up in certain ways … All of those things suddenly just didn’t apply to me anymore…I can go to the mikveh if I want, but I’ll have to choose it myself … They were taught to me as like beautiful things that are like special for women…There’s something to be said about feeling left out of the mitzvot that I was taught were special for me…Now the only ones that apply, like lighting Shabbat candles and baking challah, like those are the women’s mitzvot that men can also do.

Batya: A thing that Orthodox women who are married do that I don't do, things like going to mikveh or covering their hair or things which growing up I always looked forward to doing because it was the cool stuff. That was the stuff of sort of dreams almost…I don't think I'm missing out, but you know it certainly makes me
rethink what I always thought it meant to be an Orthodox married woman and I'm sort of, I'm an Orthodox married woman, but not in that sense.

The same heteronormative culture that caused lesbian women to feel “lesser than” also denied them the same privileges afforded to individuals maintaining heterosexual identities. For the heterosexual person, the community helps to celebrate one’s life from birth until death. Life cycle events including birth ceremonies (e.g. circumcision), coming of age ceremonies (e.g. Bar/Bat Mitzvah), marriage ceremonies (e.g. Chuppah and Kiddushin services, see Glossary), and illness and loss rituals (e.g., the family distribution of the Book of Psalms, see Glossary) are celebrated with support from others. For the LGBTQ Jew, not fitting the communal mold meant not being privy to those same communal supports. Women reported a variety of homoexclusionary policies, be them formal or informal, that left them feeling as though they needed to prove their worth in order to earn the same communal privileges. Below, four out of the ten participants reflect over lacking the very aspects of the Orthodox Jewish community that others love and benefit from: spiritual and religious structure, mentorship, guidance, and emotional support.

**Hana:** When we started dating, there was no formality — no matchmaker nudging us on, no family calling references to assess compatibility, no rabbis advising us as to the acceptability of the match, no laws or customs guiding our courtship, and no kallah (see Glossary) teacher instructing us as to when and how our bodies should fit together — all of the hallmarks of Orthodox dating were missing. I'm not necessarily following the same chart of life milestones of my
peers, and when my girlfriend and I get married, it's going to look very different…

**Batya:** There's no community for us here. There's no *shul* that we can join as a family. I mean none of the Orthodox *shuls* here would give us family membership…the RCA (Rabbinical Council of America) won't allow it, cannot give family membership to a gay family…It’s very isolating. We have certainly lost that sense of community.

**Devorah:** I believe there are organizations that have support groups for difficulties getting pregnant and with loss, but I am not going to be signing up for those…I would probably choose to withhold the sexuality component because people aren't as sympathetic, because to some degree- this is- not to some degree- this is my choice, I have chosen this life.

**Miriam:** Without a *shul* membership, I didn't have like public *tehillim* (see Glossary) like other people who get things when they're sick…

On a similar note, participants also reported being denied the same financial resources that heterosexual individuals, couples, and families receive:

**Hana:** There’s a lot of community support to help young couples get started. We don't have that. We're not going to get support from Tenyad, an organization which gives money to all the *kallahs* around here… They will fully pay for weddings and, you know, basic, you know, kitchen equipment and sheets…I mean it doesn't matter. We can afford our own stuff, but it's kind of just like sad that it's not there…like, we're not, we're not part of your community enough or we're not worthy of it.
**Batya:** One way the community made it very clear that we're not welcome or that our family type is not welcome is that there are some very interesting organizations that were created to help (um) Orthodox couples with infertility and cover the cost of IVF…They offer special rates…They are not available to gay couples—to Orthodox gay couples. That’s another way of saying, "Your family is not, your desire to have children is not a recognized, you're not a recognized family.”

**Subtheme IV: Barriers to Visibility**

At least half the sample of women reported feeling less visible in the community compared to their heterosexual and gay male counterparts. Several factors accounted for this experience.

**Gender meets sexuality.** The women discussed feeling less visible in the community due to the sheer fact that as women they already have fewer ways in which they can participate in ritual practice as compared to men.

**Atara:** I knew that I would never have a husband and, therefore, would never have a spouse who was on the proactive side of the mechitza (see Glossary); that my family would always be the passive ones. We would always be sitting and watching from the other, from behind the wall, and that's different than what men experience…It's really easy to see the Orthodox feminist problem when you take a couple that only consists of women because it highlights all of the ways in which women are left out of our community, our stories, our rituals. Our conversation is a totally different conversation than it is for gay men…In an Orthodox communal space, women are not as important …No one has to have
the argument of whether or not we get to have an *aliyah* (see Glossary) in *shul*, whether or not we get to count in the *minyan* (see Glossary) or whether or not we have to lead *davening*...That's not a conversation that anyone has to have about us...We're already disregarded...It's just easy to continue to disregard us.

**Adina:** My relationship with *halacha* was always fraught because of my womanhood and then was just pushed further because of my sexuality. I've always said that I don't understand why women would want to be *frum* in Judaism...It just sucks so much... No matter how much I would be able to make concessions in *halacha* so that women could do more, I would know that it's in violation of not only the *halachic* text, but also the spirit of the *halacha*...Now there are even fewer ways for me to participate in a Torah lifestyle. I always have felt that being a woman in Judaism is second class...If I were to create a type of Judaism in which women would be accepted, I would be going against some fundamental points of what I see as traditionally observant Judaism.

**Devorah:** Unless you really have a husband, you're not really part of the community.

**Yael:** I'm not a fan of the traditional Orthodox community—of women being more passive citizens of Orthodoxy. I'm not saying that all of them are. I do think that in right wing Orthodoxy there are plenty of women teachers or leaders running things. I don't believe in a system that decides those rules based on gender.
Erased from text. Though six out of the ten women reported feeling “thankful,” “lucky,” and “glad” that sex between women is not mentioned in the Torah, as this makes their sexuality “less complicated,” two women reported that this absence furthers their experience of erasure:

**Hana:** I prefer lesbian [not gay]. I know it's more syllables, but gay means men and so much of Orthodoxy erases women. *Davening* says, “He. He. He. He. He.” Why would I pick that as an LGBTQ label for myself too?

**Atara:** The *pasuk* (see Glossary) in the Torah [referring to Leviticus] doesn't involve women specifically…This *pasuk* specified men only, and so there's an interesting thing in that you might think, “Oh it's lucky that you [women] aren’t included there,” but really, it's not accidental acceptance; it's just erasure… It's a stigma just as much for me as it is for men…I experience the same rejection, but I’m just erased from the narrative. The same level of rejection applies, but we're just not included in the story. To me, it's even more disempowering.

**Less visibility in Orthodox LGBTQ Spaces.** Four out of the ten women discussed feeling less visible in spaces created to help Orthodox LGBTQ Jews feel connected to community—spaces that women found to be male dominated.

**Hana:** JQY is one of the organizations that works with Orthodox LGBTQ folks. They now have a separate women's program. Why? Because their general meetings used to be predominantly men and always one or two women would show up and would never come back because it was so many men and no other ladies. It was like a different one or two women that would brave the meeting each month…So much of the community is dominated by gay men that you kind
of have to create your own little circle and space as a lesbian or as a transgender person or as a bisexual person—as someone who's not a gay dude.

**Atara:** The first time that I went to a JQY meeting—they had support meetings once a month. The room was overwhelmingly male. I liked the meetings so I started going back. What I noticed was that every single time there would be like forty-eight men in the room and like two women. It would be me and one other rotating seat. Every week someone would come and they would not come back the next time…I was okay because I had a bunch of guy friends there, but the truth is that's a lonely feeling. It's a complicated thing to feel like you finally mustered up the courage to go to a space that is both Orthodox and LGBTQ and then you get there and you still feel out of place. Like how is that possible that within this population, within this, you're STILL alone?! Obviously these people exist, but they don't feel welcome here.

**Rivka:** JQY has a women's group. They do a support group once a month that people don't really show up to, which is really sad because that's your opportunity to kind of talk to other people … I just think that women don't realize that they have to step up to the plate to kind of create that community for ourselves. I think the men have it much stronger…I don't know if it's because we’re so used to not really having a voice...

**Devorah:** It's really a gay man's world… There are a lot more gay men attending these [Orthodox LGBTQ] events. They are the ones coming out (um) either because of finances—the retreat is not cheap—or because you're not dragging out your five kids.
Subtheme V: Barriers that Still Remain

This section seeks to examine the emotional and relational barriers that women continue to face as a result of being told, both explicitly and implicitly, that their sexual orientation is unacceptable. “Intrapersonal barriers” refer to those internal psychological processes that have made it difficult for the women in this study to achieve the self-acceptance they so desperately strive for. “Interpersonal barriers” refer to the continuous relational strains within family and community that women have experienced as a result of disclosing their sexual orientation.

**Intrapersonal barriers.** Living in environments that have denigrated and demeaned same-sex attraction and relationships has made it difficult for several of the women to accept themselves and their sexuality. More specifically, six out of the ten participants reported internalizing negative beliefs, attitudes, and feelings regarding their sexual orientation. As the below statements indicate, some of these feelings included excessive guilt, doubt, and, in the most extreme case, self-hatred:

*Atara:* It took me a long time to be like, "Okay, like this is something that I'm going to choose not to hate about myself and to embrace it more,” and that took a lot of work. I still sometimes feel self-conscious about my own—really in Orthodox spaces and in spaces that are very obviously more conservative—it doesn't happen often, but I’ll immediately feel like self-conscious and uncomfortable instead of being like proud of myself… On the opposite side of the spectrum of internalized homophobia is being proud or like fighting to at least hold my head high and to not let myself be that part that doesn't like this part about me, which, I think, is a very small part of me now.
Ariella: Every year around Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (see Glossary), I always freak out. It's just like a very tense time for me and I have like a lot of feelings of guilt around my sexuality, and I always feel like it's my chance to like reset…

Hana: I think there is that little worry in the back of my head of like they [the community] were right all along. This was the way to live life. This was the correct way.

Yael: I have a lot of doubt still in my life. I still feel stuff is still hard years later…I would not readily admit that because I'm in a relationship, but, yeah, I think I definitely, like, there are times where I have doubts and I'm like, "What am I doing?"

Rivka: I still have very conflicting thoughts on what it means to be gay. It's something that I'm still not comfortable with a hundred percent (um) in terms of you know applying those labels to myself. How do I reconcile being religious and believing in God and being gay? I still don't reconcile it. It's still hard for me. I do experience a lot of conflict internally, not necessarily externally as much, but like Yom Kippur is very difficult for me…I know that Yom Kippur is going to end and I'm going to still want to be with women and will actively pursue that.

Adina: I feel like even though I do believe there is overwhelming evidence, I still want people to tell me I'm gay so that I also believe it. I feel at this point like I'm probably gay. I just don't want to put 100% on it …I'm definitely, for now, I'm dating a girl. I'm definitely in love with a girl. In the future it seems like the next person who I'd like if <name of girlfriend> and I would break up would be a
girl...like the cards seem to point in that direction, but I don't want to say anything definitively... I'm definitely a lesbian. At the beginning, I didn't say, like, “I'm a lesbian.” The way that I would say it is like, ”The evidence seems overwhelming.” I want to KNOW that I'm gay before I put myself through this emotional trauma... I don't want to come out in the Orthodox community if I'm not gay.

This latter narrative by Adina exhibits a person stuck in between the stages of knowing and not knowing. Within the same excerpt, Adina vacillates between “probably” and “definitely” being a lesbian as well as needing to hear it from others that she is gay while simultaneously knowing it herself. In order to “believe” that she is a lesbian, she needs evidence. She requires this not because she does not know she is gay, but because she needs justification for setting herself up to endure the emotional trauma that is coming out in the Orthodox community.

In addition to having difficulty accepting their sexuality, five out of the ten participants reported mourning the loss of the lives they expected to and wished they could live:

**Atara:** I find that there's a lot, for me personally, mourning the loss of what could have been or should have been. I feel sad like it's- it's an interesting thing like I never - this isn't something that I ever imagined would be my life... I have never wanted to be like a rabble-rouser kind of person, (um) but I have to be.

**Hana:** I'm still holding on to a lot of like sadness, just from the life that could have been, the life that I thought was going to be mine ...Still living in this neighborhood, there are constant reminders of the way I used to live my life and
the way I used to really want to live my life and the way that I won't be able to live my life unless I give up very significant parts of myself …Just seeing it kind of makes me sad and nostalgic. It's not a pleasant experience to see everyone else moving on to bigger lives and not being able to talk about me moving on with my life, and it's just like, I don't know, it's not pleasant…

**Devorah:** At the wedding, Batya had a little bit of a breakdown and didn't realize how difficult it would be not having family there. She had one brother that came…This is not the picture that she had in her mind since she was a little girl of what her dress would look like and all the wedding fantasies. She kind of had a little meltdown afterwards.

**Yael:** I always wanted to have like seven kids and like thought of elaborate names for them and wanted to be a mom and I have a lot of heartbreak that like I don't have that yet and I don't know when I’ll have it and it won’t be the way that I imagined. I have a lot of heartbreak over that.

Though Ariella expressed excitement about her upcoming engagement to her girlfriend, one can detect a similar trace of sadness as she reflected upon the wedding grounded in Jewish law that she wished for:

I'm getting engaged on Sunday and my partner and I have been thinking about our wedding. I feel very conflicted about what I want for my wedding in terms -in regards to like Jewishness there, and like, there isn't really an Orthodox ceremony that exists but I wish-I want there to be a way that it's like celebrated Orthodoxly …I wish gay milestones were celebrated. Life-cycle events are exciting for anyone and they should- they deserve to be celebrated for anyone.
**Interpersonal barriers.** All ten participants discussed encountering various degrees of difficulty in their relationships with family during and after the disclosure period. Even those who reported feeling support from their family, be it immediate or eventual, explained that the process was challenging and distressing. For four participants, disclosing their sexuality severely strained the relationship they share with their parents. For these participants, this strain was a central focus throughout their interviews. While three participants hold no hope for repair, Adina, the youngest participant in the study, desperately yearns to mend her relationship with her parents. Through tears, she relayed, “I used to be really close with my parents and then throughout being with <name of girlfriend> I just drifted further and further away and that is so hard for me… I just want to be, you know, my parent’s daughter again.” She continues:

Whenever people ask me, “What was it like coming out to your parents?” I was like, "Don't come out to your parents, it sucks.” I thought telling my parents would make me feel better, but it made me feel ten thousand times worse. I hate that my parents know… I just feel bad because I know on some level like it made them sad and disappointed, and it's just going to be harder for them socially. I just feel guilty. I can't say her name to my parents; like I stumble over it; like I can't say it to them. It's just so hard for me. Even though they know I'm in a relationship with a woman, it's so hard for me to say anything about being in a relationship with a woman…Until my parents feel comfortable with it, I'll never feel comfortable with it.
Like Adina, Rivka remains concerned with her parents’ comfort level and conducts herself accordingly. Below she describes continuing to live a double life to protect her parents:

Even still when I go to Israel, I have to like put on those two faces again.

Whenever I interact with my parents as well, I have to put on that face…My mom will know just from the sound of my voice that there's something. Where it's like she knows I can't talk to her about it, she'll be pushing me and I'll say, "Ma, this has to do with things in my life that you don't want to know about, so stop pushing me," and then she's like, "Oh, okay."

Later, Rivka adds that she has “zero expectations of her parents ever changing” and described the pain she carries as a result:

I said “You know how many times I've wanted to pick up the phone to call you because I just needed my mother and I couldn't?” “Do you have any idea how painful that is for me?” I spoke to her about these fears that I have of the fact that like my parents are such wonderful grandparents to all my nieces and nephews to fifteen kids and like that I, basically, in my head, know that my children one day will probably not have a relationship with my parents because my parents will not be accepting of my children. They won't be accepting of my wife. They are not accepting of my life at all in that regard.

Knowing that her parents, and mother, in particular, will not be involved in her child’s life is likewise central to the pain that Batya carries to date:

My parents said to me numerous times that what we're doing to <name of son> isn't fair… My mother said to me, "It’s the most selfish thing you could ever do,
you know, bringing a child into this world without a dad” in a- in a- not
dysfunctional, but a not normal family. I told my parents that I was going to
pursue this regardless… I made it very clear that, you know, you may have been
my family in the past, but you're certainly not my future if you're not willing to
accept everything about me, and so this is my family of the future. There's a lot of
love there still. There's a lot of pain for everybody involved. My family of
creation was really an impetus for me to sort of get it together. I was falling apart
and I still am sometimes. It's still very painful for me… My painful moments are
more so random moments when <name of son> does something really special and
I wanna call my mother…The holidays are really painful, too. They haven’t
gotten easier yet. I don’t know why but they’re still excruciating …
Left unprocessed, unresolved and often minimized, Batya’s hurt often gets
communicated unconsciously through nightmares:

You know, it’s funny. I have these recurring nightmares. I'd say like three or four
times a year where—and I don't remember my dreams or nightmares very
frequently—but I do remember these because they're so traumatizing. It's one of
those things where you’re screaming and nobody can here you...That's what it
feels like…There's no point in yelling back at this person because literally nobody
will hear you.

In the same way that Batya feels unheard by her parents and siblings, Yael feels
unseen by her father in particular:

I'm sort of like a lost cause to my dad-like I’m very much like bottom of the totem
pole of the kids. I don't care that much, but I guess I do care because for a long
time, I was my dad's favorite. I was like the scholar…I do think it [sexual orientation] has changed his perception of me of being like a lost cause, which is like so, so stupid and crazy because something I said in the letter to my parents is like, "I know that you don’t feel this way, but like one day I hope you can realize that this is something to be proud of that I wrote you this letter and I will help the Jewish people,” and I know that my dad doesn’t see it that way.

In addition to experiencing relational strains with their parents, participants reported negative communal experiences that were a source of immense pain and anger. For many participants, these experiences served to alter their relationship with the religious community in general. For others, the loss of community was akin to the loss of family. For participants like Batya, this loss was tremendous:

I have to say that aside from losing my family, the second most painful part of this process for me has been the loss of community, and I honestly don't know if it's that’s because I no longer feel like I belong or that I'm no longer wanted, or I don't really know what it is, but I'm certainly no longer wanted. That's not a, that's not a perception, that has been made very clear over and over and over again. I am not welcomed, my family is not welcomed. My gayness isn't welcome. Every holiday I kinda have a little breakdown that we have nowhere to go. Nobody is inviting us, you know, we have to make our own everything. There is a sense that I have that I'm moving further and further away from it. It's a feeling, but it's a remnant of my childhood that I'm missing out on.

Hana expressed sentiments of sadness and nostalgia while discussing the loss of community she, too, endured. Given that Hana became religious on her own without the
assistance of her parents, the community served not only as her substitute family, but as a structure that provided emotional sustenance and guidance:

God was that parental attachment figure, and I think that was eventually transferred to the community… In some ways, I’m still very attached to the community mentally and emotionally even though in the grand scheme of things, I’ve distanced myself… I feel emotionally kind of still stuck there… It's not a happy relationship right now, and I wish I could go back to a time where I felt like happy and eager and excited and all that… Now I’m just a little sad, a little nostalgic.

Miriam endorsed similar emotionality while discussing her rupture with a rabbi who revoked her synagogue membership. Unlike Batya and Hana, who vocalized feeling sad, Miriam articulated anger:

I suffered tremendous mental anguish and I do believe that the stress of all of this impacted my health. I'm absolutely convinced that I got sick because the neshama (see Glossary) gets so angry.

In relaying a speech she was asked to give to the Rabbinical Council of America, Miriam shared the extent of her anger. After being stripped of her community before being diagnosed with breast cancer, Miriam began to wonder what community would help care for her sick, bury her dead, eulogize her loved ones, and recite the mourning prayers for her departed.

I went to this levaya (see Glossary) and I'm looking across the room to see this woman who sent me the blank envelope, and to my right is someone who I actually knew from elementary school who for some reason stopped speaking to
me, and I'm listening to all these rabbis giving these hespedim (see Glossary) about community coming together and how we all have to care for each other and I think to myself, “I don't want to die here. I don't have a chevra kiddisha (see Glossary). I don't have a shul. I don't want to die in this community with these people. Who will say a hesped for me? Who will have kovod for my gufa (see Glossary)? Who will comfort my child? Who will comfort my partner? My family?”

Sarah shared feeling similar disillusionment with the Orthodox community after her children were rejected from one Orthodox yeshiva after the next. She became tearful about the moment she finally tasted a dose of acceptance by a Conservative school, where she ultimately sent her children before finally getting them reaccepted into the yeshiva system two years later:

So that was the moment where my entire community rejected me. Nobody helped. Nobody gave a crap and it was like, I questioned my (um) my level of Orthodoxy. I questioned my relationship with God. I said, “What’s happening here? Why? You know? Like what do you want for me? You know, screw it.” I never did anything about it. I never didn’t keep Shabbos…I stayed frum, but I had that moment and I went, “Why? What am I doing here? I want to be part of this community? Why do I want to be part of this community? What a bunch of really disgusting people.”

Given the array of communal difficulties they encountered, participants expressed anxiety about their future in Orthodox Jewish spaces. More specifically, seven out of the ten participants conveyed apprehension about whether the Orthodox community would include them and provide them with a place to raise their families, celebrate their life
milestones, and educate their children. For mothers in the present study, the welfare of children was the most salient concern:

**Batya:** Especially with a child, that's where the uncharted comes into play…

Children are a whole different ballgame in the Orthodox world…An important part of it to note is that there are many children who have two moms or two dads but are the result of a heterosexual relationship. Those kids are accepted in *yeshivas,* not as easily as a regular kid, whatever that means, but they will take them because they’re products of a mom and a dad. Children from homosexual marriages have a completely different experience. Most of the *yeshiva* day schools will not take their kids and we're talking about pre-schools…Next year *<name of son>* is going to be three.

**Miriam:** I don't know what it's going to be like with *Machatanim* (see Glossary). That's going to be interesting when *<name of daughter>* gets married because you're going to have people who are, you know, going to not be okay with it, but I'm hoping that in terms of the generation… They say that people forty and below or in that age range are not so homophobic.

**Sarah:** We have a son, and he has no father and he has no male role…*<Name of wife>* is most concerned about who he is going to look up to. Who is going to teach him the right things? Who is he going to follow?

Even women in the sample who were not yet mothers worried about how the children they hoped to birth would fair in communities and schools known to be cruel and rejecting. Women, likewise, worried about whether their parents would be present in the lives of these children or in their own lives for that matter. Though each woman
expressed concerns that were unique to their situation—be it status of relationship or degree of being out—each woman concluded that she has many questions and not much guidance to help her construct answers:

**Yael:** If I end up with <name of girlfriend>, we'll probably be in a community like <name of pluralistic, egalitarian Jewish day school> where our kids will have normal lives in their gay families...How can I like bring kids into the world knowing I'm setting them up already to be different and from a minority group? How can I do that? Should they know who their biological father is? I really—that is something that like I'm not really prepared for my Orthodox community to deal with and that I don't have a support system on. Those are really hard questions that I'm not dealing with yet because I don't know how to deal with them... I don't think there's such a thing as a gay Jewish wedding... I don't know what that will look like. It's painful to think about. My parents won't be there as they told me. I don't know how- I just don't...I kind of avoid a lot of the stuff that you're asking because I don’t have answers...I don’t have a lot of clarity.

**Rivka:** If I meet someone that I want to marry, what about my wedding? Do I have a wedding? Do I invite my parents to my wedding? And then if I have kids, like will my parents want to be grandparents to my kids? Will my kids know my parents? ...My brain can spiral out of control like that, so like I have to remove myself so that it doesn't because then I'll just end up in a pit of doom and gloom, and then it's just like, yeah, I'll be a mess.

**Ariella:** One thing that we like disagree on is would we want to send our kids to <name of school> which is like a Modern Orthodox school where they're like
weird for being gay? Or, would we want to send them to somewhere like <name of school> where it's like more like common that there are gay families? So I would want my child to have an Orthodox education, and I think that, “Okay, cool so you're weird,” and we’ll help them not be weird but <name of girlfriend> like doesn't want that…our kids will have like enough to deal with, and she like doesn't want this to be one of them.

Adina: Right now, I don't mind going to family functions without my significant other, but I realize that there will come a time in my life where I will want my significant other to be invited to family functions and when that time comes, there's a question as to whether my mom's family will invite my significant other or not, which means there's a question as to whether or not I will continue attending family functions.

Though women were without answers to these grave questions, they were not without coping strategies to manage the distress these questions induced.

**Theme II: Coping with Barriers**

The previous section detailed how Orthodox Jewish lesbians faced numerous barriers while navigating a complex set of identities within their respective communities. Both in spite of and as a result of the homonegative experiences they endured, participants articulated resilience. Salient throughout all ten transcripts were the women’s attempts to cope with and to overcome challenges that were often painful and, at times, life altering. By shedding light onto the participant’s capacity for personal and relational growth, self-acceptance, and meaningful pursuits, such as leadership and community
engagement, this section aims to capture how Orthodox Jewish lesbian women thrived in the face of hardship.

**Subtheme I: Finding Affirming Religious Spaces**

Discovering affirming religious spaces (synagogues, schools, or places of work) as well as people (rabbis, neighbors or peers) was of paramount importance to helping the women cope with their struggle to achieve self-acceptance.

Five out of the ten women described the healing power of religious spaces that acknowledged and received them for their whole personhood. After many years of sacrificing her sexual identity within different Orthodox institutions, Atara was apprehensive about returning to synagogue after a long hiatus. Below, Atara conveys the mixture of emotions that she experienced after finding a synagogue that labels itself inclusive:

So I started going back to *shul* again when I found the <name of synagogue> and I was really nervous to go back to *shul* again because I felt- again I already feel rejected in in so many places in my life and I can't put myself in those situations anymore like on purpose, so like *shul* was a really hard thing for me… The rabbi <of the synagogue> is a really big deal in my life. When he said, "Yeah you can come to our Orthodox *shul* and you can be out and you can come as a couple” that was a crazy thing to me because there's- there aren't Orthodox *shuls*…NOW there are like a few here and there, but it was in my mind, at that time specifically, it was unheard of that there was like a rabbi in an Orthodox *shul* who said you can and should, like, I'm recruiting you as a couple to come and so that was a really big deal …After going, I kind of immediately realized that I've really been
missing this Jewish communal aspect of life …I started feeling like I can have a community of people! I could be a part of a community? I can come to davening and feel like I don't have to be partially lying or withholding the truth, which to me feels like lying...I started making new friends from shul and that was like a crazy thing for me, too…It was so exciting for me that I got to say, "Oh, this is my friend from shul" because I never thought I would be able to have a community that I was like completely welcomed by.

For Atara, Orthodox synagogues and spaces have long conjured up feelings of fear and rejection. This particular synagogue, however, elicits exhilaration and gratitude. Atara presented as animated as she discussed finding an Orthodox space that would not merely tolerate her presence, but actively seek it out; a synagogue where she could not only enter to pray, but exit having made friends who know and accept her for who she is.

Rivka shared that she moved from Israel to New York specifically to join the same synagogue mentioned above:

When I decided to move from Israel, a lot of it had to do with the fact that I'm, I identify as gay, as a gay woman, and I wasn't finding a place for myself in Israel, so when I was looking to figure out like what do, what is my next step, I had heard a lot about the <name of synagogue>. That there's a very significant LGBTQ population that goes to the <name of synagogue>. It's very open in that sense. Nobody cares if you're gay. It's probably one of the more, if not the most, Modern Orthodox institutions that's welcoming to gay people. That's why I decided to move here, to be part of that shul.

She continued:
I love it here. I'm happy. I'm fulfilled. I realize how lucky I am to be in this community, to have made friends here that I can rely on and truly like care for me... I'm really happy for the first time in a very, very long time. As the days go by, I'm excited to be a part of the community… I have found an incredible community that welcomes with open arms and doesn't give two shits about my sexual orientation… Something that I really love about the <name of synagogue> is that the people are there for a reason. There's an intention. People are here searching for something and the fact that we're all there with that understanding… You have people from all different walks of life, all different colors and shapes and everything. People are there because they are… they're searching.

The idea that all people, despite their differences, could be seen as “searching for something” is what Ariella finds most appealing about her place of work. To review, Ariella worried that coming out would adversely impact her professional dream of conducting Jewish communal service work. In describing her work at a Jewish organization that she believes welcomes people for who they are, no matter their struggles, Ariella states:

I was ready to walk away from Judaism completely before I worked here. This place really saved my relationship with the Jewish community. It was the first Jewish community that I felt was totally not judgmental and like everyone has, is like suffering in some way or challenged by something and no one is different. Everyone has their own thing and everyone here is loved and welcomed and encouraged to step up and lead just as much as the next person... It's not like the
gay struggle is the only struggle in the community like everyone- people have whatever it is… I just feel a part of a people and not singled out here. This place is like the best approach to God and Judaism that I've experienced.

In the above narration, Ariella communicates the importance of feeling like an equal; the power of feeling part of and not a part from. She emphasizes this later when she states that what she appreciates most about her accepting workplace is “not having a separate gay community”:

Everyone knows that I'm gay here. I don't yell it from the rooftops, but <name of girlfriend> comes to hang out here. Everyone knows who she is. Everyone knows who I am. I just like being gay within my community and there’s gay people and there’s straight people and it’s not, there’s not so much of a divide and it doesn’t necessarily matter. I just am who I am.

Yael revealed a similar type of acceptance while discussing her work at a pluralistic, egalitarian Jewish day school:

Working at <name of school> is the first time in my life I feel like I'm not lying about a part of myself… I came out to my parents when I was in <name of school>… There's four openly LGBTQ Judaic studies middle school staff in <name of school>, all from Orthodox backgrounds, all of us. And, guess what? There's a reason we're all at <name of school>. There are Orthodox kids in the school, but we don't know who they are; it's blind in labels. We have the power there to create a community that’s label blind.

Finding a community that does not assign labels was particularly meaningful for Sarah after her children were rejected from eight Orthodox schools. When she finally
managed to secure their entry into a Modern Orthodox Jewish day school reputed to be more open-minded after having to send them to a Conservative Jewish school, Sarah stated, “This is where I wanted my children my whole life…They’re home. We’re home. We’re part of the community.”

Seeing her children accepted by a welcoming Orthodox school gave Sarah the courage to attempt connecting with members of her own community; a community she had long avoided. For most of her life, Sarah abandoned community before community could abandon her. With tears in her eyes, Sarah happily reported that the risk of reaching out to others was met by multiple rewards:

The biggest LGBT advocate lives right around the corner. She’s been instrumental in trying to get us integrated into the community. They didn’t feel like it was fair for us to be isolated and they love <name of son>…Her thing is that the kids really deserve to be, you know, part of the community like anybody else, and how dare the community say otherwise… She wants us to become members of the <name of synagogue>. She winds up talking to <name of rabbi>… In the end, we wind up becoming members of <name of synagogue>…They accepted the two of us, as a couple to <name of synagogue>… It’s like here I am. I’m finally home. This is exactly where I’ve always wanted to be…It’s lovely at this point. People are so accepting. I don’t have to run out of shul. I can stay till the end and I can say “good Shabbos” to people and I can smile and be friendly.

Like Sarah, Miriam, Atara, and Batya discussed the instrumental role that heterosexual LGBTQ advocates played in helping them feel comfortable within communities:
Miriam: This gay thing has definitely created tumult in this community (um) and it's impacted straight people who stood up for us. There was a lot of support, people wrote letters, forced a meeting...People went and pushed and pushed and pushed... I've had friends who in protest, you know, withdrew from the shul...I have very real, very good, very supportive friends who stood up for us, you know, and stepped out of their comfort zone and wrote letters to the rabbi or called and said, “Don't do this. Don't do this.” I think we have a lot of really good people here, so I think I changed my anger, especially since I got sick.

Atara: After my girlfriend and I got engaged, we have a whole bunch of different pictures on Facebook and there’s one picture that this one guy who I don’t know commented, “Whose the male in this picture?”... It was like the coolest thing that all these people kind of rallied together and started commenting [back to the commenter], “You should really delete that post... it's really embarrassing for you that you put this here.”

Batya: Our neighbor across the street said to me, "You know, <name of Orthodox school>, they don't have a nursery program or pre-nursery program, but if you wanna put <name of son> there, I will make a stink and I’ll go to the principal on your behalf."

In addition to noting the powerful impact that heterosexual LGBTQ advocates had on their lives, participants similarly conveyed how emotionally corrective it was to meet rabbis who showed kindness, compassion, empathy, and genuine curiosity:

Ariella: <Name of rabbi> and this community go out of their way to just like preach inclusiveness without exclusively mentioning who’s included...<Name of
rabbi’s> message is, “No one keeps all 613 mitzvot, no one- everyone struggles with something.”

**Yael:** <Name of rabbi> is a rabbi in the <name of community>, and his son came out as gay recently and <name of rabbi> wrote a letter that he had all these more progressive Orthodox rabbis sign asking *mechilah* (see Glossary) to the LGBTQ community for not being more supportive and not being there for them, and I thought that was like an INCREDIBLE thing for Orthodox Judaism.

**Miriam:** <Name of rabbi> said that the blogs he's read have completely altered his perception of how he has to deal with things and when I spoke at the Rabbinical Council of America, rabbis came up in tears and literally said to me, "You have completely altered the way I'm processing this. I don't want to be that rabbi.” I had a *rav*, a very well-known *rav* in Chicago say to me, "I need to go back and deal with my congregants very differently now that you have explained this to me. I didn't understand.” A *rav* from Baltimore with the longest beard and this long *bekeshe* (see Glossary) says, “If you need a place for *Rosh Hashanah*, you can come to me and you bring your partner, and we will give you a room and a space and you're welcome in my home.”

**Batya:** We actually found a wonderful rabbi in <name of neighborhood>. He's a spectacular human being, a heart of gold. This is a man who when you meet him, you realize: "This is actually like a person who represents Torah. This is why I'm Orthodox.” He was there for us through some interesting situations, some difficult situations…When telling him about some of the experiences I had with some
rabbi, at one point, he looked at me and he goes, "That's just not how it's supposed to work… This is really not how it's supposed to work."

**Sarah:** My mother’s rabbi found out about it [school rejections] and he made phone calls for me, even though I’m not a member of that *shul*, and it’s my mother’s rabbi… He’s just a nice person, you know. He understands. He felt. He felt, I guess, compelled to help a member of the Jewish community… I’m not his community member, but my mother is his member, and my mother went to bat for me as a gay person.

**Atara:** And that rabbi texted me and said like, “*Mazel tov*, I’m really happy for you guys… you guys as individuals and as a couple are both really leaders, and you should have happiness together… I'm probably not as comfortable with this as you would like for me to be, but you taught me to open my eyes to a whole different world, and I will be forever indebted to you for that.”… So this is a rabbi who is like, it's bold for him to acknowledge those things out loud… acknowledging prejudice is a really big deal.

**Adina:** <Name of rabbi> very much wanted to know more, “What's her name? Where did you guys meet?”

**Subtheme II: Turning to Orthodox LGBTQ Jewish Communities for Support**

Participants discussed the positive influence that Orthodox LGBTQ Jewish communities had on their lives as they navigated understanding their sexuality, disclosing their sexuality, and managing challenges that surfaced as a result of disclosure. Five out of the ten women referenced a number of organizations that provided guidance and counteracted feelings of aloneness. Formed in the last decade, Eshel and Jewish Queer
Youth (JQY) are organizations that exist to promote acceptance and inclusivity for Orthodox LGBTQ Jews and their families. In many ways, these organizations have become a spiritual home for Jews seeking community and a space that makes room for both sexuality and religious observance.

**Devorah:** We are part of Eshel, which is the gay Orthodox community. We are very involved in that... Eshel definitely plays a much larger role for my wife than myself... they ask her to speak at everything... I'll have people come up to me privately, and I can do a one-on-one conversation and give back to the community in that way.

**Rivka:** I think something that I found very helpful was connecting with other people who have experienced similar things to me, so like I'm personally a part of JQY and Eshel, and they've been incredible resources just in terms of like meeting people, hearing other people's stories, and that's had a really big impact for me in terms of helping me to become more comfortable with being Orthodox and being gay... Things like that kind of like give me like chizzuk (see Glossary) in a way.

**Miriam:** I ended up at Eshel as a reaction to what happened here [referring to rupture with her synagogue]. I feel now, after having written on behalf of the community, presented at the Eshel shabbaton (see Glossary), and been to an Eshel shabbaton that I am part of the community, and I have had friends who I've made along the way, closeted people who have come here for Shabbat. Openly gay people have come here for Shabbat. So I'm building a community of gay friends. I am building that community now.
Batya: We are both part of Eshel and that has been a great source of joy and community and friendship. It's been a really wonderful experience…They have, you know, a big *shabbaton* once a year in the winter and they have smaller events, smaller *shabbtons* and other events over the course of the year. We try to go to as many as we can… Made some really great friends—met some really nice people…I've been asked to speak at a number of events. I think people find our experience to be unique in that we are sort of living the dream. It's a hard dream.

Hana: I had gone on an Eshel *shabbaton* at some point in college. This was before I like swung back and got super into religion…When I went back to attend a support group, I was so nervous I remember circling the block like five times before I went in the building. I went and the floodgates opened. I was like, "Oh my god, there are other people like me." It's given me a bit more of a community. There are a lot of role models…There are other women who are getting married, having Shabbos, having kids and all…

**Subtheme III: Using the Internet as a Source of Support**

Five out of the ten participants recalled utilizing the internet to find in-person support vis-à-vis the organizations mentioned above or to connect with online communities that are comprised of individuals who identified as gay/lesbian and Orthodox. Participants consistently mentioned that finding others like them through online forums helped them find comfort and reduced feelings of isolation. For those participants who did not find others like themselves online, the internet still provided an anonymous and, subsequently, safe place to learn about sexuality.
**Hana:** I was just like feeling fed up with the [Orthodox] system and with everything and so I think in a very frustrated moment, I found a support group for LGBTQ Jewish women online.

**Miriam:** The internet helps you realize that you're not alone in this…it created a place for me to meet people and I encountered others who were like me and some of them were in relationships with other women. I started reading and trying and looking into it, and it started becoming something- and I really made connections with other women who were similarly situated in marriages and, you know, some who were, you know, going to leave their marriages, not leave their marriages, and, you know, we formed like a community.

**Sarah:** I was doing a lot of research online at that point. I found (um) a group called the Orthodykes, and there was like eight people, none of them were religious and gay…It was either religious and hiding in the closet, still married, whatever the situation was, or left the religion, formerly religious, which is nice because I was able to identify a little bit with both, but I just couldn’t understand why there was nobody that wanted to be both like I didn’t understand it…[Nevertheless] It’s funny because having the Orthodykes gave me hope that there were people out there that were more similar to me, so I started to try to pursue people like that.

**Rivka:** After the [Yeshiva University Gay] panel, that's when I went online and tried to find like whatever I could about like being gay and being Jewish, support groups, stories or essays… This gay panel was all men, I would have loved to have heard about women…I was able to kind of connect to voices of women. It
happened just to not be Jewish [women] because it just doesn't exist. I found it very sad that I couldn't find voices of other women in my position, so I turned to other avenues of other women. YouTube was a big thing for me. There were different YouTube personalities or bloggers that are gay that like talk about their lives…They gave me like a lot of strength…I actually contemplated maybe starting like an anonymous blog as like someone who identifies as Orthodox and lesbian, gay or whatever just so that like people have a resource to turn to or a voice… I found it very sad that I couldn't find voices of other women in my position, which is what kind of pushed me to reach out to you…Women need to create a community for themselves… As women, we have the responsibility to one another to help each other.

**Adina:** I was doing research on the internet about statistics about lesbianism and religiosity. I was just interested in Orthodoxy across the board; what lesbians were like in religious communities. I really couldn't find anything, so when you said that thing about filling in a hole in the literature, I was really encouraged by that…That’s part of what encouraged me to say yes to doing this [interview].

In describing their reliance on the internet as a means of guidance and building connection, both Rivka and Adina recall not finding the voices of Orthodox lesbian women they hoped to locate. Both stated that the absence of Orthodox lesbian voices is what primarily inspired them to take part in this project. The initiative that Rivka and Adina took to speak about their experience as Orthodox Jewish lesbians highlighted a particular form of resilience demonstrated by all ten Orthodox Jewish lesbians in the
present sample: Each woman strove to make audible the stories they felt had been silenced.

**Subtheme III: Creating Community Where Community was Absent**

Women found ways to build community when affirming communities were non-existent. They desired to know others who identified as religious and gay as well as regain the sense of community they had lost. When women discussed the barriers to visibility that they faced, they also articulated that creating a community for themselves was all the more important given that LGBTQ Orthodox Jewish spaces were dominated by men. Below, women discussed building community for themselves and others who are made to feel marginalized:

**Miriam:** I think Shabbos has taken on a significance because I don’t have a *shul* and I’ve created a community…I just made something here, you know? The *minyan* (see Glossary) I guess has filled that void. I was thinking, “I’m going to miss all of this so why don’t I create something here?” And that's been my motivation. I wanted to make a place for anybody. I hear people in this community do not invite single people, people who are divorced or alone, but I always make sure that, just come, just come, just come. I try to pay it forward for people who have paid it forward to us, you know, who have included us…so we're actually trying to really put something together that's going to be an inclusive space for *frum* Jews who are, who are straight or LGBT. That's what we're looking for…That's what it is practically speaking. It's a support network.

**Atara:** I create the resources that I wish I had when I was younger. I helped to build the community that I wish I had so that other people don't have to... Now
there are women; there are female participants of JQY because I did this space, because I made this space and now the women's space is like it's great… The women's space itself is not necessarily thriving but JQY is better because of it…

**Hana:** We do host Shabbos meals here. We actually had one last weekend…We kind of do our own thing. We’ll make our own *Kiddush* on most weekends. If we're going to have a Shabbos meal, we have it here, and we invite people to come here…I feel like the way I do Shabbos at home hasn't really changed that much, but I’ve changed who comes to the Shabbos table.

**Batya:** Nobody is inviting us, you know. We have to make our own everything, which in the end has turned out to be nice…We've created our own little family, our own little community within the gay Orthodox community. We all do a lot of holidays and all that together...<Name of wife’s> best friend lives in <name of town>. We go there for Shabbos often. We probably spend two *shabbasim* (see Glossary) every month away, making our own community. Doing our own thing.

**Sarah:** Meanwhile, we made a community for ourselves.

In order to create community, women needed to step up as leaders. Below, seven out of the ten women recall their experiences serving as leaders in their respective communal spaces. Some of these communities were those that participants, themselves, created.

**Hana:** When I was an intern at Eshel, I was really involved in helping to create and provide and sustain the services both, you know, logistically in terms of community organizing as well as clinically in terms of like doing more outreach to women, forming support groups, and meeting with people one-on-
one...I think in a lot of ways when I was figuring this out, I was figuring this out on my own, but the community has grown in terms of its organization so much in the last few years, and so people kind of now identify me as someone who knows a lot, someone who can connect you with people... and I was proud of that girl.

**Atara:** I never had a role model that I could relate to at all and so I strive to be that for other people. A lot of different teenagers have reached out who I know from [name of LGBTQ Orthodox Jewish organization] saying, “You give me hope for my future.”

**Miriam:** When I started blogging about it [membership being revoked], it was unbelievable. The community itself just started reaching out...like, "You don't know me, but I've read your blog. You don't know me and my kid is gay. You don't know me..." All these things you know I've gotten—people have reached out to me from Israel, from England, from California, from all over the world...One person said, "Your blog has started a dialogue between myself and my mother." So there's been an impact, which is why I continue to write...

**Ariella:** I feel like I have the ability to be a leader and to pave the way and make it safer and more comfortable for other people. My first cousin, when she found out that I was getting engaged, sent me the nicest text saying, "It's amazing that you're doing this and like what you're doing for people that are coming after you." So I try. I think by working here, I set a new example, you know? I have an opportunity to help people. I have an opportunity to set an example. I feel like I have a lot of responsibility.
Yael: I decided to appear in speaking about this at the <name of conference> even though I'm scared to do it because there is no Orthodox Jewish educator in a school who has gotten up and—definitely not female—and has been like, "This is who I am." I don't think it’s happened. I think it's people who have left [the Orthodox community].

Adina: People have come to talk to me about like people that they know who are gay… I feel not that I want it to be an ambassador, but in some ways like an ambassador, which in some ways is rewarding that people have (um) like a face to put to this concept of Orthodox homosexuality.

Batya: Eshel asks me to speak… I have a wonderful life but it is hard every single day… I know that we're lucky…Just finding somebody and then being able to carry through to marriage, and we're together ten years now and have a beautiful baby… It's what a lot of the younger kids want to- want to have for themselves and want to know that it's a possibility, so for that reason alone they ask me to speak…

**Subtheme V: Distancing Oneself from Painful Sources**

In order to foster the courage and creativity that was crucial to creating communities, women reported needing to detach from certain religious people and spaces. Below, eight of the ten women describe physically distancing themselves from communities and institutions that had been causing and maintaining their pain. With distance, women reported being able to safely come out, critically examine beliefs about their identities, and begin healing the wounds that were inflicted by rejecting environments.
**Hana:** In those months, I sort of distanced myself a lot from the community… I was making a plan to get a job outside the community so that I wouldn't be as dependent on them as I was figuring this stuff out (um)... I told the rabbi and *rebbetzin* that I was taking a break from dating. I said I was focusing on school… I started working on just distancing myself from the community so that I could feel safe coming out… I don't really go to synagogue anymore and I have stopped really reaching out for Shabbos meals at families that I used to go to … Why should I try so hard to be part of the community that's never going to make room for me? … I’m like one foot in, one foot out at this point.

**Rivka:** It was probably one of the hardest decisions because I really do, I did love, I do love living in Israel. I did love living there, and it upset me that I had to leave because of the fact that I'm gay and I just wasn't finding a place. It was hard to be around my parents and my family… I'm not out to everyone in my family… It was really hard. It wasn't an easy decision leaving Israel. I'm very happy I did it because my quality of life now is just like totally different and I'm finally able to be myself in a way that I never could.

**Yael:** I left the Orthodox school system. I don't ever go to anything affiliated with <names of Orthodox institution>… It's like too hard to think about that stuff anymore… The Jewish institutions I'm involved in are more like <names of liberal, egalitarian organizations> things where it's just a non-issue, your sexuality… I’ve sort of avoided strictly Orthodox environments for the past two years. Part of that has to do with my current relationship because I don’t feel as accepted… It's hard for me to go back to those spaces even though they speak
to me in a much deeper way and I miss it, but it just reminds me of a lot of negative secretive times in my life. I'm sort of...I have one foot here, one foot there.

**Sarah:** I wound up going to my sister’s *shul* almost like every other Shabbos because at my mother’s *shul*, there were too many questions. It was too integrated and I didn’t really want to be. With my sister’s *shul*, I could be kind of anonymous.

**Adina:** I wasn't going to as many <name of Orthodox community> functions so I've kind of like lessened my commitment to <name of Orthodox community>…I’ve withdrawn from the community.

**Miriam:** I myself have made a determination that you know (um) I won't *daven* in the *shul* anymore because it's not LGBT inclusive…It’s not an environment I want to be in. It definitely-it's impacted me. I guess ritually wise, I'm not the biggest *shul* goer anymore. I used to be better. I used to be better.

**Batya:** My parents’ community, the one that I grew up in, I have, I have no connection with whatsoever anymore. It’s kind of like "those people," almost like "those crazy people" at this point.

**Atara:** After I originally came out, I felt I had to be in more open, liberal, open-minded kind of places and so even if I would have wanted to continue going to like *shul* in let’s say in <names of traditional Orthodox communities>, because I felt rejected by those places, I think I sort of had to move towards the more open kind of Orthodoxy.
Ariella: Yeah, <name of parents’ community>… it’s definitely not like where I choose to be or feel my best… It was a fight for me to not feel self-conscious at my brother's *aufruf* (see Glossary) ... I do feel that people are like looking at me differently or like talking to me differently… I know that sometimes it's in my head and sometimes it's not.

In addition to withdrawing from homonegative communities in order to find and create more supportive religious spaces, women also discussed requiring emotional distance from figures, be them familial or spiritual, whom they felt hurt by:

**Sarah:** My mother and I were always very close, but I needed to distance myself and that’s what I learned through therapy. Like you really have to take a step back from your mother. She’s hurting you. That I’m not responsible for her life and I’m not responsible for her feelings… She just wants the best for me, but she’s really hurting me and so I need to not be as close to her. So for a while, we were not close. I kind of avoided her and, you know, I felt bad for me because I lost a piece of a relationship with her.

**Batya:** With the exception of my older brother, my relationship with my siblings is very limited at this point because I'm not really interested in investing in relationships that will only cause me pain and at this point, that's the reality. I'm kinda done with the sympathy. I think if given a choice, most of my family would-certainly my father's siblings-would choose my parents [over me] and I just don't wanna deal with it...

**Hana:** I was so close to the rabbi’s family. I lived with them. Their kids used to draw me in the family pictures, so that's been kind of a loss, and I know it doesn't
have to be. I think they would be a lot better with it if I really gave them more of an opportunity, but I'm scared to give them that opportunity. So, we have this distance for now.

**Rivka:** I found myself for a period of like a year distanced from God. I didn't feel Him in my life. I didn't want Him in my life (um) I was just not. I wasn't-I wasn't happy with Him because I didn't, I couldn't understand why He would do this to me. Why He would put me in a situation with two impossible choices and either way, I lose out.

**Subtheme VI: Cognitive Flexibility**

The distance that Rivka needed to take from God reflected a broader shift that several of the women undertook as they began to explore their complicated set of identities within communities that were often rejecting. More specifically, the women began to challenge longstanding beliefs about religious observance, ritual, and identity. Challenging these beliefs often translated into trading in certainty for uncertainty. Several participants discussed beginning to “live in the gray” as opposed to the “black and white” that had, thus far, been guiding their lives. The women began to look at religion in deeper ways, questioning whether or not certain rituals aligned with their personal values and beliefs as well as examining how practices had served to hinder, as opposed to bolster, their happiness. Accepting the ambiguous resulted in seven out of the ten women assuming a more eclectic, less rigid religiosity than before as evidenced by the following narratives:

**Batya:** I would say my level of observance has changed. I am now far more comfortable living in the gray whereas before, the way I was raised, it was very
black and white… I don't value it anymore in the same way I used to. I don't feel this stringency really brings any…I don't think it's necessary. I don't think it's intellectually honest…I will always remain Orthodox, but the Orthodox community may not view me that way…I'm far more comfortable with what you're allowed to do than what you should or shouldn't do.

**Rivka:** With halacha (um) I've chilled out a little bit …I've started to just like tone down a little bit because I realized like either it just wasn't feasible or I wasn't happy or I was just, like, do I need to make myself crazy? Is that what God wants?

**Atara:** It took me a long time to have a more flexible way of thinking…It’s okay to live in the not- it’s okay to live in the question rather than feeling like I HAVE to be doing everything by the rules. So that was a little bit of a different transition for me.

**Hana:** I'm going to pick and choose a little whereas before it was like this is the religion…There are more shades of gray right now… I am more accepting of the fact that there are multiple (um) halachic interpretations…Now I'm kinda like a little more distanced like I keep Shabbos and kosher. I cheat a little when no one is watching. I don't go to shul anymore. I don't pray anymore. Most of the time, I don't say brachot (see Glossary). I mean, the consequences of not being very strict with the ritual practices are significantly lower now that I'm not worried about losing my job. I'm not worried about losing my housing.

**Yael:** My Orthodoxy changed and evolved, but never in my mind did I consider myself external to the Orthodox community…I made changes…Things that don't
really resonate with my personal values, I've sort of pushed away. Those things include the basic things you would expect of a Jewish feminist… I noticed the flaws of following the *halachic* system not just in terms of sexuality, and it's hard because I love the *halachic* system. It's brilliant and fascinating and I've spent years studying it, but I realized that some of it doesn’t flow with what I, if I’m really honest with myself, with what my values are and I can’t ignore that. I think a lot of Orthodox people, I don't wanna say they follow it blindly, but they follow it unconditionally and I think you have to have conditions...

**Adina:** I used to think I'm either all *frum*, like I'm all in, or I'm not *frum* at all. I never thought that I would be at this halfway point and now I kind of am at that halfway point.

**Deborah:** I would just say that while the rituals and practice might have been frozen or declined, the pursuit for knowledge and learning has definitely skyrocketed … so I'm trying to increase my analytical skills in how to interpret Jewish material.

In addition to taking a more open approach to the interpretation of Jewish law and a less rigid approach to practice, three out of the ten women began to reinvent their relationship with God by way of separating God from their experience of rejecting communities. Doing so allowed for a renewed sense of closeness with God, which, in turn, fostered a heightened degree of self-acceptance:

**Ariella:** In my first conversation of coming out with <name of rabbi>, he explained to me that I have to be able to separate my relationship with God from my relationship to the Jewish community and like the whole concept of like don't
judge Judaism by Jews… That was the first time that anyone really encouraged me to separate my relationship with the Jewish community versus my relationship with God and both required a lot of healing. I was like extremely angry and frustrated with both. At first, it was all like lumped together, like it was all one, and it was like really hard… I thought God rejected me, but in healing my relationship with God, I decided I wanted to take on a little bit more- take back a little bit of Shabbat that I had lost… At this point in my life, I'm much more focused on my relationship with God than my relationship with community…I'm going to choose to live and choose to surround myself with people that I want to.

**Yael:** I was angry at God and I probably expressed this to my girlfriend at the time. I felt very betrayed by my Judaism and I'd be like, "You know, you’re the love of my life, and Torah and Judaism are also the loves of my life and I feel like I can only have one and both feel wrong without one of them,” and she said, "You shouldn't be angry at God. God didn’t do this to you. You should be angry at how the Orthodox community functions...This is a social, a cultural thing.”

I realized she was right, so I think having that shift was extremely important for me because I was still able to like believe in a loving God.

**Rivka:** I would say my level of religiosity in terms of my connection to God deepened and strengthened a lot where I really feel like I have a relationship with God, but on the outside, like, as you see, I wear pants now, which is something that I didn't do.

For Devorah, Batya, and Sarah, separating their relationship with God from their relationship with community was instinctive to their faith. Reaffirming that they were not
religious for a community, but for God and God alone proved essential while coping with continuous communal criticism and rejection that often felt unrelenting:

**Devorah:** I never had any conflict with reconciling lesbianism with religion. I know it's something—I’ve heard that's something people struggle with. For me, it was never part of it because I answer to God and no one but Him and so I don't care about these community norms and community rules as to what's acceptable and not acceptable… I answer to God—not to anyone else: not to you, not to my neighbors, not to the rabbis, not to the community. So I kind of have that… God and I have this special relationship.

**Batya:** Somehow, never even in my most despondent moment did I think of walking away from Orthodox Judaism because, to me, that’s not what’s at fault here. I don't have issues with my relationship with God. I still don't. I don't believe that I should have shame and I think that what we're doing is holy. I think raising this magnificent child is about as holy as it gets. The issue is with the people. It's the rabbinate, the people. It's certainly not God.

**Sarah:** My relationship to God is very strong. I feel His presence all the time. I feel like if I need something, I just ask. I feel like I have a personal relationship with God and I’ve always known everything happens for a reason and this was, I guess, everybody has challenges in life and this was my challenge…It seems like the first thing that people wanna do is just drop the religion because they’re not accepted and screw it, but I don’t. I’m not religious for people. I’m not religious for a community. It’s my relationship with God. It’s who I am inside.
Fostering alternate interpretations to Jewish law, a more flexible approach to ritual practice, and a personalized connection with God were just some of the different ways in which participants utilized cognitive flexibility as a means of coping with loss, marginalization, and alienation. In the same way that women challenged themselves to explore various facets of religious identity, women also exposed themselves to the emotional risks involved in deepening relationships. Regardless of experiencing much rejection from families, community leaders, and rabbis, women still made space for the supportive responses they received from select friends and family members. Below, seven out of the ten women recall feeling surprised by the warmth, love, and encouragement they were shown in place of the rejection they had anticipated:

**Atara:** A lot of people were surprisingly really good about responding.

**Miriam:** I started telling my friends whose response was, "I've been waiting for years for you to tell me." Literally all of my friends were like really amazingly supportive.

**Sarah:** So then she comes over and she’s like, “Who are these frum neighbors that I know nothing about?” So I said, you know, “I’m like really uncomfortable because I’m scared I’m going to be rejected, so from the beginning I don’t say anything”… So she’s like, “So? I give a shit?” It was crazy. It was, she just didn’t care and she’s like, “Where do you guys go to Shul?”

**Yael:** I just think there were certain friends who I thought were like too frummy (see Glossary) to ever tell this to who eventually ended up approaching me about it and the reaction was like really meaningful. When I finally told one friend, she was like, "I’m just so happy you're telling me. I don’t care that you’re dating a
girl. I’m just so happy you're actually telling me and I’ve always wondered why
you didn’t tell me." So that like was really like wow and then she was like, "I just
want you to be happy. I just want to meet her"… Everyone had been very
comforting… 99% of the time when I told someone, my parents excluded,
everything felt much better, and it improved my relationship with that person.

**Adina:** My religious friends ended up being so fine and excited about it. It was
so sweet and they also had so many questions. They were like peppering me with
questions and it was so encouraging…I thought that it would go worse with these
people than it actually went. It actually went much better.

**Rivka:** My brother stopped me and he like grabbed my hand and he's like,
"Rivka, I'm your big brother and I love you and nothing is ever going to change
that…You are always of course welcome in our house, nothing is ever going to
change that.” He was really good about it. He was really upset at my parents, at
(um) their reaction, at the way that they were treating me.

**Ariella:** My grandparents shocked the world. They bought me flowers the night
that I came out to them.

Women were similarly able to remain open to the Orthodox community despite
enduring numerous instances when actions taken by communities and religious leaders
served as sources of strain and conflict. Unlike gay peers who left the Orthodox
community after acknowledging and/or disclosing their sexual orientation, all ten women
in this study strove to maintain varying degrees of engagement and involvement with the
Orthodox Jewish community. The below excerpts reveal what factors kept women
staying in the community as well as what influences kept them from leaving.
Seven out of the ten women described feeling affection toward the Orthodox community as they detailed moments of connectedness and belonging. Participants felt a sense of emotional safety knowing that others in the community care for them and that these feelings are reciprocated. These strong ties not only linked participants to others in close proximity, but to a global Jewish community deeply entrenched in a rich history and tradition:

**Adina:** I love how all the Jews on campus know each other. People are always like, "How do all the Orthodox Jews know each other?" and we're just like, "We just do, you know, we just know each other."

**Hana:** Everyone coming together on holidays. All of that happiness. In that moment, the community doesn't really care who you are because no one's really looking that closely.

**Batya:** That feeling of belonging. There's something about a regimented daily existence (um) that really makes you feel like you belong. Even though that might just be perception and not reality. It certainly makes you feel as if you're a part of something bigger than you are and everybody else feels it too and so you kind of all feel that way together.

**Rivka:** I think for all its ups and downs, and pros and cons and craziness, the Jews are awesome. That community is global and I really love the richness of the history and the tradition.

**Ariella:** It's comfortable. There's safety. There's people that always have my back... God forbid if something happened to me, the Jewish community has each other’s backs. It just makes me uncomfortable to leave a Jewish community.
**Miriam:** In good times and in bad times, we all come together…It's just a coming together…"l'chaim (see Glossary), happy birthday! l'chaim, mazal tov!"…When I was sick, there was a minyan in my house and the guys came and davened for me so even through illness they're there…it’s my chevra (see Glossary).

**Atara:** The Orthodox Community is my home… It's a community that I love and believe in and want to push because it feels like a home to me and, similar to how sometimes a regular home can drive you crazy, and it can sometimes feel like you're not welcome in your own home or sometimes you are frustrated with your home, you still stay and fight to make it better because your home should be better.

Four out of the ten participants reported that the structured guidelines that Orthodoxy provides helps to foster a sense of security and purpose. For those participants who felt that Orthodoxy provides safety, Jewish law helped cultivate comfort with the predictability of its rules and expectations. For those participants who felt that Orthodoxy provides purpose, Jewish law helped to make meaning and strengthen relationships.

**Adina:** I love the extent of halacha. I love that there's a way to put on your shoes in the morning. I love that there's something to say when you just wake up, even if I don't do them. I like the order to that. It just gets me.

**Yael:** The structure of the Orthodox community is unique to the Orthodox community…It doesn’t not exist in other places… it's unique and there's a sanctity to it.

**Miriam:** I know that my faith has such good guidelines. I know that it can be perverted easily, for sure by people who do horrific things to other people in
the name of what they think God wants, but I also think you can take Yahadut (see Glossary) and you can go out into the world and be a light onto the nations…

When you're a frum person, you have an opportunity to really do a kiddush hashem (see Glossary) ... that's what keeps me, my intellectual and emotional love of Yahadut.

**Hana:** I'm still taking the law with me... A lot of the life lessons that I have learned in the community are still applicable to my life now... A lot of life lessons that we learned in Jewish home class about how to have a happy marriage or happy relationships... These relationships skills, no one teaches you them in the secular world. Where are you going to learn this? I learned it in seminary.

Five out of the ten women reported that they continue to maintain ties with the Orthodox Jewish community for the sake of their families, both of origin and of creation.

Three of these women detailed staying connected to the community so that they can stay connected to their family of origin who place a strong value on community engagement:

**Adina:** What's always been my foremost connection to the Orthodox community is my family, which is strongly Modern Orthodox, and I have a commitment to always being a part of my family because I really love it... When my dad knows that I'm learning and that I'm going to davening, it makes him really happy. I don't think my mom cares about those things, but she cares that I'm, she would be upset if I weren't keeping Shabbos.

**Ariella:** My family is a big part of it... I'm very close with my family so in a certain sense I'll always be a part of the community where I grew up, but I wouldn't say that's my primary community. I just don't think I'll ever fully leave it.
Rivka: I stay out of fear of hurting my family. I knew that it would upset them… …It would upset them greatly.

Four out of the ten women discussed maintaining ties with the Orthodox community because they felt it would be the best way to raise children who would appreciate ritual practice and observance:

Adina: I would also want to raise my kids frum. I want to send my kids to a religious day school. I want my kids to make brachot before they eat things… Those are all things that I want even though I'm not necessarily… I feel like the way my parents raised me was really good and I want to give that onto somebody.

Ariella: My partner and I want to live a Jewish life and raise Jewish children.

Devorah: What keeps most people staying in the community? You don't want your grandchildren to be not Jewish. That is it. It's very hard to sell Judaism without the rigid rules. Otherwise, there would be a breakdown. <Name of wife> wants to go to a Conservative shul because they're open. They're nice. They're welcoming and why feel inadequate or uncomfortable in an Orthodox shul? While we might intellectually agree with Conservative shuls, all the kids will go to the movie after shul and what are you going to tell <name of son>? "Sorry, that’s what they do, that’s not what we do." It would send a mixed message and then he'd be that loser kid that's keeping Shabbos when everyone else is going out…

Miriam: I didn't take my child and yank her out of a religious community in anger and then put her into a Conservative community because I had lived in Conservative communities [growing up] and it becomes a religion of “no”: if you
go to <name of Conservative school> you have kids who eat treif (see Glossary), you can't eat at their house, so I have to say, "You can't eat at this person's house." You have parties that happen on Friday night, you can't go to that party on Friday night…It becomes a religion of no. When you have a religion of no, it becomes a religion that is burdensome. When you have a religion of “we,” it is beautiful: “We in this community all keep kashrut and Shabbat. We all have the same chagim (see Glossary). We all have the same Shabbat.” The beauty of religion, and of Shabbat in particular, was a theme that repeated throughout five out of ten interviews. Women described the Sabbath as a day to ground and center oneself; a time to refocus on that which is important in one’s life while surrounded by those who are most important. Within this theme was the important role that community plays in helping individuals observe Shabbat.

Adina: I don't want Saturday to be just another day… I don't know why Shabbos is such a grounding point…I love putting away my phone for twenty-five hours. I think it's been fantastic. I don't think this is what Shabbos was made for back in the day, but I love the whole idea of no technology for twenty-five hours…I think it creates such strong relationships between people…I feel like having a Shabbos meal is just so amazing and singing nigunim (see Glossary) and zemirot (see Glossary). Is just so, it's such a big part.

Yael: I think Shabbos is a gift. Regardless of feelings about other things in Orthodoxy, I never ever wanna give it up. I really care about. As a child, I led groups at shul and I really cared about it SO much and put so much into it. I davened. I listened to the whole Torah reading. I learned the Parsha (see
Glossary). I’d give a shiur (see Glossary). I was like very intense and spiritual… I felt sad when Shabbos was over. That’s the kind of child I was.

Miriam: We all look forward to Shabbos. When we light Shabbat candles, it keeps me from leaving [Orthodoxy]… It's like the world shuts down, you're not on your cell phone, you're not on the computer, your friends are here… The world shuts down and we are collectively keeping Shabbat and kashrut together… It is beautiful.

Ariella: We had the craziest week ever last week. We had a lot going on, and I texted <name of girlfriend> “Aren’t we so lucky that we have Shabbos?” I was resentful towards it [Shabbat] at some points in my life, but it’s one of the greatest gifts in my life at this point. I just see the beauty and the value in Shabbos… in community.

Sarah: I couldn’t live in an area where there were no Jews. I couldn’t do that because I feel like it centers you. I feel like the hustle and bustle of life just goes on around you and I guess you need just to stop with other people. The world stops in our community once a week. It just stops and then everybody together refocuses and just takes a moment to say, “Hey we’re not here for that, for the gashmius (see Glossary). We’re here for the ruchnies (see Glossary).” I think that when your environment stops as well, then it really stops… When you are pausing yourself, it’s just not the same. It’s very easy to get sucked in.

Because women saw community as the conduit through which they could connect to their creator, they believed inclusion was worth fighting for. Below, four out of ten women detail their individual fight to stay connected to Orthodoxy:
**Yael:** I've left pieces of Orthodoxy, but I know that if I were to leave it behind completely I am not staying to help fight this battle so if I leave it, what do I do? I leave everybody else.

**Adina:** The whole “You're gay, you must not be frum… if you're willing to do this, then you're willing to do anything” makes me want to prove I can do this…a part of me wants to prove them wrong.

**Batya:** My family doesn’t invite me for holidays or people don't invite me to events. I refuse to let them take it away from me. It's not theirs to say I can't have it and I'm not keeping it in spite of them but there's a certain amount of joy in that.

**Atara:** I fight so that other people don't have to. I work to create the resources that I never got to have. I work to be and cultivate the role model that I never got to see and I think that if every fight I have is to be productive in some way that people after me don't have to fight the same fight or so that they can be building on it instead of starting it, then that's what I'm trying to do…I think that if everyone left then there would be no one left to fight and I just I believe in fighting…I see that there is Orthodox leadership who is able to make a difference but they wouldn't be as likely to make it, to be fighting this specific fight or working on progress on this specific conversation if I wasn't there saying, “Hey what about this or I can work with you in terms of this.” I think that I have the ability to make change and to push different leadership in certain directions or to challenge them in some kind of way that will make them be thinking about this conversation in the Orthodox community.
Finally, five out of ten women reported that they continue to stay in the community because they maintain hope that the community is capable of change.

**Sarah:** I think change is happening slowly… I’m not an in-your-face person. I’m not a protester. I’m not a “you better accept me or else.” I’m grateful for the people that do those things because that’s where the changes are coming from; the people that are interviewed in the paper; the people who are saying, “Well I’m gay, so you don’t like it? Too bad.” I think because there are so many vocal people coming out and it’s such a big thing in the community now, people are starting to say, “We have to accept these people because these people are leaving the community right and left.”

**Yael:** The Orthodox community to me is split, in the past few years I see one contingency of it that like I have so much faith in and I see one that’s just not keeping up.

**Miriam:** Listen, there is movement…I have hope with the younger generation of rabbis.

**Atara:** I see hope in the Orthodox community. I see possibility for change. If I were fighting and fighting and I saw that there was no movement then I think I would be more inclined to stop fighting here, but there are people that I see hope in…I see some kinds of Orthodox leadership that are bold and willing to fight a good fight and I think that they can make the biggest difference…I see that there's possible change.

**Ariella:** I feel very optimistic about the Jewish future and Jewish communal future because I feel like students in <names of progressive college
communities> are the future of the Jewish Community…The values that they're learning in college and picking up on and making part of their lives—that's what's going to be in place for my children…So it makes me feel very optimistic

**Theme III: Improvements for the Future**

All ten women discussed the changes they hoped to see implemented in Orthodox Jewish systems in the future. Participants identified numerous deficits on the communal level that they believe are in need of remedy. Whereas some women appealed for alternatives without proposing specific solutions, other women suggested specific implementable methodologies to help improve the community.

**Subtheme I: Change in Treatment of LGBTQ Individuals**

Five out of the ten women expressed the hope that the Orthodox community will become more open-minded, accepting, inclusive, welcoming, kind, and compassionate:

**Miriam:** Judaism, as you know, has three protected classes: the Ger (the convert), the Yetom (the orphan) and the Almana (the widow); ones most in need of protection, inclusion, and compassion. We in the LGBTQ community are like all of them. We are the “stranger” among you, even if we are from within you. We are the “orphan” as we are often orphaned by our families who abandon us and we are the “widow,” who is the epitome of loneliness, when Rabbis and members of the community exclude us. I ask that you protect us, include us, and have compassion for us.

**Ariella:** There’s a lack of acceptance, a lack of openness. There's been so much suicide in the Jewish community this year and people are starting to talk about it…
**Sarah:** I think it would take very open-minded individuals to understand gay people in order for the changes to happen… By pushing people out, all you're doing is isolating people and you're hurting people and people are committing suicide.

**Batya:** Somehow people have gotten too comfortable with being cruel… I don’t think it’s really a community thing. I think it's more of a human thing. People need to trust their hearts… Listen to your hearts more and say, "Hey this is a really nice person. There's no reason to say she's not welcome here blah blah blah blah.” … Allow yourself those kinds of feelings and those kinds of thoughts.

**Hana:** There is still room in the community for people just to be welcoming instead of this, “don't ask don't tell” and “we kick you out if you don't fit the mold” approach. That goes for a lot of things. For anyone who doesn't fit the mold, we’ll find a place for you.

Paralleling the hope that LGBTQ individuals will be treated with compassion, women expressed the desire that gay people will be held to the same religious standards as their straight peers whose religious transgressions tend to be overlooked and not treated as harshly.

**Adina:** There's something about being gay that makes you so de-legitimized in the eyes of the community … If you break shabbos then it's whatever, but if you have gay sex then you're really willing to break halacha, you know? This issur is just considered worse than other issurim. My gay male friends come to davening every morning to show that the fact that they're gay doesn't preclude them from participating within the community… The idea is that if you're willing to do “this”
then you're willing to do anything, so there's this need to prove that you’re frum
…we have to act SUPER frum to compensate for the fact that we're gay because
being gay makes all your other actions count less.

**Hana:** Yeah, I mean it’s considered an abomination. People don’t read it close
enough to see that it is one very specific act…Why do we focus on that act more
so than on eating shrimp? That’s where the spiritual crosses over into the
communal. I get that Orthodoxy is an orthopractic religion, where what we do is
more important than what you believe, but it’s not that clear of a boundary
sometimes.

**Miriam:** If you're looking the other way for someone who drives to shul on
Shabbos, what are you doing for somebody that two aidim (see Glossary) have
not seen engaging in any particular activity, nor do you know anything about
their participating in any activity that could halachically be an issue?

**Ariella:** I don't assume anything about anyone’s sexual life, so why should
anyone assume anything about mine? People are too obsessed with halacha and
that someone must be violating halacha. It's inappropriate to think about a
husband and a wife having sex, so why are you thinking about or assuming that
these people are having sex just because they identify as gay?

**Batya:** There’s a mentality that if you're going to do this one sin in the
community then you shouldn’t be practicing it [the religion] at all. They don't
really say that to people in most circumstances. Everyone has their weaknesses.
Everyone has their needs. Everyone has things that they do that they shouldn’t.
Nobody ever said, "Well then you shouldn't do any of it.”
Subtheme II: Change in Mindset and Mentality About LGBTQ Individuals

Three out of the ten women proposed that the Orthodox Jewish community change the heteronormative expectations about what it means to live a successful and fulfilling life:

**Atara:** If the Orthodox community could change its expectations of what a successful future looks like…I’m talking about not changing the system, but changing a mindset of a large group of people… A successful future doesn't necessarily mean a man and a woman happily living in a fancy house with many children. That's not the only successful kind of future—not for same-gender couples or a single parent who wants to have children…This fight, this conversation is not only for people who are gay necessarily, but for all those who don't fit into the system…We have a system that works for a lot of people, but not for everyone, and I think a lot of people leave because they feel like they don't fit in. I do think actions are very much affected by expectations.

**Yael:** The assumed heterosexuality …<Name of head counselor> would always be like "We're here because we want to make couples between boys and girls.” When you’re a gay kid and you're listening to this over and over and over, it's painful…You like have to be sensitive about it…Think about how often you're saying it…If you’re saying that's the main point of your camp, how does that makes someone feel if they’re gay?

**Hana:** I think just less of a push on everyone has to get married.

Four out of the ten women expressed hope that the community will stop
perpetuating the erroneous mentality that gayness is contagious, a choice, or a problem that can be fixed:

**Sarah:** Understanding that it’s not a contagious thing…that some people are born this way and some people are born that way, and that’s just the reality of the situation and you can’t push…

**Ariella:** I think there's like this fear that if you bring in an alumnus who's gay or have a social worker come in and talk about it [same-sex attraction], then people who are unsure about their sexuality might think it's okay and are going to be gay, which is ridiculous. No one is going to choose to be gay! It’s an infinitely harder life! If you have the choice, you are going to choose to be straight! It's not a commercial for gayness! There is no convincing anyone to be gay or like pushing a gay agenda.

**Batya:** People seem to think that if kids know that being gay is an option, it will make them consider it as an option, and I do hear that in the sense that had I known it was an option, I probably wouldn't have taken so long to realize that I was gay, but that certainly wouldn't have made me gay.

**Hana:** Not to see gayness as a problem that needs to be fixed, but that it is something that happens.

Four out of the ten women expressed hope that the community would stop equating same-sex romantic relationships to same-sex activity. By reducing gay individuals to sexual activities that are assumed, members of the Orthodoxy community continuously hypersexualize gayness and gay people.
Ariella: I think that a big problem in the community is that the topic of gayness in the Orthodox community is very sexualized. People tend to focus only on the sexual part, which is what's not allowed, but by doing that, you're overlooking people's feelings. Everyone wants to be loved. Everyone wants to feel loved. I feel like people don't think about that when someone is gay. They're just like, “Oh, you're having sex?” This topic very much needs to be de-sexualized and to focus on the bigger picture of what it means to be gay and not just like if you’re gay, you’re having gay sex.

Atara: I think people automatically jump to “gay equals sex,” which is totally not truer than for an engaged couple…If when we said mazal tov to every couple who got engaged and thought "oh, they're gonna have sex one day or they already are" that would be a weird and inappropriate response, but people do that all the time with any kind of gay conversation. "Oh, we can't accept gay couples here because they're having gay sex and, therefore, it's an abomination.” Why is that the first place your head goes?

Adina: My therapist was like, “Your mom is probably blinded by the fact that you and <name of girlfriend> would have sex in theory. All she sees is homosexuality as the will to have sex with a woman as opposed to loving a woman.”

Batya: Advocates are people who are okay with sending their kids to school with your kids, letting their kids come to your house to play, sending your kids to their house to play and not worrying that, you know, some crazy orgy and swings and
whips are hanging from the ceiling. People's imagination run wild for some reason.

Interestingly enough, while the women pointed out how gayness is all too often hypersexualized in the Orthodox community, they also noted how Orthodoxy simultaneously silences female sexuality. Atara alludes to this when she posits the following, “In Orthodoxy, women don't really have a sex drive and women aren't really sexual beings, and so what is a couple doing if they're both female?” She elaborates further:

The way that we talk about sex in Orthodox Judaism is a really complicated thing. Usually, we don't talk about it. We talk about men as being hypersexual beings and women as being something like zero sex drive at all and that women have to cover up certain things so that men can control themselves, and so then what happens is we're hypersexualizing men and totally disregarding women's desires. Then, when we talk about this gay conversation, we assume that male gay couples are just having sex everywhere they go all the time...In the Orthodox conversation, women are disregarded anyways and specifically in a couple that has no man in it.

Five out of the ten women discussed how Orthodoxy’s lack of discussion around female sexuality not only led to confusion about their own experience of same-sex attraction, but also left women with the task of clarifying misconceptions held by ill-informed community members:

Ariella: I really feel bad for people that grew up in this like Modern Orthodox world. She [peer] was wanting to suck on my neck and we wanted to touch each
other everywhere and we like couldn’t understand that we were bisexual or gay. That was a way of showing our love for each other… There’s a bigger conversation there.

**Yael:** You have a bad education about sexuality because of your Orthodox upbringing. No one ever talks about female sexuality. I didn't even know what sex was between women. I didn't even know what kissing was according to Jewish law. I didn’t understand, but I felt like I was sinning, and I felt gross. That was a very big thing of why I was so depressed and so sick.

**Atara:** I think people are extremely confused by <name of girlfriend> and I...

One of my best friends told me that a lot of her friends have asked her, "So do they share a room? Do they sleep in the same bed?" Aside from the fact that that’s a personal question and a very strange thing to be asking about other people, it’s also that people view us as like uber best friends.

**Miriam:** She asked stereotypical things about my partner, “How does that work? Who does stuff in the house? Who’s the husband?”...They don't know how to process at all.

**Adina:** The most common question that I get about <name of girlfriend> in terms of sex is “What is it that girls do? What is sex between girls?” People are fascinated. So many people have asked me. I'm just like shocked because these are such inappropriate questions. It just shows the little that we know about female gay people.
Subtheme III: The Rabbinate as a Prime Change Agent

Five out of the ten women specifically identified the rabbinate as a crucial ingredient for communal change. Beyond asking rabbis to recognize their prejudice and acknowledge its damaging impact, women expressed the hope that rabbis would begin to appreciate the powerful influence they have over their congregants. As if speaking to a rabbi at the time of interview, Miriam simplified her request as follows: “I ask that you understand that we as Jews look to our rabbis to lead us and not harm us.”

The utter failing that I see in the rabbinic world is astronomical. These people, in one minor sense of just compassion, can absolutely alter people's lives. I think the rebbeim who are not being inclusive and are harming LGBTQ Jews have blood on their hands. I think it's absolutely causing shefichat damim (see Glossary) and it is an issur (see Glossary). For me, the violation of halacha is on them. I don't mean to be arrogant. I don't mean to say I know everything, but when you know that LGBTQ Jews, our young people, are committing suicide, are turning to drugs …Shame on you! Shame on you if you don't figure out some way to reconcile it without telling them to get back in the closet, which is to get back in the casket… “Teach me all of Judaism. Love your neighbor as you would love yourself and the rest is all commentary,” Rav Hillel says. How dare you not live your life that way.

Similar sentiments echoed throughout four other participant interviews:

**Ariella:** I want the rabbis to be more accepting, more welcoming.

**Devorah:** I think the skeptical cynical side of me has no faith and trust in the
rabbinate, current and past...People follow; the rabbis lead and if the rabbi isn't willing to behave as though he accepts us, why should anyone else?

Batya: One major problem the Orthodox community has is revering the rabbis to the point of the infallibility factor...Believing that you can't trust your own judgement and that there's always someone who knows better than you and that you need to consult them in order to really do the right thing...My parents believe very strongly in consulting with rabbis before making any decisions, even minor decisions, which is sort of a hallmark of the rightwing Yeshivish community. At this point, people will ask the inanest questions to rabbis who instead of saying, "Go figure it out on your own," say "Okay, I'll take the power and let me rule on whether or not you can do etc." It's this catch twenty-two where you need to start asking about everything and then it also satisfies your emotional need to not have responsibility for the choices that you make ... The rabbinate is the one that's leading the pack on this... I think the rabbinate wants us to be relinquishing of power and control...The whole system works so well because it feeds the egos of the rabbis, which then feeds the emotional needs of the people.

Atara: Basically, what the rabbi said was, “I'm prejudiced and I'm recognizing it.” I appreciated it. It was the first time that a rabbi was really honest with me about it. I mean it's a hard thing to hear, but if you can recognize prejudice then you can then help get rid of some discrimination. If you can't call it prejudice and you're masking it under religion and Torah and halacha, then you're just giving yourself more of an excuse to discriminate. Once you can recognize prejudice, it's a really good first step.
Subtheme IV: Specific Solutions to Help Achieve Proactive Acceptance

Five out of the ten women suggested specific steps that communities can take to become more inclusive of their LGBTQ members. Some of these changes include a heightened sensitivity to the language rabbis and community leaders use with congregants and with children, in particular. Other suggestions speak to specific structural changes that can be made to help youth with disclosure and to help include those families who do not fit “the traditional Jewish” family mold. Yael considers these steps toward change to be “proactive” as opposed to “reactive” acceptance, given that these solutions are premediated and should be executed with intention:

Yael: I want there to be proactive acceptance of Orthodox LGBTQ people and not reactive…Most of the places that are “accepting” are quietly accepting. They are REACTIVE. A student comes out, “Great we support you.” No. You have to be PROACTIVE in letting students know. You have to put a sticker up that says, “This is a safe space” so that a kid does not have to come out of the closet and wonder, "Am I safe?" You also have to be very sensitive with your language and educational materials…What I would like to see in the Orthodox community is not this quiet tolerance or like, “hush hush, don’t talk about it, but we accept you" acceptance, but a proactive acceptance. I’m not saying that we're changing a line in the halacha or in the Torah, but that we’re saying, “You are created btzelem elokim (see Glossary) and we're accepting you with all of your choices and the way that you are.” That’s what I would like to see.

Ariella: I want people to be proactive in telling people that they're safe and that there’s support for them. I would want it to be okay to come out in high school. I
want there to be support and acceptance in high school…Kids are too petrified to come out and it's not really okay to come out in the high school that I went to, which is really messed up. I want it to be okay to come out.

**Miriam:** The rabbi sets the tone for our communities for sure. But I think the community needs to learn that they employ these rabbis …If they recognize that they employ the rabbis then they can comfortably say, “I understand that this is his *parnasa* (see Glossary), but maybe this is not where we want to go. Maybe we need to hire a different rabbi”… I'm hoping that as the generations go we begin to say to rabbis, “We have LGBT Jews and we care for them and we love them and we want them included, how do you feel about that?” This should be a line of questioning in the *pruba* (see Glossary) because we need to know who we are getting… That line of questioning has to be included in finding rabbis in communities in the future.

Miriam continues:

I always made a suggestion of making a household membership for two adults…So if you have a son who's caring for an older mother or siblings that are living together, just create a household membership. This way nobody sticks out like a sore thumb…You don't just single someone out…you don't embarrass anybody.

**Atara:** Actions would look like not assuming people are straight and maybe not using pronouns that are gendered when speaking from a podium. When a rabbi speaks from the podium and assumes the whole audience is male, but the audience is in fact 50-50 [men: women] or the rabbi speaks and assumes that...
each gender wants to marry the opposite gender or wants to get married or wants to have kids or whatever, there's all these assumptions...A lot of it has to do with like the language that we use and being aware of the fact that people are not just diverse, but different than what we expect.

In the above excerpts, we see that woman were suggesting changes that directly address the barriers they, themselves, faced while attempting to make sense of their same-sex attraction, come to terms with their sexuality, disclose their sexuality, and feel as though they and their families of creation belong.

**Summary of research questions.** The above sections reflect upon the various themes that emerged when ten Orthodox Jewish lesbians were asked what the Orthodox community means to them and what role the community plays in their lives; what aspects of the community they find challenging and/or stigmatizing; what aspects of the community they find rewarding; how their relationship with the community has changed or stayed the same since recognizing their same-sex attraction; what experiences they have had while navigating disclosure about their sexuality; what factors have impacted their decisions to remain within the community rather than leave it; and what changes they would like to see the community make, if at all, to better meet their needs as women who identify as lesbian. Themes focused on the challenges these women faced, how they coped with these challenges, and the hope for communal change that they maintain.
Chapter V: Discussion

For women within oppressed groups who have contained so many feelings—despair, rage, anguish—who do not speak, as poet Audre Lorde writes, “for fear our words will not be heard nor welcomed,” coming to voice is an act of resistance. Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others. (hooks, 1989, p.12)

In this chapter, the themes that arose during participant interviews will be analyzed through the lens of feminist psychology. Drawing from bell hooks’ concept of “talking back,” this section aims to give voice and visibility to the intense emotionality that surfaced when a sample of ten Orthodox Jewish lesbians spoke about the painful experiences they encountered while living at the intersection of identities deemed conflicting. By sharing stories about resilience and reviewing ways in which these women want to see the community improve, this section also aims to give this sample of Orthodox Jewish lesbians the platform to define their own reality. It does so within the context of a culture that erases women from religious scripture and a field where “most models of psychotherapy, and of sexuality and spirituality in particular, have long ignored women’s perspectives and realities” (Glassgold, 2008, p. 71). In doing so, this study aims to help one particularly marginalized group of women transform from “object” to “subject” (hooks, 1989). Prior to delving into themes, this section will begin with a brief review of the researcher’s emotional reaction to interviewing and data analysis. This will be done in the service of both feminist activism, which stresses the
importance of seeing and describing one’s own reality, as well as reflexivity in qualitative research, which emphasizes the importance of attending systematically to the effect of the researcher at every step of the research process.

**Reflexivity Revisited**

After concluding my final interview, which was conducted with Sarah at her home, I was escorted to the door and given the following verbal gift before departing:

I really hope that this is successful and that you do great. It’s a really, really, nice feeling when straight people (um) do this sort of thing. I feel like you’re just a person who sees the injustice in the whole thing and you just wanna help make it right… It’s refreshing and it’s wonderful to know that people like that exist. It’s almost like you feel this sense of injustice and it’s a wonderful feeling for me. It’s almost like someone is advocating for you. You know what I mean? You almost feel like a child who has a parent saying, “I got you.” So, thank you.

I recall that my eyes welled up with tears soon after Sarah, a woman who spent years fighting crime in law enforcement, likened herself to a child and me to a parent who comforts the child by saying, “I got you.” This was one of many tender moments I experienced while conducting interviews as well as one of the many expressions of gratitude vocalized by participants who described this study as “important” and “necessary.” Overall, the participants appreciated the opportunity to discuss their experiences given women’s lack of visibility in the Orthodox community at large and in the Orthodox LGBTQ community in specific. Sharing their stories was described as “positive,” “cathartic,” and “healing.”

In addition to welcoming me into their homes, many of the women who
volunteered to participate in this study invited me into their inner emotional worlds by divulging heartache and, in the process, exposing profound vulnerability. At times, the pain women reported was palpable and both figuratively and literally difficult to swallow. For instance, I sat with a lump of sadness in my throat as Rivka described coming out to her parents (“I remember when I said the words, “I’m gay” to my mom, my dad let out this completely guttural cry. That was the first time I ever saw my father cry”) and as Adina detailed her strained relationship with her parents (“I just want to be my parent’s daughter again”). I was similarly overwhelmed by intense emotion, though in this instance anger, as Batya told me of a “traumatizing” recurring nightmare whereby she screams and no one can hear her. She laughs as she states, “There's no point in yelling back at this person because literally nobody will hear you.” She tells me about this nightmare toward the end of the interview, after she has already divulged details of the “excruciating heartbreak” she feels over losing her family and community and the “emotional warfare” she believes the rabbis have waged against her.

Though overwhelming at the time of interview, these intense countertransferencial emotions were expected: Women spoke from the depths of mourning, grief, and heartbreak and moved me in turn. What did, however, surprise me was how the intensity of these emotions endured over time. Feelings of sadness and anger did not abate as might be expected between the tedium of transcription and the multiple iterations of reading involved in data analytics. In fact, my enthusiasm for helping women tell their stories only grew as I engaged deeper with data that detailed numerous experiences of discrimination.
Beyond speaking to women’s pain, this data also spoke to their power. In detailing attempts at creating community where it was lacking, the women in this study proved capable of transforming from objects to subjects of their own reality. That women of faith are strong is something I have always known to be true but have too frequently forgotten given women’s invisibility in religious communities. This study, thus, reinforced my motivation to make women more visible.

Finally, this research served as a reminder of the blind spots that are frequently encompassed within privilege and the importance of reflexivity in dismantling existing power structures. Despite pursuing diversity trainings that have examined different aspects of hegemony and power, this research process enlightened me to the depth and breadth of systematic barriers that I have not been subjected to due to my heterosexual and cisgender privilege. This knowledge proves indispensable in my quest to becoming a stronger advocate for Orthodox LGBTQ Jews and a better psychotherapist for religious sexual minorities.

**Finding 1: Orthodox Jewish Lesbians Experienced Various Emotional Responses to Numerous Communal Barriers**

All ten women interviewed in the present study reported navigating numerous barriers in the Orthodox Jewish community as a result of being lesbian. Several women struggled to recognize same-sex attraction, make sense of their sexuality, disclose their sexuality, and achieve a sense of belonging within their family and community. Half the sample continues to struggle with self-doubt, guilt, and internalized homophobia as a result of being Orthodox and lesbian. Some women grapple with these feelings without support from family, peers, and community leaders due to strained relationships that were
triggered by women disclosing their sexuality. The below section will review these challenges in more detail, with a particular emphasis not only on the content that women reported, but on the emotionality that was expressed as they described enduring difficulties. In other words, women in the present study did not simply report feeling pain, but pronounced it by using language that carried emotional weight. Paralleling bell hooks (1989, p. 28) concept that “words are an action, a resistance,” women’s language will be reviewed as “a place of struggle.” Throughout the remaining sections, the abbreviation “LG” will be used in reference to individuals who identify as lesbian or gay.

**Alienation, Isolation, and Loneliness**

Women reported experiencing alienation as they navigated barriers to recognizing same-sex attraction and understanding their sexuality. Because homosexuality was silenced at home, in school, and in the broader community, women reported not knowing that “being gay was an option.” Lacking a language for or concept of gayness, the women struggled to first become aware of same-sex attraction. They likewise lacked role models or frames of reference for same-sex relationships to help guide them with processing, exploring, and understanding their developing sexuality. With no visible lesbians in their communities, over half the sample reported feeling “weird” and as though they were a deviation from the norm. Atara poignantly captures this alienation when she states, “I felt like I was the only one in the world like me.”

For women in the present study, the profound sense of otherness that was felt as a result of same-sex attraction was a symptom of a heteronormative culture that promotes heterosexuality as the dominant and “normal” way of being and non-heterosexuality as “abnormal.” In this culture, the “expectations regarding life trajectories are clearly
spelled out” (e.g., marriage and procreation) (Itzhaky & Kissil, 2015, p. 624) and the preservation of communal values is prioritized over the pursuit of individual happiness (Mark, 2008). Furthermore, Orthodox Jews are reared to value deference to rabbinic authority. The tendency of women to conform to communal and familial expectations, no matter how detrimental to one’s mental health, was best reflected in Miriam’s reason for marrying her now ex-husband: “What I knew was that men and women got married and they had children. You don’t process it, so I just followed along the way of my friends and I dated guys and I married my ex-husband and I went along with the way I was going. That was the way it was.” A similar sentiment was expressed by Tamar Prager, an Orthodox Jewish lesbian whose piece, “Coming Out in the Orthodox World,” was featured in Kabakov’s (2010, p. 51) anthology about LBTQ Jewish women:

I grew up in a modern Orthodox community whose members shared a belief system that dictated the norms of education, marriage, family, life, and career. Some people held socially conservative opinions and some were more liberal, but when it came to relationships and marriage, there was no dispute: the heterosexual model reigned supreme, with its single archetype for lovers…Year after year, the heteronormative model implanted itself deeper and deeper into my consciousness, cutting off the circulation to my budding feelings that charted a different path.

Paralleling present works on Orthodox gay individuals (Kabakov, 2010; Itzhaky and Kissil, 2015), women in the present study disavowed same-sex attraction shortly after discovering it. They appeared to endure a process that Halbertal and Koren (2006, p. 47) refer to as “knowing and not knowing.” According to these researchers, the initial moment of self-revelation for Orthodox LG individuals is one of “intense self-
alienation,” where a gap is formed between what one inherently knows to be true and what one is willing to accept. The Orthodox LG individuals studied in Halbertal and Koren’s (2006, p. 47) study reported various levels of denial or even dissociation during early stages of homosexual awareness:

For them, these stages entailed a dialectical pattern or accruing self-knowledge as homosexuals, while at the same time working hard to undo this knowledge—to not-know. This attempt at repression was the first stage in a dialogical process through which the sexual and religious selves began to assert and communicate the content and the demands of their respective identities.

A similar tension was reflected by participants in the present study who upon acknowledging their same-sex attraction in one sentence, followed it with “this is not me” and “this is not a thing” in the next. Halbertal and Koren (2006) indicate that the use of the nonspecific third-person pronoun, “this,” is evidence of the self-alienation described above. For example, when one Orthodox lesbian in Halbertal and Koren’s study described her revelation of same-sex attraction, she relied on the demonstrative pronoun "that" rather than any specific term denoting lesbianism. Recall that this “linguistic distancing” was similarly used by Atara while describing her painful struggle between knowing and not-knowing.

When I noticed, when I like realized, I kind of pushed that out of my head for a really long time. I recognized it, and then I was like, "No.” And so, for a bunch of years, I actually just totally didn't (um) like I just disregarded it completely, but like kinda at that point I knew it in the back of my mind. I just refused to acknowledge it… this was something about myself that I really hated and really
didn't want to be true. Like for as long as I can remember, I just remember being like, “This is not me.” Like whatever it is would rather die than have this be the case that this was my reality in life.

The “linguistic distancing” and “not-me” reaction endorsed by women in the present study is, according to Slomowitz and Feit (2015, p. 108), a common one among many young Orthodox LG individuals who cannot bear to tolerate same-sex attraction because “the notion of being homosexual is so horrific.” It is yet another form of alienation, whereby one self-state is alienated from another. Citing Stern (2010, p. 140), Slomowitz and Feit (2015) explain the “not me” dissociated self-state as follows:

There are states of mind that cannot be tolerated, these are dissociated and cannot be “experienced simultaneously” and “remain sequestered from the others.” These states of mind are experienced as alien to the individual and are defined as “not-me.” It is these “not-me” parts of self, which are defended against actively and unconsciously and remain what Stern calls “unformulated.” These feelings cannot be experienced as one’s own without severe psychic consequences.

The severe psychic consequences alluded to by Slomowitz and Feit (2015) appeared particularly salient when women began to explore their sexuality in closeted relationships. For these women, living a “double life” took a substantial toll on their emotional wellbeing. More specifically, these women reported feeling isolated, which resulted in depression, loneliness, emptiness, lack of fulfillment, and hopelessness about the future. Keeping secrets made women feel distanced from their families and friends and dissatisfied in their romantic relationships. As was reported by the Orthodox gay men in Coyle and Rafalin’s (2000) sample, women in the present study explained that their
reliance on compartmentalization negatively impacted their ability to be authentic, which in turn, had a significant detrimental effect on their sense of well-being. While some of these women reported suffering to the point of thinking about killing themselves, others expressed feeling as though their secrets “killed” a piece of them. The struggle participants experienced while selectively not disclosing aspects of their identities was evident in their language, which was marked by aggression and destruction: Sexuality was for Rivka a “monster that was just constantly having to be pushed down” and secrets were for Yael something that “ate up” her relationship and “killed a part” of her.

The negative psychological consequences that women endured as a result of concealing their sexual identities paralleled the emotional struggle detailed by Orthodox gay men in the works of Coyle and Rafalin (2000), Itzhaky and Kissil (2015) and Novich, (2014). Unsurprisingly, living dishonest and censored lives proved detrimental to one’s mental health, irrespective of a person’s gender. Unlike the male participants in Itzhaky and Kissil’s (2015) study, however, women in this sample did not believe that hiding their sexuality was the only way they could survive in the Orthodox community and, thus, did not keep their sexuality concealed. Those women who expressed struggling to reconcile their sexual and religious identities detailed an active and, often times, painful journey of finding ways in which they could inhabit and embody both identities. The men in Itzhaky and Kissil’s study, however, made no effort to do so. These men believed that they alone, and not the community, were flawed and required change. The differences endorsed between samples may be due to the fact that men in Itzhaky and Kissil’s study identified as ultra-Orthodox while women in the present study more closely aligned with Modern Orthodoxy. Men in Itzhaky and Kissil’s study were, thus,
embedded in a more conservative environment that likely embraced more rigid ideas about sexuality, religion, and community. Future research is needed to understand how gender may influence the coming out process for religious sexual minorities.

**Fear**

For many women in this sample, the act of disclosing sexuality, let alone acknowledging same-sex attraction, felt frightening. Receiving homophobic and/or prejudiced messages about homosexuality while growing up led the participants to believe that their families and communities would not accept their lesbianism. Witnessing gay individuals in the community experience maltreatment only served to reinforce these fears. According to D’Augelli and Hershberger (1993), research indicates that rejection by one’s own family is the most frightening form of rejection. In Orthodoxy, the community serves as an extended family, in addition to being a set of relationships and a belief structure (Glassgold, 2008). Thus, for the present sample, the idea of being rejected by family as well as community caused much anticipatory anxiety about potential losses.

On a practical level, three out of ten participants reported fear that coming out would jeopardize their position as Jewish leaders in various Orthodox organizations. A similar fear was endorsed by the Orthodox gay men interviewed in Novich’s (2014) study who expressed worry that coming out would have negative professional consequences. Novich (2014, p. 77) asserted, “For gay men in this study whose professional lives involve Orthodox clientele, the potential impact of coming out could mean financial losses simply by virtue of their status as gay men."

In addition to fearing that their own positions within the Jewish community would become untenable should their sexuality become known, participants in the present study
reported fear that their parents’ positions in the community would likewise be compromised. Consistent with existing literature (Itzhaky & Kissil, 2015; Mark, 2008; Novich, 2014), women worried that their family would be blamed, shamed, condemned, ostracized, and/or excommunicated by their extended family members and communities if women disclosed their sexuality and/or publicized their same-sex relationship. The fear of bringing shame to one’s family is well documented in the literature. Mark (2008, p. 183-184) considers this fear a rational one given the tight-knit nature of the Orthodox community:

As traditional Jewish community tends to be close-knit and homogenous, members’ knowledge of each other’s lives and histories is either readily accessible or not difficult to ascertain. Unlike most secular households today, in the Orthodox Jewish world, having an openly gay immediate relative will often have a measurable, practical, and adverse impact on the prospects for other family members. Orthodox Jewish gays often describe their families’ sense of stigma when siblings seek a marriage partner once it is known or suspected that a family member is gay.

The fear of shaming one’s family was painfully articulated by Adina, the youngest woman in the sample who recognized her same-sex attraction within less than a year of participating in this study. Soon into the interview, Adina declared that she is “committed to being able to attend family functions without making anyone uncomfortable and always making her parents proud.” Later, as she allowed herself space to reflect upon her own discomfort, she stated, “I hate the idea that they’ll [my parents] have to walk into shul and be the parents of that gay girl.” Adina’s statement directly reflects an assertion
made by Itzhaky and Kissil (2015, p. 624): “If being a source of nachus (pride and joy) is an explicit expectation [in the Orthodox community], then becoming a source of disappointment and shame to one’s parents is a particularly heavy burden.” Between tears, Adina confirmed that this burden is, in fact, an onerous and ongoing one. She also demonstrated that the fear of relational loss, and in this case the loss of relationship with her parents, was equally if not more distressing than the fear of damaged status and/or reputation in the community.

Many women in the present study feared that disclosure would result in disrupted attachment with Orthodoxy. For these women, Orthodoxy was the only life path and world they had ever known. The possibility of losing this attachment was terrifying and subsequently resisted, as was evidenced by Yael who stated, “I kept keeping myself in these Orthodox spaces because I was desperately trying to hold onto them and felt like they were going to slip away…A lot of people leave Orthodoxy as soon as they find out that they feel this way and I did the opposite.” The fear that sexuality would sever highly valued relationships, connections, and communities was similarly endorsed by Chaya in Glassgold’s (2008) work. According to Glassgold, Chaya “would have to face the potential loss of her spiritual community or figure out some way to avoid this loss” in order to even acknowledge her sexuality (p. 60).

**Rejection**

Paralleling Novich’s (2014, p. 81) findings, women in the present study “received continuous, repeated messages, both implicit and explicit, that their sexual orientation is simply not okay.” Women experienced a wide range of rejecting interpersonal interactions with family members, religious leaders, teachers, fellow congregants, and
peers subsequent to disclosing their sexuality. Some of these rejections were described as
direct, cruel, and malicious in intent, while others were portrayed as indirect, subtle, and
beyond the consciousness of those who perpetrated the offense. Irrespective of their
delivery, Batya indiscriminately labeled these different forms of rejection as “Ways you
know you’re not welcome” before summarizing her overall experience in the mainstream
Orthodox community: “I am not welcomed. My family is not welcomed. My gayness is
not welcomed.”

Despite the fact that rejection came in multiple forms, participants consistently
reported that negative experiences with family members were a source of considerable
stress and sadness. Over half the sample reported being overtly rejected by family
members, some of whom initially reacted to disclosure by stating that they did not want
to know about or be involved with this aspect of women’s lives. Attempts at denying,
ignoring, omitting or avoiding women’s sexual orientation were similarly reported. Even
when women were not being asked to deny their sexuality, some were instructed not to
publicize it, which also felt rejecting. In addition to being directly rejected by family,
participants were excluded by community members and leaders from spaces where they
were once active contributors. Both family and community also perpetuated women’s
exclusion by way of not inviting their partners to family events or community functions.
This Orthodox Jewish lesbian sample, thus, described the process of both feeling as if
issues pertaining to their sexual orientation were simultaneously overemphasized
(whereby women were reduced to their sexual identities) and minimized (whereby
women’s sexualities were made to be invisible). Both scenarios communicated that
woman are not okay as they are.
Study findings also revealed that rejection need not be overt in order to promote feelings of exclusion and non-belonging. Orthodox Jewish lesbians were attuned to even the subtlest behavior changes in others, which communicated discomfort and derision. This precise experience was captured by Tamar Prager in Kabakov’s (2010, p. 57) anthology: “Telling people that we were a couple elicited a discomfort that would make its way from the gut to the face, as we watched physiognomy change before our eyes.”

In addition to observing behavioral shifts that felt rejecting, half the sample reported feeling hurt by family, friends, and rabbis who asserted the flawed belief that gayness is a choice and can, therefore, be unchosen.

Participant narratives suggest that for family members and community leaders, accepting a person’s public gay identity proved far more challenging than supporting their private one. Put differently, one’s gayness was more likely to be accepted when seen behind closed doors than when presented and performed on the public communal stage. Time after time women were met by rejections that evidenced the prioritization of reputation in the community over the mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the participants and their families. To publically accept a lesbian and her family meant potentially risking one’s standing within the community which, in turn, was considered a threat to community membership. Study findings indicate that this was not a risk that many rabbis were willing to take. Though it felt hurtful to have one’s partnership go unacknowledged at best and punished at worst, women reported that seeing children suffer because “they had two moms” was the ultimate form of rejection. That children of lesbian parents were denied entry into a number of religious nurseries and day schools was the ultimate sign that women’s families were neither recognized nor respected.
Abandonment and Anger

Echoing Halbertal and Koren’s (2006) research findings, Orthodox Jewish lesbians in the present study reported feeling abandoned by a religious establishment that not only appeared to stand idly by while women experienced marginalization, but all too often helped perpetuate their poor treatment. Rabbis appeared unsympathetic as they regularly failed to understand, much less constructively address, the women’s predicaments. For some participants, the lack of compassion and concern demonstrated by those who were meant to guide them was demoralizing and, in most extreme cases, outraging. This was best evidenced by Sarah, who upon reflecting over her children’s multiple rejections from yeshiva stated, “I never felt that rejection, but the mother in me was infuriated and sad.” Though only one member in this study had her synagogue membership revoked by a rabbi, several women spoke of feeling shunned by leadership in religious structures, supporting Etengoff’s (2017) assertion that structural exclusion can be both a formal and relational process.

Without guidance, the women were left to their own devices as they attempted to traverse the completely uncharted territory of living a gay and observant life according to Jewish law. Navigating these identities without a script or support was a stressor reported by Orthodox LG Jews throughout existing literature (Glassgold, 2008; Mark, 2008; Novich, 2014). Women specifically felt that they had little guidance from religious leaders who proved fundamentally unfamiliar with lesbian sexuality, as was found in Glassgold’s (2008) work. Novich (2014, p. 64) summarized this experience of abandonment as follows:

Not only did participants reflect on not having the institutions of marriage and
family available to them, they reported a dearth of potential partners and no assistance from the Orthodox community in finding a partner. This is in contrast to the general eagerness of the Orthodox community to facilitate opposite-sex matchmaking…The challenges for gay men in the Orthodox community with respect to family extended beyond those concerning families of origin and related to ideal future families…”

Women in the present study expressed similar sentiments. Beyond lacking support from the community in celebrating family life cycles events, women spoke at length about having no guidance in securing partners, sanctioning marriages, family planning, infertility, illness and end of life issues—all privileges that that their straight counterparts enjoy. In describing what some consider one of the most special days of a person’s life, Batya called her wedding “one of the worst days” of her life. She continues, “I underestimated how painful it was going to be for my family not to be there and I just fell apart at the wedding.” The sense of abandonment that women alluded to is even more painful when painted against a backdrop of a community that puts a high value on marriage and procreation (Ariel, 2007).

Given the array of communal difficulties they encountered, several participants expressed anxiety about their future in Orthodox Jewish spaces. More specifically, seven out of the ten participants conveyed apprehension about whether the Orthodox community would include them and provide them with a place to raise their families, celebrate their life milestones, and educate their children. For this sample of women, even more troubling than the possibility of continued abandonment by the community was the notion that their children would be subjected to similar types of negative treatment. This
same struggle was reflected by an Orthodox lesbian writer featured in Kabakov’s (2010, p. 76) anthology who expressed that the greatest challenge she anticipates is “moving forward despite the pain of rejection and celebrating amidst the struggle.” For this woman, life is filled with both awe and dread; awe for the love she and her partner share for one another and dread for the alienation she might continue to face.

**Grief, Loss, and Mourning**

Women in the present study reported that rejection and abandonment was accompanied by the loss of significant relationships, a finding that is consistent with the literature (Mark, 2008). Pain was perhaps most palpable when women detailed how the very nature of relationships with family, and with parents in particular, have changed since coming out. Yael, for instance, believes that she has slipped from being her “dad’s favorite” to “bottom of the totem pole of the kids” as a result of disclosing her sexuality. She likewise believes that she is perceived as a “lost cause.”

The losses that participants endured were accompanied by an emotional struggle that was described as ongoing and unresolved. This was best evidenced by Batya, who in detailing her changed relationship with her parents stated that though “the love is still there,” she neither speaks to her parents as regularly nor celebrates holidays with them, a void that she finds “excruciating.” Several women similarly explained that relationships that were once warm and authentic were now experienced as distant and superficial. Conversations with family now felt censored and, thus, incomplete. While Rivka intentionally excises her dating life from discussions with her parents, Adina attempts to gloss over her girlfriend’s name entirely. Both women do so in the service of salvaging
the remnants of their relationships with their parents whom they fear will not be involved in their future lives and families of creation.

Much like the loss of family, the loss of community was experienced as devastating for some women in the present sample. For these women, both the actual and perceived loss of community generated feelings of “nostalgia,” “sadness,” and “heartbreak.” In the most extreme case, losing community was felt to be the catalyst for cancer (Miriam: “I'm absolutely convinced that I got sick because the neshama gets so angry”). This finding supports Mark’s (2008, p. 185) assertion that “most Orthodox gays and lesbians describe how jarring it is when a community that is so safe in many significant areas of life becomes extremely unsafe in others, particularly when ignorance about the lesbian and gay experience becomes manifest.” In many ways, the loss of community was experienced as the loss of an entire support network that once helped to create a sense of emotional safety, belonging, and connectedness with others.

Finally, women reflected over the loss of the dreams they once had for themselves, a process that Atara refers to as “mourning the loss of what could have been or should have been.” As Orthodox Jewish lesbians pondered the lives they envisioned for themselves—fantasies that sound no different than those expressed by heterosexual individuals—women revealed how they grieve for their parents’ losses in addition to their own. This added heartbreak reflects the internalized homophobia and self-doubt that some women in the present sample still battle as they revealed that the life they currently live is not the one they envisioned, expected or, in some cases, wanted for themselves. It also illustrates the ongoing and unresolved sense of uncertainty that exists at the core of what Boss (1996, 2006) has termed “ambiguous loss.”
According to Boss’ (1999, 2006) ambiguous loss theory, “ambiguous losses” occur when a loved one is either physically present, but psychologically absent or physically absent, but psychologically present. The theory proposes that both types of ambiguous loss are stressful and “traumatizing” since they present no opportunities for validation, closure, rituals for support, and, thus, no resolution of grief. The present findings are consistent with Dziengel’s (2015) assertion that ambiguous loss theory can be applied to the lived experiences of sexual minorities. All ten women in the present study noted varying degrees of both the physical and psychological absences of their family and communities. For some participants, disclosing same-sex attraction and/or relationships resulted in complete rejection by family and community members. According to Dziengel (2015, p. 305), “this physical absence can be distressing, yet the sadness and/or desire to regain approval or love can result in a daily psychological presence for the individual.” Conversely, some women maintained ongoing engagement with family and community members yet experienced a lack of emotional support or acceptance from them. According to Dziengel (2015, p. 305), both scenarios leave the sexual minority continuously wondering, “Am I still a part of our (my) family or not?”

As stated previously, Boss (2006) asserts that ambiguous loss is inherently traumatic because of the inability to resolve the situation and the ongoing obscurity that accompanies the loss. Though women reported feeling emotionally pained by how ambiguous loss has negatively affected them and anxiety about how it might impact their families of creation, it is interesting to note that the word “trauma” only surfaced in two participant interviews (Adina states that she wants to know she is definitely a lesbian before enduring “the emotional trauma” of coming out in the community and Batya
describes “traumatizing” nightmares where she screams and no one can hear her). That said, the ten transcripts, when woven together, create a tapestry of trauma. In other words, though women did not explicitly label their experiences as “traumatic,” they described enduring “parts” of traumatic experience. Symptoms of trauma were observed in the following instances: the conscious avoidance of Orthodox communities that Yael reports, the recurring nightmares that Batya describes, the dissociation that Atara alludes to by way of linguistic distancing, the intrusive thoughts of excommunication that bombard Hana as she encounters former community members, and the intense anger that Miriam carries after her synagogue membership was revoked. Taken together these experiences corroborate Boss’ (2006, p. 1) findings that the “ambiguity between absence and presence creates a unique kind of loss that has both psychological and physical qualities” and is traumatic in nature.

**Disempowerment and Invisibility**

Overall, the women in this sample echoed several struggles vocalized by Orthodox gay men throughout the literature, indicating that both genders appear to endure alienation, exclusion, rejection, abandonment, mourning, and loss as a result of being Orthodox and LG. Despite these similarities, study findings also suggest that Orthodox Jewish lesbians experience an additional layer of marginalization as they are rendered invisible not only as sexual minorities, but also as women (Alpert, 1997). Orthodox lesbians reported experiencing poor visibility within both the Orthodox Jewish community at large and, even more problematically, within the Orthodox LGBTQ community. Several women expressed feeling disheartened after mustering up the courage to attend Orthodox LGBTQ support groups only to find that these spaces were
male dominated. Not seeing any lesbian representation in spaces dedicated to inclusion made women “still feel out of place” and “alone.”

Furthermore, though several Orthodox LG individuals feel as though their religious commitment is delegitimized in the eyes of the community because of their sexuality, Orthodox lesbians expressed experiencing additional devaluation based on their already limited participation as women. This finding is consistent with Alpert’s (1997, p. 363) assertion that “though gay men do challenge the centrality of heterosexual relationships in Judaism, they do not face exclusion from Jewish tradition on the basis of gender and often fail to recognize the problems all women face gaining access to Jewish tradition.” Adina alludes to lesbian women’s compromised access when she states, “my relationship with halacha was always fraught because of my womanhood and then was just pushed further because of my sexuality… Now there are even fewer ways for me to participate.” In detailing how she is no longer obligated to fulfill the few commandments made special for the heterosexual Orthodox woman, Hana similarly shares that she “cannot share in what is considered to be an essentially female rite of passage.” This leaves her feeling like “an outcast.” Feeling “disregarded” by a culture that denies women the same degree of power and participation as men and being absent from a text that “erases” women and female sexuality, a number of Orthodox lesbians in the present sample expressed experiencing disempowerment twofold.

Finding 2: Orthodox Jewish Lesbians Relied on Numerous Coping Strategies and Systems to Help Manage Barriers

While pain was prominent throughout participant transcripts, focusing exclusively on struggle would overlook the resilience and thriving that was prevalent as this
Orthodox Jewish lesbian sample described attempts to cope with and overcome challenges. This finding reaffirms existing literature indicating that gay individuals utilize a number of coping skills to manage experiences with homonegativity. Overall, all ten women demonstrated a capacity for personal and relational growth, self-healing, and the determination to live authentically and honestly as they transformed from objects to subjects of their own realities in the face of stressors.

**Finding and Creating Affirming Religious Spaces**

Select environments proved essential for helping women salvage their relationship with the Orthodox community. These findings echo previous researchers (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000; Schnoor, 2006) who documented how gay men from Orthodox Jewish backgrounds often replaced rejecting, conservative religious communities of their youth with more inclusive communities where they could experience a sense of belonging. This process often entailed physical and emotional separation from rejecting sources and contexts (e.g., families of origin, communities of youth). Though painful, this distancing was important in helping women find religious figures and community members who proved affirming. It also helped women find religious spaces that provided them with the safety needed to re-access feelings of authenticity that had been compromised during years spent living “double lives.” The women commented that these later spaces were more egalitarian and progressive in nature given that they no longer felt as comfortable in strictly Orthodox environments.

Joy, disbelief, and astonishment were salient as women described joining communities where all members, irrespective of their sexuality or struggles, were treated and respected as equals. Women felt empowered knowing that their contributions were
valued and that they could achieve a sense of mutual influence with other community members. The sense of fulfillment that women communicated as they discussed finding religious spaces that acknowledged and received them for their whole personhood illuminated the unprocessed sadness that women carried after initially losing community. At least half the sample of women did not realize how much they craved and missed community until filling the void that losing community had left. This was particularly evidenced by Sarah, who cried as she described getting her children accepted into a Modern Orthodox day school after multiple failed attempts as well as securing a family membership with her wife at her neighborhood synagogue: “This is where I wanted my children my whole life…They’re home. We’re home. We’re part of the community…I’m finally home. This is exactly where I’ve always wanted to be… I don’t have to run out of shul. I can stay till the end.”

Seeing her children accepted by a welcoming school gave Sarah the courage to attempt connecting with members of her own community; a community she had long avoided. For most of her life, Sarah remained an anonymous member of various synagogues, which she would vacate prematurely in order to avoid being questioned by fellow congregants. In other words, Sarah’s perceived rejection compelled her to abandon community before community could abandon her. Feeling seen and accepted by a synagogue was for Sarah the catalyst for restoring a “cracked self-image and identity” where she could begin “combining her divided parts into one meaningful identity” (Schnoor, 2006 citing Shokeid, 1995, p. 239).

Women benefited from a similar restoration of “the cracked other-image” after meeting heterosexual community members who proved supportive. These members
defied women’s expectations of an “other” who would be rejecting. Not only were these members accepting, but some even actively advocated on women’s behalves. Furthermore, participants were consistently surprised by the support that they received from specific family members, peers, and community leaders. Consistent with the works of Coyle and Rafalin (2000) and Novich (2014), coming out to supportive peers was not only validating, but also served to strengthen participants’ self-esteem and relationships with others. Participants similarly conveyed how emotionally corrective it was to meet rabbis who prioritized inclusion and tolerance over community politics. This finding corroborates Etengoff’s (2017, p. 187) research, which theorized that “positive pastoral interactions may be a pivotal therapeutic process in the pursuit of resilience.”

In addition to finding affirming religious communities, participants reported actively seeking support from Orthodox LGBTQ in-person and virtual communities. Finding others like themselves proved essential for allowing women to enact their preferred identities as they navigated challenges around understanding same-sex attraction and disclosing their sexuality. The internet in particular offered women the opportunity to anonymously connect with and learn from others’ experiences. Orthodox LGBTQ in-person communities similarly provided guidance, roles models, and a space where women could counteract feelings of aloneness. For some women, organizations like Eshel felt more like family than a community as evidenced by Batya who stated, “We've created our own little family, our own little community within the gay Orthodox community.” This finding is reflective of how sexual minorities are likely to create alternative family-of-choice structures when biological families of origin prove
unsupportive (Etengoff, 2017). It is also reflective of how women in the present sample found ways to build community when affirming communities were non-existent.

To create a community not only required courage and creativity, but leadership. Women described becoming the role models they wished they, themselves, had while growing up. Blogging, public speaking, event organizing, and educating were just some of the tasks that women took on to help build Orthodox LGBTQ spaces. Supporting other LGBTQ Orthodox Jews, and Orthodox Jewish lesbians in particular, was a way that participants were able to cultivate their own resilience, agency, and empowerment.

**Cognitive Flexibility**

One subtheme that emerged with regard to coping was women’s ability to mentally integrate ostensibly disparate “parts” of themselves. All but one participant spoke about themselves as both inherently religious and lesbian, as if each were “unchosen” parts of themselves that were both intrinsic to their being. A similar experience was cited by Orthodox LG individuals in the works of Hartman and Koren (2006) and Schnoor (2006). In the former study, Orthodox LG participants described both religion and sexuality as “sites of profound celebration” and not “merely suffering and angst” (p. 58). For these participants, identity elements that are, at times, in conflict can also positively reinforce and support the other. In the latter study, Jewish gay men “viewed themselves as being made up of multiple attributes, where no one social identity assumes a role of "master status" around which his or her life is organized” (p. 52). Despite the fact that some women in this sample remain closeted in certain contexts, women discussed performing both their lesbian and Jewish identities across various social spheres, with neither identity accounting for their whole personhood.
The cognitive flexibility that women assumed with regard to concepts of identity extended to religion as well. Whereas the majority of women once held uncompromising ideas about ritual observance, they began to trade in rigidity for ambiguity. As women began to personalize religion by evaluating how beliefs and rituals mapped onto their personal values, women adopted a more eclectic, less stringent approach to practice. In becoming more flexible over time, women appeared to undergo what Schnoor (2006) referred to as a “Jewish journey,” where Jewish identity evolves over the life course, paralleling growth and personal development. According to these authors, a person’s experience with Jewishness is not a fixed aspect of his/her life, but a fluid one. The same was true for women’s relationship with God. Though some women reported initially feeling angry and abandoned by God for making them lesbians, women came to accept that God created them in His image and felt closer to God as a result. As was the case in Novich’s (2014) study, where participants made sure to distinguish their experience of religion itself from their social experience of Orthodoxy, women in the present study separated their relationship with the Orthodox community from their relationship with God. Doing so allowed women to rely on God when they felt the community had abandoned them.

Despite this abandonment, the present sample of Orthodox Jewish lesbians did not lose faith in the Orthodox community and, in fact, many participants actively worked toward carving out space for themselves. Consistent with existing research (Itzhaky & Kissil, 2015; Novich, 2014; Mark, 2008), women still felt attached to the community no matter how destabilizing and jarring it was to be rejected. Orthodox Jewish lesbians maintained a strong and often positive connection to the Orthodox community for a
variety of reasons. Women found sustenance in Judaism (Glassgold, 2008) and therefore relied on congregations to help them sustain religious faith, practice, rituals, and lifestyles. Observing the Sabbath within a community was a particular aspect of religious observance that helped women feel more connected to themselves, their partners, and God. According to participant transcripts, the community provided comfort, connection, security, care, mutual influence, fulfillment, structure, predictability, and as a sense of belonging.

Despite loving Orthodoxy for all that it offered, women also felt pained and hurt by the Orthodox community and thus expressed mixed emotions toward it. This ambivalence was captured by participants’ repeated use of the expression “one foot in, one foot out.” On the one hand, community was a source of attachment; while on the other, it was the catalyst for much heartache and resentment. After all, community was much like home, as had been indicated by Atara in the below excerpt:

The Orthodox Community is my home… It's a community that I love and believe in and want to push because it feels like a home to me and, similar to how sometimes a regular home can drive you crazy, and it can sometimes feel like you're not welcome in your own home or sometimes you are frustrated with your home, you still stay and fight to make it better because your home should be better.

For women in the present sample, the Orthodox community is not merely the only world they have ever known, but it is also the only world they want their children to know. As a result, women have chosen to stay in the community and continue to hope for change. This choice is an active and dynamic one, taking on different shapes and forms as women
witness their surrounding communities show stagnation and evolution, cruelty and compassion, rejection and tolerance. In demonstrating their ongoing dedication to choosing their realities, as opposed to having their realities chosen for them, this Orthodox Jewish lesbian sample prove capable of transforming from objects to subjects.

**Finding 3: Orthodox Jewish Lesbians Hope for Communal Improvement**

Shortly before concluding each interview, all ten women in this study were asked the following: “What would the community need to change in order to improve your experience as a lesbian woman?” Participants were asked this question in the service of fostering minority resilience, which per Etengoff (2017) may be associated with the narrative opportunity of expressing both personal and collective concerns. By providing women with the space to articulate ways in which the community can better address their needs, this study attempted to move the discussion beyond injustice to the promotion of social justice (Novich, 2014). Furthermore, reviewing Orthodox lesbians’ needs is important when considering “how to help empower those religious sexual minorities who elect to remain members of the conservative and homorepressive communities of their youth rather than affiliate with religiously liberal, affirmative communities” (Etengoff, 2017, p. 168). Though women varied with regard to the types and degrees of change they hope for, all ten participants acknowledged the negative impact of the status quo and advocated for change.

Above all else, the women in the present study expressed the desire to be humanized by the Orthodox Jewish community, a finding consistent with Etengoff’s (2017) research. Using Jewish values as basis for this request, women expressed that humanization could be accomplished by a change in treatment of LG members. Improved
treatment would include more open-mindedness, understanding, protection, acceptance, inclusion, and compassion. Participants in Novich’s (2014) study similarly conveyed a desire for increased understanding, acceptance, and tolerance. Three out of ten participants in the present sample noted that should the treatment of LG individuals not change, the Orthodox Jewish community will continue to lose these members to suicide.

Women alluded to the fact that understanding and sensitivity should be the basis for all interpersonal relationships, regardless of an individual’s sexual preference. Along these lines, women asked that LG community members be held to the same religious standards as their heterosexual counterparts. This desire was similarly expressed by participants in Novich’s (2014) study who described being held to a stricter standard of behavior than are straight community members. While the Orthodox community rarely asks members of an opposite sex-couple if they observe the laws of family purity, the gay individual is assumed to violate the biblical prohibition of male-male anal intercourse. This assumption is representative of the community’s tendency to hypersexualize gay individuals by reducing the same-sex relationship to same-sex activity. According to Novich (2014, p. 66), not only is being gay held to be synonymous with anal intercourse, but gay men are also “pigeonholed such that anal intercourse is their defining characteristic.” Though women did not personally experience this same degree of sexualization, and in fact reported experiences with de-sexualization by the community, women expressed the hope that gay men not be reduced to a sexual activity. Women conveyed that education is needed to not only help the community better understand female sexuality, but also aid in clarifying common misconceptions about homosexuality (e.g. gayness is neither contagious nor a choice).
Similar to participants in Etengoff’s (2017) study, women in the present sample expressed dissatisfaction with the heteronormativity that has long prevailed in Jewish culture. Unmarked and unquestioned, assumed heterosexuality is everywhere, from the classroom to the pulpit to most Jewish weddings where both single men and women are repeatedly wished “soon by you” (i.e. an expression implying “you should be married to a member of the opposite gender soon”). Women expressed that the community needs to change its expectation about what a successful future looks like before it can dismantle the systems of normativity that have left many individuals, irrespective of their sexuality, feeling negated, rejected, and wounded. Being more sensitive about speech was identified as a key piece to communal improvement.

A number of women in the present sample commented on the power of language as a tool that can promote both exclusion and inclusion. Women suggested ways in which language could be used to facilitate the latter in order to help foster proactive acceptance of diversity in place of quiet tolerance. Novich (2014, p. 92) similarly suggested that compassion be communicated in public and not conveyed in private where it will “appear shameful, dangerous, or possibly forbidden.” Youth, in particular, were identified as a vulnerable population that needs to hear that they are safe and supported in coming out within their schools. Unsurprisingly, because rabbis are tasked with leading Orthodox communities, women identified them as an essential piece to the change process.

Several women pointed out the seeming paradox between what the Torah teaches and how rabbinic leaders practice those teachings when it comes to the treatment of LGBTQ Orthodox Jews. Miriam, for instance, noted the contradiction between how she was rejected by her synagogue rabbi and the Talmudic principle of “Love your neighbor
as you would love yourself and the rest is all commentary.” Miriam does not hesitate to articulate her feeling about rabbinic failure. To review, she stated the following:

The utter failing that I see in the rabbinic world is astronomical. These people, in one minor sense of just compassion, absolutely alter people's lives…I think the rebbaim who are not being inclusive and are harming LGBTQ Jews have blood on their hands.

Miriam’s language reflects the power of a rabbi’s position to heal and to harm, a concept that was consistent throughout the literature. Because rabbis represent the highest spiritual authority and custodians of Jewish tradition, they are considered highly influential in dictating community behavior. Given this power, women in the present sample joined other Orthodox LG Jews in asking rabbis to lead by example and show sensitivity, care, and concern to all members of the community. In Etengoff’s (2017) study, participants petitioned for religious leaders to emphasize more inclusive values, as showing anything less would be considered a deviation from the basic tenets of Orthodoxy. Overall, women asked that rabbis lead with compassion so that their congregants can follow suit.

It is interesting to note that while the existing literature features Orthodox LG Jews calling upon rabbis to reconfigure and reinterpret Jewish law, women in this study asked for no such adjustments. No participant focused on her desire for rabbinic leadership to utilize the spirit of the law to mediate her painful conflict between religion and sexuality. Women did not wish for tradition to change but requested change from the people who uphold the tradition. Overall, women hoped to educate others regarding their
shared human experience and universal right for connection, community, love, and companionship, which women saw as the ingredients for quality of life.

**Limitations of the Present Study**

Though valuable for providing rich insight into the subjective experience of Orthodox Jewish lesbian women, the qualitative nature of this study has inherent limitations that should be considered before applying study findings. First, the generalizability of this study may have been restricted by a small sample size that was geographically specific and narrowed down from early to middle adulthood. Furthermore, most women in the sample identified as Modern Orthodox and even those participants who identified as Orthodox work outside of the community and engage with non-Jewish society. The sample may, thus, not represent those Orthodox Jewish lesbians who identify as ultra-Orthodox. Though raised in different areas, all ten women who participated in this study were living in the same state at the time of interview and were primarily of Eastern European descent. In addition, this study comprised neither individuals under the age of 18, who represent a more vulnerable demographic, nor those over the age 50, whose sociopolitical lens surrounding sexuality likely differed from the young-mid adult sample interviewed in this study. Thus, the ethnic, geographic, degree of observance, and age homogeneity of the present sample may limit generalizability of the findings. Future research would benefit from recruiting a larger, more diverse sample.

Study generalizability may have also been limited due to selection bias and a nonrandomized sample. Given the recruitment procedure that was utilized in this study, namely snowball and networking sampling, people who agreed to be interviewed may have already had at least a minimal level of comfort discussing their sexuality with
others. Furthermore, it is possible that women chose to participate because they had come to greater place of reconciliation and wanted to talk about their experiences; both possibilities lead to the potential for selection bias. As a result, study findings may not be representative of women who are either in earlier stages of the coming out process or who remain completely closeted in heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, because this study employed a qualitative research design, study participants were not chosen at random, which may also reduce the generalizability of the results.

As is the case of any study that relies on self-report, the findings of this study were impacted by the participants’ ability to recall their experiences, some distant and others recent. Because narratives are often edited and reconceptualized over time, memories have the capacity to change with regard to detail or accentuation. Furthermore, self-report is subject to personal biases such as affect at the time of interview, degree of psychological mindedness, insight, extent to which the participant is concerned with social desirability, family background, and interpersonal relatedness. Nonetheless, core themes emerged as each participant was able to recall particular details that framed their subjective experiences.

Finally, according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 183), transcripts are “co-authored by subject and interviewer.” All ten interviews and analytical coding were conducted by the principal investigator who not only shared the religious affiliation of participants, but also had a vested interest in providing a vocal platform for a collective whose voices have, to date, remained silenced. It is, therefore, possible that the results of this study may also be affected by researcher bias. Though this feature of the research may be considered a limitation, it can also be considered its strength. Between the ease
with which rapport was established between researcher and participant and the thorough nature of all ten interviews, the present study showcases qualitative methodology’s ability to capture emotional breadth, depth, and detail.

**Implications**

The findings of the current study suggest several directions for future research, clinical considerations for those psychotherapists hoping to pursue culturally sensitive treatment with religious sexual minorities, and implications for Orthodox Jewish communities looking to keep their LG members from leaving the community. Each implication area will be discussed in detail below.

**Implications 1: Future Research**

The findings of this study suggest several directions for future research. First, as the current study is one of the only studies examining the experiences of Orthodox Jewish lesbian women, replication of its findings is warranted. Additional qualitative studies with larger samples including greater diversity in age, degree of observance, socioeconomic status, levels of education, ethnicities, and geographical locations, would be useful in gauging the generalizability of the current findings. Furthermore, a quantitative research approach would help evaluate the accuracy of the emergent theories in qualitative studies as well as provide in depth analysis into particular areas of women’s experiences. Future research could examine how adaptive and maladaptive ways of coping with homonegative experiences differs based on the extent of one’s outness and visibility within the community. Furthermore, developing a quantitative measure that assesses LG microaggressions could be used to objectively assess the psychological impact of LG microaggressions. It would be important that these studies, irrespective of
design, include the examination of the resiliency factors that allow LG individuals to thrive in the face of subtle and overt homonegativity.

A second area of inquiry should involve broadening the population to include other sections of the LGBTQ Orthodox community. Given that this study solely focused on the experience of cisgender Orthodox Jewish lesbian women, it is important to give voice to other marginalized sub-groups of religious sexual minorities. On a similar note, further research should explore the experience of community for lesbian women in similar traditional populations so as to gain a deeper understanding of the ways gender and sexuality interact to inform communal experience. Doing so may shed light on how religious sexual minorities more generally navigate, cope with, and make meaning of multiple, stigmatized identities.

Finally, as was recommended by Novich (2014), it would be helpful to conduct a needs-assessment for Orthodox LGBTQ Jews. Reviere, Berkowitz, Carter, and Ferguson (1996, p. 6) define a needs assessment as “a systematic and ongoing process of providing usable and useful information about the needs of the target population—to those who can and will utilize it to make judgments about policy and programs.” Data collected through this assessment process can be used to explore what Royse, Staton-Tindall, Badger, and Webster (2009) define as four “focal points” of need: (1) awareness of services; (2) availability of services; (3) accessibility of services; and (4) acceptability of services. This information would be particularly helpful in strategizing ways to reach those more vulnerable members of the Orthodox LGBTQ population who may not readily seek out or utilize ethical mental health treatment.
Implication 2: The Practice of Psychotherapy with Orthodox Lesbian Patients

This study sheds light on how a sample of Orthodox Jewish lesbians remained resilient in the face of marginalization, alienation, rejection, discrimination, and disempowerment. The pain and emotional distress that had been and continues to be endured by these participants makes the need for culturally competent practitioners all the more acute. The current study offers several implications for therapists seeking to sensitively address the needs of this particular population as well as other religious sexual minorities who experience marginalization among other homonegative experiences. The unique social and cultural contexts, as well as the distinct issues that Orthodox Jewish lesbians may struggle with in treatment, will be reviewed below.

**Intersecting identities.** This study sought to capture how a group of individuals navigate tight-knit communities while living at the intersection of what are assumed to be conflicting identities. The word “assumed” is used with intention, as it is important to avoid assuming that sexual identity is inevitably in conflict with religious identity for those individuals who identity as religious sexual minorities (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000). Though initially angry at God and Orthodoxy, many of the women in the present study came to frame their sexuality as part of the way they were created by a God who loves them unconditionally. Some participants even came to consider their same-sex relationships and families of creation as being “holy.” This evolution in religious struggle echoed Shilo et al.’s (2016, p. 1552) assertion that “for some [gay] individuals, anger and frustration with God are part of a close, engaged relationship characterized by strong positive—as well as negative—emotions.” Many of the women did not see their sexuality as being in conflict with their religious observance, but with a religious
community whose condemnation of homosexuality stems more from intolerance than from a strict commitment to literal biblical interpretation.

Given the above findings, Slomowitz and Feit (2015, p.106) recommend that practitioners “see a gay religious individual as someone composed of many shifting self-states—states of experience that might be quite disconnected from one another” rather than framing a “gay orientation as an internal battle.” Slomowitz and Feit (2015, p.107) provide the following scenario to illustrate this idea:

For example, if such an individual is in synagogue and his emotional and spiritual core are engaged, part of him is fulfilled, yet the parts of him that are focused around gay identity are less accessible, as there is little space for such self-reflection in a religious environment. However, if the same person is at an LGBTQ event on a Friday night, part of him may be engaged and feel at home with similarly identified peers, but other parts of himself and his religious experience may not be fully available to conscious thought and experience.

Slomowitz and Feit (2015, p. 106), thus, assert that there needs to be a shift in the way that the Orthodox Jewish gay experience is understood, whereby practitioners have a “more nuanced grasp of what an embodied gay person experiences as opposed to a disembodied concept of how one ought to be.” By allowing these “contradictory and incommensurable” self-states to come into awareness, Slomowitz and Feit (2015) believe that the gay religious individual will be better positioned to make fuller sense of who they are and the choices that exist before them.

In her paper reflecting on treatment with LG Orthodox Jews, Mark (2008) expressed appreciation for the complex task of constructing an individual and collective
identity for those who identity as Orthodox, gay, and Jewish. Glassgold (2008) similarly commented on the value of validating the extraordinary complexity of identity formation for her Orthodox lesbian client. Mark (2008, p. 186) notes that “the therapeutic relationship can provide a framework for integration” by contextualizing understanding of the inherent conflicts and tensions that arise between these fragments of identity. Borrowing Fine and Gordon’s (1992) term “braided subjectivities,” Mark (2008) explained how identity formation is forged from the interweaving of many strands of self-experiences. According to Mark (2008, p. 186), “the therapeutic work involves recognition of the different strands of identity, to understand how each strand affects the other, to identify at what stage of identity development a patient may be in and, finally, to be aware of how all of these factors can affect the therapeutic relationship.” For many clients who present with concerns related to sexual orientation, affirmative therapies can provide a space for clients to better understand and clarify dimensions of these different “strands of identity” including sexual identity (e.g., sexual and romantic fantasies, attractions, and behaviors); gender identity (e.g., gender roles and expressions); religious and spiritual identity (e.g., attitudes and approach to practice); and communal identity (e.g., community identification and engagement). Therapy can promote cognitive flexibility and a space where patient and therapist can maintain complexity and contradiction while understanding how each of these strands weave together to create one’s personhood.

Sexual identity. In the present study, participants reported initial attempts to rid themselves of their same-sex attraction by way of dating men and immersing themselves deeper into religious practice. This finding is important when considering how to
clinically conceptualize and intervene with an Orthodox LG patient population. In other words, clinicians must understand that experiences with disavowing sexuality may be developmentally standard for religious sexual minorities. Though none of the participants in this study sought out reparative and/or conversion therapy, it should not be surprising to some psychotherapists that religious sexual minorities will enter treatment actively seeking to change their sexuality (Slomowitz & Feit, 2015). Furthermore, many of these individuals have likely received instruction from religious leaders, and even more problematically Orthodox mental health professionals, to immerse themselves in religious practice as a means of coping with their sexual orientation. Itzhaky and Kissil (2015, p. 638) caution that “until the Orthodox discourse about homosexuality changes, it is unlikely that Orthodox gay men will seek out therapy that is not oriented toward sexual identity conversion.” The dilemma practitioners are put in by clients looking to change their sexuality through conversion therapy is noted by clinicians like Mark (2008), Slomowitz and Feit (2015), and Glassgold (2008). Glassgold’s (2008) response to a client who asked for such assistance is reviewed below given the delicate and impressive balance Glassgold strikes between being sensitive to her client’s needs while staying firm about her ethical obligation as a clinical psychologist:

I told her I did not perform such treatment for a variety of reasons, primarily lack of efficacy and ethics. Instead, we dealt with the emotions raised by this dilemma through my empathic understanding of her suffering…Further, I invited Chaya, as an educated professional, to read the psychological literature on sexual orientation conversion therapy and we discussed her options. I invited her to consult with a conversion therapist if she wished and discuss the results with me and remain in
therapy. I believe that respecting her choices, while showing compassion for her suffering was essential.

It should be noted that women in the present study who were instructed either by a parent or religious figure to pursue therapy that would help change their sexuality experienced these instructions as emotionally harmful. Yael captures this when she states, “I understand that they were doing it out of a place of love and it was well-intentioned, but I think I still carry a lot of that fear with me…I think I could have had a few more years of my life where I wasn't freaked out and panicked and trying to force myself into this mold that I didn't fit into.” Clinicians should remember that professional organizations, such as the American Psychological Association, have prepared specific guidelines for how to handle patients requesting conversion/reparative therapy, on which there is broad professional consensus that these practices are ineffective and often harmful (Chazin & Klugman, 2014 citing APA Task Force, 2009). Clinicians should also consider that while coming out to others, regardless of reaction, is an important developmental task related to healthy psychological adjustment, it also represents a complex and challenging process that should be navigated with pragmatism, intentionality, and the utmost of sensitivity. Though hiding a stigmatized identity can have negative psychological consequences, concealing that identity may be adaptive when an individual’s context is unsupportive and when there is evidence that disclosure would have more adverse side effects on an individual (Pachankis, 2007).

**Gender identity.** There were numerous ways in which women in the present study felt as though they were “inadequate,” “less than,” “second class,” and “unworthy” due not just to their sexuality, but also to their gender. Between the pervasive cultural
norm of heterosexual marriage and the biblical commandment to procreate, women learned repeatedly throughout their socialization that regardless of other achievements, they were failures if they never married or had children. Women understood that to be considered “a whole adult” and to be able to fully partake in the few commandments designated for Orthodox women, they needed to be partnered with men. Comprised of two women, the Orthodox lesbian couple, thus, represents the ultimate feminist dilemma. Atara aptly captures this when she states, “It's really easy to see the Orthodox feminist problem when you take a couple that only consists of women because it highlights all of the ways in which women are left out of our community, our stories, our rituals.” Feeling as though one is invisible and expendable may adversely impact one’s self-esteem and sense of agency. Therapists should not only make space to process these feelings, but also be aware of communal resources that can help Orthodox lesbians cope with them. Organizations like the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) offer all women, irrespective of sexual orientation, a space to look for spiritual, ritual, intellectual, and political opportunities in Orthodox Jewish life.

**Religious identity.** Despite reporting experiences of rejection by various religious leaders and communities, the women in the present study continue to demonstrate their love and commitment towards God and religion. Batya captures this emphatically when she states:

Somehow, never even in my most despondent moment did I think of walking away from Orthodox Judaism because, to me, that’s not what’s at fault here. I don't have issues with my relationship with God… The issue is with the people. It's the rabbinate, the people. It's certainly not God.
This finding echoes other works indicating that religion and spirituality are an important resource and protective factor in the lives of many Orthodoxy LG individuals. It is, therefore, important for practitioners to conduct an assessment of clients’ religious and spiritual backgrounds and current beliefs and practices as well as “harness the positive role that religion plays in clients’ lives” (Chazin & Klugman, 2014). Along these lines, clinicians must recognize that individuals may maintain an attachment to God that is distinct from their approach and/or attitude toward religion. Glassgold (2008, p. 65) illustrates this precise approach in her work with an Orthodox lesbian client: “An important part of psychotherapy was exploring what was important to Chaya about her religious and spiritual beliefs and traditions. The personal experience of religion is unique and clarifying an individual’s understanding of their spiritual priorities is essential.”

It should be noted that while women in the present study did not report relying on the reinterpretation of text as a means of resolving religious conflict, research on religious sexual minorities has found that reinterpreting doctrine and emphasizing aspects of religion that promote inclusion, tolerance, and justice have been known to help religious sexual minorities actively engage with religion in a healthy, adaptive way. Thus, clinicians should keep in mind that helping to raise clients’ awareness of alternative interpretations to religious texts and/or teachings within their religious faiths may be an important part of the work (Chazin & Klugman, 2014).

Communal identity. Consistent with existing literature, this study found that the social context of Jewish identity should not be ignored or underestimated. Though the participants in the present study provided devastating accounts of maltreatment by the hands of community leaders and members, they still reported feeling emotionally
attached to the community and to the hope that communal change is possible. As was the case for Chaya, the Orthodox lesbian client discussed in Glassgold’s (2008) paper, women in the present study considered the community profoundly important due to the connection, care, and sense of responsibility for each other’s welfare that it provides. Therapists need to keep this attachment in mind as they hear Orthodox LG clients discuss communal hardship. For participants like Batya in particular, the loss of community was nearly as devastating as the loss of family. Using an empathic and non-pathologizing ear, therapists must be prepared to hear Orthodox LG clients discuss what the community means to them and how they might feel pressured to conform to communal norms. For some Orthodox LG individuals, conformity is not simply an act of submission, but a desperate attempt to hold onto the only world and way of life they have ever known. Clinicians must keep this in mind as they reflect on their own life experiences and philosophies about power structures, oppression, and hegemony. Self-awareness on the part of the clinician is an integral part of acknowledging the mutual influence that both the therapist and client have on the therapeutic process.

**Helping clients and their families find social support and resources.** Study findings show that Orthodox lesbians felt a deep sense of isolation as they began recognizing same-sex attraction and exploring their sexuality; this finding largely echoed the literature. Feeling as though they did not have family, friends or community members on whom they could rely for support, some participants described feeling deeply depressed and suicidal. Facing rejection from family and community, this feeling of isolation persisted as women began entering into loving same-sex relationships and started to build their chosen families. Women also expressed frustration over lack of
information, mentors, and external resources to help them understand their feelings of isolation and being different. Given this sense of isolation and dearth of information, fostering clients’ connections to other sexual minorities and/or communities either through in-person or online channels may be an effective way to help foster positive identity development. These support networks will not only help to counteract feelings of alienation, but also provide Orthodox LG clients with a range of information about topics that are sensitive to an Orthodox population (e.g., education about safe sex practices, safe spaces, and a list of rabbis and communities who are considered sympathetic and responsive to the needs of LG individuals). It is particularly important that Orthodox lesbians gain access to these resources given their poor visibility in the Orthodox LGBTQ community. Familiarizing oneself with available community resources is, thus, a necessary step in providing effective, affirmative treatment for religious sexual minorities (Chazin & Klugman, 2014). A comprehensive list of online and in-person resources can be found on Eshel’s website (http://www.eshelonline.org/resources/).

In addition, Coyle and Rafalin (2000) suggest that parents struggling to come to terms with their child’s sexuality may require a range of resources—be them informational, emotional or social. This was the case in the present study, with two out of the ten women reporting that their parents pursued therapy as a result of their disclosure. Therapists can provide family members with accurate information about sexual orientation and the risks of conversion therapy as well as make appropriate referrals to community-based resources. Recognizing that other families like their own exist may help to reduce fear and disrupt the very behavioral cycle that inspired this study. Namely, “When an Orthodox child comes out of the closet, the parent goes in.”
The therapeutic stance. Study findings point towards particular challenges that therapists would do well to consider when attempting to maintain an accepting and validating therapeutic stance with their Orthodox LG clients.

Grief, loss, and mourning. Mark (2008) identified grief and loss around strained relationships as one of the core areas of struggle that Orthodox LG individuals bring into treatment. Findings from the present study suggest that Orthodox lesbians experienced multiple layers of loss as a result of disclosing their sexuality: (1) Women lost the support of certain family members, peers, rabbinic figures, and community members; (2) Women lost rights to the communal resources that heterosexual community members are privileged to; (3) Women reported mourning the lives they dreamed about and expected to live, which was cause for much heartbreak; and (4) Women reported fear that disclosure would result in tangible loss, including loss of job, housing, and/or financial support.

Therapists working with this population need to create space for the depth of sadness women experience when they feel they have lost the only lives and relationships they have ever known. They can also help patients understand that the loss they may be experiencing—unresolved, complicated, confusing, and ongoing in nature—may be that of ambiguous loss. In aiding patients with processing ambiguous loss, Boss (2006) recommends teaching patients how to hold two opposing ideas at the same time. This mental juxtaposition of “both/and” facilitates a synthesis between insisting on the status quo and yearning for closure. Overall, helping the Orthodox LG client with recognizing, processing, accepting, integrating, and transforming loss may be a critical step in bolstering their overall psychological well-being.
Making space for ambiguity and ambivalence. Mark (2008) found that of the many struggles Orthodox LG Jews bring into treatment, living with ambiguity was a particularly challenging one. More specifically, Mark (2008) noted how Orthodox LG individuals are concerned about living life without a set script and needing to carve out a pathway for themselves within completely uncharted territory. Unlike their heterosexual counterparts, Orthodox LG Jews lack the role models and communal supports that typically help guide life milestones, including marriage and child rearing. The women in the present study reflected these concerns as well and specifically articulated anxiety about how to raise children in communal contexts that can be cruel and rejecting.

Glassgold (2008) advises psychotherapists that therapy will entail helping these patients tolerate and wade through ambiguity and ambivalence. Mark (2008, p. 187) provides similar advice stating, “the tolerance of ambiguity modeled in the therapeutic encounter may also give permission for an individual to doubt God in the quest for faith.” Mark added that “having these feelings tolerated and accepted can sometimes be a relief, bringing resolution closer.” Chazin and Klugman (2014, p. 138) similarly encourage clinicians to “explore the range of meanings ascribed to identities by clients, while tolerating ambiguity and complexity inherent in the process of identity exploration and development.” This proposal is consistent with Boss’ (2006) recommendation that hanging on to absolute identities does not serve us well and that it is flexibility that helps our humanity grow.

Microaggressions. In the present study, participants described many instances in which rejection was communicated in the form of covert, indirect, and subtle nonverbal and verbal snubs. These microaggressions were often experienced as being more painful
and harmful than the overt forms of hostility that women were subjected to. Better understanding the effect such microaggressions have on LGBTQ clients in individual therapy will have direct results on the quality of services provided to LGBTQ clients. Presumably, with this enhanced knowledge, clinicians can work constructively to limit or eradicate their microaggressive assaults in order to promote LGB-affirmative spaces.

Implication 3: Movement toward a more accepting Orthodox Jewish Community

Existing research has shown that involvement with non-affirming, non-inclusive religious communities can pose serious mental health risks for religious sexual minorities (Itzhaky & Kissil, 2015). While strides toward inclusion have been made within Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative communities, the more conservative end of Orthodoxy has remained largely closed to the needs and concerns of its LGBTQ members. As the Orthodox Jewish LGBTQ community continues to grow, the task of educating the heterosexual Orthodox Jewish world remains vitally important. Taking this task one step further, Mark (2008, p. 192) proposes that “as Orthodox LG Jews accept the challenge of integrating their identities, it is clear that the challenge is no longer theirs alone, but that of the Orthodox community as well.” Championing Mark’s assertion, the following considerations are reviewed in an effort to help educate the Orthodox community, which has largely failed to recognize and address the unique needs of Orthodox Jewish lesbians.

The power of nonverbal and verbal communication. Supporting existing literature, the present findings suggest that microaggressions can have damaging effects on religious sexual minorities. In order to prevent microaggressions from occurring in communal institutions like Orthodox Jewish synagogues, camps, and schools, communal
leaders and educators must understand how microaggressions manifest in everything from policies and laws to language. This study thus advocates for education about microaggressions on systemic and institutional levels. Microaggressions occur in three distinct ways: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007a; Sue et al., 2007b). Each type will be explored in brief detail below. Examples from participant narratives will be provided as well in order to ground these abstract concepts in actual everyday experiences.

Microassaults are defined as conscious, deliberate forms of discriminatory practices that are intended to harm. Examples of microassaults include the “overt bolstering of heterosexual and gender conforming normativity” (Sanders, 2013), which can be employed by using discourse that either frames homosexuality as pathology or sinfulness or endorsing behavior that is rejecting of same-sex relationships. Several women in the present study experienced various forms of microassaults ranging from being told that their sexuality could be changed through conversion therapy to being denied family memberships at synagogues to having their children denied entry into Jewish nurseries and day schools. Though not representative of the majority, a few women in the present study also reported experiencing calculated and cruel behavior by community members—behaviors that were intended to make women feel unwelcome and excluded.

Unlike microassaults, microinsults are verbal slights or nonverbal cues that though consciously perpetrated are not malicious in intent. While subtle in delivery, microinsults can be experienced as insensitive, denigrating, and hurtful and ultimately serve to demean a person’s sexual identity. An example of a microinsult is the
hypersexualization of LG individuals by way of exclusively focusing on the sexual nature of their same-sex relationships at the exclusion of the love, care, and concern that are central to any romantic relationship. Many women in the present sample alluded to Orthodoxy’s “obsession” with what happens in the bedroom for gay couples. Ariella captures this sentiment when she asserts, “People are too obsessed with halacha and that someone must be violating halacha. It’s inappropriate to think about a husband and a wife having sex, so why are you thinking about or assuming that these [gay] people are having sex just because they identify as gay?”

Finally, microinvalidations are often unconscious communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the thoughts, feelings or realities of certain groups of individuals who tend to be oppressed. These types of communications are perceived as invalidating because they deny a part of a person’s reality, experience and/or identity. The women in the present study experienced microinvalidations when their sexuality was ignored and overlooked by community members. When women saw that they were not being asked questions about their partners or lives more broadly, they interpreted this disinterest as discomfort with their sexuality. Ariella captures this concept when she described sitting next to a former Judaic Studies teacher at a bridal shower: “It felt like she was afraid to ask any questions about my life for fear of getting into the answers, so I always felt uncomfortable…I think once she realized that I work for a <name of Jewish organization> she realized that like I'm not this lesbian alien, but sometimes I feel like she thinks that.”

To review, for the participants in this study, acts of omission were often just as emotionally painful as acts of explicit discrimination. Seeing teachers, rabbis and
community leaders either ignore one’s sexuality or consistently assume that all community members are heterosexual felt like a negation of their experience as lesbians. Though the indignity, denigration, or hostility embedded in microaggressions often go unnoticed by the perpetrator, the negative impact is often felt deeply by the recipient. Citing Sue (2010a), Sanders (2013, p. 25) asserts that “the chronicity of microaggressive experience can wear down the targeted individuals, leading to experiences of exhaustion through the persistent confrontation of a hostile and invalidating climate that devalues one’s lived experience.” Atara alludes to this exhaustion when she describes how painful it felt to hear her teachers and rabbis discuss the righteous husband she would come to marry. She describes feeling crushed by these “blows” time and time again over the course of her education. Unsurprisingly, Atara calls for educators in the classroom and rabbis speaking from the pulpit to be more sensitive in their use of language. More specifically, she requests that speakers realize the danger of heteronormative assumptions in speech.

**The power of the rabbinate.** In discussing clinical implications for working with Orthodox Jewish gay individuals, Itzhaky and Kissil (2015) assert that intervention needs to begin at the community-based level and with rabbinic authority in particular. These authors maintain that because rabbis have significant influence on how homosexuality is viewed within the community and, subsequently, how the gay individual is treated, they must be included in the conversation. Itzhaky and Kissil (2015, p. 639) specifically recommend developing a community committee comprising the highest rabbinical authority in the Orthodox community and mental health professionals from within this community to discuss “how gay men can be allowed to stay in the
community without being concerned about excommunication or negative consequences for their families.” Though it is unlikely that this committee will condone homosexuality, Itzhaky and Kissil (2015) maintain that forming such a group will serve as the foundation needed to make the lives of gay men who want to remain in the Orthodox Jewish community more tolerable and less challenging. Novich (2014) similarly asserted that gay men can begin to work toward self-acceptance and integration when rabbis join the conversation. As such, Novich (2014) recommended that Orthodox rabbis conduct a collaborative conversation with gay community members in order to discuss theological concerns and solutions.

Given how influential rabbis are in framing the terms of discourse surrounding homosexuality, the present findings support the need for rabbis to be part of any conversation regarding communal change. In addition, though words are certainly powerful, rabbinic actions are also required in order to facilitate improvements for LG individuals. Seeing rabbis publically model compassion toward congregants who often feel marginalized would do much to help steer community members toward taking a more accepting and inclusive stance toward those who feel alienated by the larger the community.

Conclusion

Informed by the critical ideology of feminist theory and psychology, this phenomenologically oriented qualitative study sought to understand the experiences of Orthodox Jewish lesbians by focusing on the unique intersectional forces of gender, sexuality, religion, and community. To date, the realities of Orthodox Jewish lesbian women have been absent from both scholarship and Jewish normative tradition. This
work, thus, endeavored to provide visibility to a population who has remained largely understudied. It accomplished this task by providing Orthodox Jewish lesbians with a platform to discuss the multiple challenges they have faced, the many strategies they have used to help manage these challenges, and the changes they want to see made in their communities moving forward. By sharing stories and insights about women’s resilience and ability to define their own realities, this study also strived to help transform members of a marginalized group from objects to subjects in the eyes of the communities to which they belong.

Though each Orthodox Jewish lesbian participant revealed their subjective experience of struggle, common challenges they shared by virtue of living in the Orthodox community as lesbians were presented in detail. Results offered critical insights into the painful barriers that Orthodox lesbians encountered throughout their heterosexist socialization and across different familial and communal contexts that were permeated by heteronormativity. These barriers made it difficult for women to recognize same-sex attraction, understand and disclose their sexuality, feel as though they belong within their families and communities, and believe that their families of creation will be accepted by their families and communities of origin. Homonegative experiences, both overt and subtle, were cause for a range of negative affect including alienation, isolation, loneliness, fear, rejection, abandonment, anger, grief, loss, mourning, and disempowerment. For many women in the present sample, these emotions remain ongoing and unresolved.

Despite facing systemic barriers and emotional injury, women demonstrated a capacity for resilience and perseverance. All ten Orthodox Jewish lesbians relied on a
number of coping mechanisms to help themselves claim both their religious and sexual identities. Finding support through the internet, Orthodox LGBTQ communities, and more progressive, egalitarian religious spaces allowed Orthodox Jewish lesbians to live more authentically as observant and gay. When women could not find these spaces, they created them. Overall, women learned to approach issues of identity, sexuality, and religion with flexibility, and in so doing, began accepting the role that uncertainty plays in their lives while forming a more personalized and nuanced bond to Jewish tradition.

Although several participants reported renewed and reinvigorated relationships with Orthodoxy and God, Orthodox Jewish lesbians maintain an ambivalent relationship with the Orthodox community. Having been rejected from specific communities and individuals by virtue of their sexual orientation and yet brought back into the community by more affirming spaces and figures, Orthodox Jewish lesbians simultaneously consider the Orthodox community to be a source of both pain as well as the support that helps to mollify that pain. Orthodox Jewish lesbians stay in the Orthodox community because they believe that no other community better meets their religious and spiritual needs. They also maintain hope that the community can change to better meet their needs as lesbian women.

Findings in this study suggest that there is more research needed in order to better understand how female religious sexual minorities experience community, homonegativity, and microaggressions. The current study also offers several implications for psychotherapists and Orthodox communities seeking to sensitively address the unique needs of Orthodox Jewish lesbians. Finally, for those heterosexual Orthodox allies hoping to create more welcoming communities for their LG counterparts, findings in the
present study not only provide a guide, but also suggest that there is hope. The Modern Orthodox community has shifted in the past two decades, offering more opportunities for dialogue and engagement. The rabbinate will play a key role in helping this shift permeate more conservative parts of the Orthodox community where more vulnerable Orthodox LG Jews are suffering in silence.
References


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Appendix A: Recruitment Email

To Whom It May Concern:

I am a doctoral student at the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology (GSAPP) at Rutgers University, and my dissertation aims to explore the experiences of lesbian Jewish women in the Orthodox community. I am writing to ask that you please forward this request for research participation to Orthodox Jewish women (18 years of age or older) who identify as lesbian and who consider themselves part of the Orthodox community. Participants will be asked to attend an in-person, audio-recorded interview. Interviews will last 90 to 120 minutes. Participants will also be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire that may take an additional 5 minutes. The researcher will keep all personal, identifying information that is collected confidential. Participants may discontinue their participation in the study at any time. If you or anyone you know is interested in participating, or if you have any questions pertaining to this study, please contact me at sew129@scarletmail.rutgers.edu or (917) 426-7670. Please note, you will not be compensated if you decide to participate.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Shelby Weltz, Psy.M.
Appendix B: Phone Screening Script

Thank you for considering participating in my study. I have a few questions to ask to confirm that you meet the criteria for the study, okay?

1) What is your age?
   Inclusion: 18 years of age or older
2) Were you born biologically a female?
   Inclusion: Yes.
3) Are you still biologically female?
   Inclusion: Yes.
4) Do you identify your gender as female?
   Inclusion: Yes.
5) Do you identify as lesbian?
   Inclusion: Yes
   6) Do you consider yourself part of the Orthodox Jewish community?
      Inclusion: Yes
7) Do you identify yourself as Orthodox Jewish?
   Inclusion: Yes

If the prospective participant does meet inclusion criteria, the researcher will say, “Let me tell you a little bit about what to expect if you decide to participate. The purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences of Orthodox Jewish lesbians in the Orthodox community. You will participate in an individual interview that will last anywhere between 90-120 minutes, plus a few minutes to fill out some brief forms. Your participation is voluntary and you may stop participating at any time. Please note that you will not receive any compensation except for your knowledge that you are contributing to people’s understanding of how Orthodox Jewish lesbian women experience the Orthodox community. The interviews will be audio recorded so that I can transcribe what is said later. All identifying information will be removed from these transcripts before they are analyzed. None of your identifying information will be recorded or used in the study. Should you be interested in participating, we will conduct the interview at a time and location that is convenient for you.”

If the prospective participant does not meet the inclusion criteria, the researcher will state: “I’m sorry, but you don’t meet criteria to participate in this study. Thank you for reaching out and expressing interest.”
Appendix C: In-Person Interview

INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT AND PRIVACY STATEMENT

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled “How Orthodox Jewish Lesbians Experience the Orthodox Jewish Community: A Qualitative Study,” conducted by Shelby Weltz, Psy.M. Before you agree to participate in this study, you should know enough about it to make an informed decision. If you have any questions, ask the investigator. You should be satisfied with the answers before you agree to be in the study.

Purpose of the Study:

The proposed exploratory research study seeks to capture how Orthodox Jewish women who identify as lesbian experience the Orthodox Jewish community. There is currently limited research on this population despite a growing number of studies looking at identity conflict, threat and synthesis in Orthodox Jewish gay men. This study will be used to enhance understanding of what Orthodox lesbian women have encountered as they have navigated tight-knit communities while living at the intersection of conflicting religious and sexual identities. A doctoral student at the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology (GSAPP) at Rutgers University is conducting this study as a fulfillment of dissertation and doctoral requirements. It is anticipated that 6 to 10 other individuals will participate in this study.

Study Procedures:

You will be interviewed about your experiences within the Orthodox Jewish community. The interview will take approximately ninety to one hundred and twenty minutes. Interviews will be audio taped to contribute to the authenticity of the study.

Risks:

The interview focuses on your experience as a lesbian woman within the Orthodox Jewish community. It is my hope that the interview will be a positive experience for you. However, recalling some experiences may be unpleasant for you and you may experience some discomfort when answering questions. If you experience emotional distress related to the study, please contact the researcher and discuss this with her, so that she can assist you and help provide you with referrals as necessary.

Benefits:

Participation in this study may not benefit you directly. However, the knowledge that we obtain from your participation, and the participation of other volunteers, may help us create a more comprehensive understanding of what experiences Orthodox lesbian women have while navigating the Orthodox community. Sharing your experience as a community member may also provide a valuable forum for reflection.
Confidentiality:

This research is confidential. This means that the research records will include some information about you, including your age, gender, sexuality, and type of involvement within the Orthodox Jewish community. Your name will only appear on consent forms and will be kept separate from research records. I will keep this information confidential by limiting access to the research data and keeping it in a secure locked location. The research team and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. Your responses will be grouped with other participants’ responses and analyzed collectively. All common identifying information will be disguised to protect your confidentiality. This will include changing your name and other demographic information.

Interviews will be transcribed, and audio recordings will be destroyed three years after the study. All audio recordings, transcripts of interviews, or other data collected from you will be maintained in a locked file cabinet and destroyed three years after the study. Audio recordings will be assigned a case number.

Compensation:

There is no compensation for participation in this study.

Contact:

I understand that I may contact the investigator or the investigator’s faculty advisor at any time at the addresses, telephone numbers, or emails listed below if I have any questions, concerns or comments regarding my participation in this study.

Shelby Weltz, Psy.M.  Monica Indart, Psy.D.
Principal Investigator  Faculty Advisor
Rutgers University, GSAPP  Rutgers University, GSAPP
152 Frelinghuysen Rd  152 Frelinghuysen Rd
Piscataway, NJ 08854-8085  Piscataway, NJ 08854-8085
Telephone: 917.426.7670  Telephone: 973.762.6878
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If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Arts and Sciences Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research and Regulatory Affairs
Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey
335 George Street
Liberty Plaza / 3rd Floor / Suite 3200
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Rights as a Participant: Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be removed from the data set and destroyed. Also, if you refer other individuals for participation in this study, your name may be used as the referral source only with your permission.

I have read and understood the contents of this consent form and have received a copy of it for my files. By signing below, I consent to participate in this research project.

Participant Signature _______________________________ Date ________________

Investigator Signature _______________________________ Date ________________
Appendix D: Consent for Audio Taping

You have already agreed to participate in the research study titled “How Orthodox Jewish Lesbians Experience the Orthodox Jewish Community: A Qualitative Study,” conducted by Shelby Weltz, Psy.M. We are asking for your permission to allow us to audiotape (make a sound recording) as part of that research study.

The recording(s) will be used for analysis by the principal investigator.

The recording(s) will be distinguished from one another by an identifying case number not your name.

The recording(s) will be stored either as a password protected digital file or on audio-cassette tapes stored in a locked filing cabinet, and transcribed by the principal investigator.

All audio recordings will be maintained in a password protected digital file or a locked filing cabinet and deleted three years after the study is completed. All transcripts of interviews will be maintained in a password protected electronic document or a in a locked file cabinet. All transcripts will be destroyed three years after the study.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Subject Name (Print) ________________________ Date: ____________
Subject Signature ________________________ Date: ____________
Principal Investigator Signature ____________ Date: ____________
Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire

Please complete all of the items below.

Age: ____

Gender: ____

Which of the following best describes your religious background (please circle one)?

1) I am frum from birth (FFB), meaning I grew up in an observant home and continue to be observant today (regardless of whether I maintained that level of observance throughout)

2) I am a ba’al teshuvah (BT), meaning I did not grow up in an observant home but I became observant later in life

3) I grew up in an observant home but I am no longer observant today
Appendix F: Semi-Structured Interview

A. Introductory Questions:
   a. In what ways do you consider yourself part of the Orthodox Community?
      i. If participants require prompting:
         1. To what extent do you participate in Jewish cultural activities that are community based?
         2. To what extent do you partake in Jewish ritual practices that are community based?
   b. What role does the community play in your life practically speaking?
   c. What role does the community play in your life emotionally?
   d. Please discuss the norms of the Orthodox community that most impact your life.
      i. Please describe how you experience these norms.
   e. Have your behaviors and/or ritual practices within the Orthodox community changed over time?
      i. If yes, how? Why?
      ii. How have your behaviors and/or ritual practices within the community stayed the same over time?
   f. Have your thoughts, feelings and approach about/towards the Orthodox community changed over time?
      i. If yes, how? Why?
      ii. How have your thoughts, feelings and approach about/towards the Orthodox community stayed over time?
   g. Do you consider yourself part of another collective of people that feels like a community, different from the Orthodox Community?
      i. If so, please describe your involvement in said community.
      ii. Please discuss the norms of said community.
      iii. How do these norms impact you?
      iv. How you experience these norms?
   h. What is it like to be a lesbian woman in the Orthodox Jewish community?

B. Sexual realization, disclosure and response:
   a. To what degree have you come out to family members, friends, and/or community leaders?
      i. Describe those interactions.
      ii. What were they like for you emotionally at the time?
      iii. What is it like to discuss these interactions with me?
   b. Are there people to whom or settings in which you are not out?
      i. If so, what prevents you from coming out to those people or in those situations?

C. Experiences in the community:
   a. Are there any aspects of the Orthodox Jewish community that are challenging to you as a lesbian woman?
      i. If so, please provide examples.
   b. Are there any aspects of the Orthodox Jewish community that are stigmatizing to you as a lesbian woman?
i. If so, please provide examples.

c. Are there aspects of the Orthodox community that have been rewarding to you as a lesbian woman?
   i. If so, please provide examples.

d. What keeps you staying in the community?

e. What keeps you from leaving the community?

f. What would the community need to change in order to improve your experience as a lesbian woman?

D. Concluding questions:

a. Is there anything I didn’t ask you about your experience with the Orthodox Jewish community that would be helpful to know or consider?

b. What has been your experience of participating in this interview?
Appendix G:

Glossary of Hebrew and Yiddish Terms

*Adon olam:* A hymn typically sung at the close of Sabbath and festival morning services.

*Aidim:* Literally translated as “witnesses.”

*Aliyah:* The recitation of a blessing over the Torah.

*Aufruf:* The Jewish custom of a groom being called up in the synagogue for an *Aliyah* at the Sabbath service before the wedding.

*Baal Chesor:* A practitioner of kindness.

*Baal Torah:* A learned Torah scholar.

*Bekishe:* A long coat, usually made of black silk or polyester worn by Hasidic Jews, and by some non-Hasidic Haredi Jews.

*B’zelem Elokim:* Literally translated as “in God’s image;” the underpinning of the Jewish value system is the notion that all humans were created in God’s image and that the humanity in each person should be valued accordingly.

*Challah:* Challah is a special bread in Jewish cuisine, usually braided and typically eaten on ceremonial occasions such as Sabbath and major Jewish holidays. Traditionally, the *mitzvah,* or commandment, of separating challah from dough is primarily associated with women. The rabbis of the *Talmud* explain that “taking challah” is one of the three *mitzvot* set aside specifically for women, along with lighting Shabbat candles, and observing the rules of menstrual purity.

*Chagim:* Literally translated as the Jewish holidays.

*Chevra:* Literally translated as society or close-knit group.
**Chevra Keddisha:** A Jewish burial society, or an organization of Jewish men and women who see to it that the bodies of deceased Jews are prepared for burial according to Jewish tradition and are protected from desecration, willful or not, until burial.

**Chizzuk:** Translates as emotional or spiritual support, inspiration or encouragement.

**Chuppah:** A canopy beneath which Jewish marriage ceremonies are performed.

**Daven/Davening:** Prayer/ the act of praying.

**Frum/Frummy:** Literally translated as "devout" or "pious." “Frum” is to be committed to the observance of Jewish religious law that often exceeds the bare requirements of Halacha, the collective body of Jewish religious laws. “Frummy” is a colloquialism used to describe someone who is painstakingly fastidious in their observance.

**Gashmius:** Materialism, in contrast with spiritual concerns; "indulgence in earthly pleasures."

**Haddakat Neirot:** Refers to the lighting of the Sabbath candles, one of the mitzvot reserved for women.

**Halacha / Halachic:** The complete body of rules and practices that Jews are bound to follow, including Biblical commandments, commandments instituted by the rabbis, and binding customs.

**Hesped/ Hespedim:** A eulogy at a Jewish memorial service/ plural for Hesped.

**Ima:** Literally translated as “mother.”

**Issur/Issurim:** Referring to that which is prohibited/ plural of “issur.”

**Kallah:** Literally translated as "bride." A “Kallah teacher” is someone who is trained to teach soon-to-be brides about the Jewish laws pertaining to marriage and family purity.
“Kavod for my gufah:” “Kavod” literally means respect and “gufa” literally means body. The participant is referring to receiving a proper Jewish funeral, which includes the washing and purification of the body, a Jewish person staying with the deceased until burial, traditional shrouds, a "kosher" casket, and to be cared for by the Chevra Kaddisha.

Kiddushin: According to Torah law, marriage is a two-step process. The first stage is called "kiddushin." Kiddushin is commonly translated as betrothal, but actually renders the bride and groom full-fledged husband and wife.

Kiddush Hashem: Translates as the sanctification of the name of God. Any action by a Jew that brings honor, respect, and glory to God is considered to be sanctification of his name.

L’chaim: a toast meaning “to life.” A “L’chaim” is usually made in response to a happy and/or celebratory occasion.

Levaya: Literally translated as a “funeral.”

Machatunim: Literally translated as “in-laws.”

Mechilah: Literally translated as “pardon;” from God and from human beings whom we have harmed in some way.

Mechitza: A partition; particularly one that is used to separate men and women.

Mikveh: A bath used for the purpose of ritual immersion in Judaism to achieve ritual purity.

Minyan: An assembly of ten men over the age of 13 required for traditional Jewish public worship.

Mitzvah / Mitzvot: Any of the 613 commandments that Jews are obligated to observe. It can also refer to any Jewish religious obligation, or more generally to any good deed.
**Nebach:** A colloquialism used to describe a person worthy of pity.

**Neshama:** Literally translated as “soul.”

**Nidah:** A concept in Judaism which describes a woman during menstruation, or a woman who has menstruated, and has not yet completed the associated requirement of immersion in a mikveh.

**Nigunim:** The plural form of a Jewish religious song or tune sung by a group of people.

**Parnasa:** Literally translated as “livelihood.”

**Parsha:** The weekly Torah portion.

**Pasuk:** Literally translated as “verse.”

**Pidyon Haben:** A ceremony whereby a Jewish firstborn son is "redeemed."

**Poseket:** Translated as a female who makes decisions about Jewish law.

**Pruba:** An interview process utilized by communities to determine a rabbi’s hiring.

**Rabba:** Refers to female spiritual leaders within the Modern Orthodox community. Though some consider the “Rabba” the female equivalent of a rabbi, the Rabbinical Council of America has iterated its opposition to ordaining women into the Orthodox rabbinate, regardless of the title used.

**Rebbetzin:** The title used for the wife of a rabbi, typically from the Orthodox, or Hareidi, and Hasidic Jewish groups.

**Rosh Yeshiva:** The title given to the dean of a Talmudical academy (yeshiva). It is a compound word of the Hebrew words rosh ("head") and yeshiva (a school of religious Jewish education). Since yeshivas play a central role in the life of certain communities within Orthodox Judaism, the position of Rosh Yeshiva is more than just his position within the yeshiva—it is often seen as a pillar of leadership in extended communities.
**Ruchnius:** Referring to that which is spiritual and not materialistic.

**Shabbasim:** The plural form of the Sabbath.

**Shana bet:** Literally translated as “year two;” many Modern Orthodox American teenagers study abroad in Israel for the year prior to starting university. This gap year is typically referred to as one’s “Israel year.” Shana bet refers to those students who return for a second “Israel year.”

**Shefichat Damim:** The prohibition of murder.

**Shidduch/ Shidduchim:** A system of matchmaking in which Jewish singles are introduced to one another in Orthodox Jewish communities for the purpose of marriage.

**Shiur:** A Talmudic study session.

**Shul:** A synagogue.

**Sukkot:** A biblical Jewish holiday.

**Taharat Hamishpacha:** Laws pertaining to family purity.

**Talmud/Talmudic:** The most significant collection of the Jewish oral tradition (a compilation of rabbinical opinions) interpreting the Torah.

**Tehillim:** Book of psalms; In times of trouble, traditional Jewish communities have turned to the recitation of psalms as a prayerful response. In some circles, the family and community of someone facing a grave illness may ask for psalms to be recited as a collective prayer for the sick person’s health and recovery.

**To’evah:** Literally translated as an "abomination."

**Torah:** Specifically defined as the five books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, or defined as the entire body of Jewish teachings.

**Treif:** Non-kosher.
Tzedaka: Literally translated as “charity.”

Yahadut: The Jewish Religion; Judaism

Yeshiva: A school of religious Jewish education; A Talmudic Academy

Yeshivish: A term referring to an ultra-Orthodoxy

Yom Kippur: Known as “the Day of Atonement,” Yom Kippur is considered the holiest and most auspicious day of the year in Judaism, with its theme centering on repentance.

Zemirot: Jewish hymns usually sung during the Sabbath.