

# Lesbian copes with faith

by Suzi

When J. and I became a couple in 1979, I (who had been straight until then) was more concerned about her being the wrong religion than I was about her being the wrong sex. To me, it was her not being Jewish that meant we couldn't get married and have the family I'd imagined. She was exactly what I wanted in a partner, but for that. My expectations for grownup happiness depended more on having an enlightened-but-traditional Jewish wedding with lots of Jewish dancing and joy, and a chance later to raise Jewishly well-educated and happy children, than they did on having a husband.

For some reason, lesbianism never felt to me like even a minor transgression. But intermarriage -- that was the ultimate Jewish sin. I felt bad.

Lesbians and gay men sometimes find it hard to acknowledge the extra stress that intermarriage can bring -- just because we have enough problems. It's hard enough to relate to the rest of the world as a lesbian. And it's hard to stay connected to traditional religion if you're a feminist, let alone a lesbian feminist. (Judaism is like other male-dominated religions in this respect -- but not worse, as I've heard said by people ignorant of Jewish history.)

Adding a non-Jewish partner to an at best tenuously affiliated or observant

## Leather group meets

by Bob Mundstock

Sixteen gay men gathered in Montpelier on February 15th to talk about leather and "S & M: what it is, what it is not." Discussion ranged from questions from those who were curious but inexperienced to an expression of concern about how the S & M community is perceived in both the gay and straight communities.

The sixteen men at the meeting were from across the state and included three guests from New York and Massachusetts.

Organizers credited the "Out in the Mountains" community events calendar with being a major help in publicizing the event and helping to produce the large turnout.

Future gatherings, with both social events and discussions, are planned. Anyone interested in further information can contact the group at Box 741, Montpelier, VT 05602.

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lesbian or gay Jew is sometimes the last straw. We already fight enough. It becomes easier to forget the whole thing, to ignore culture, history, or what may be particularly Jewish needs. It becomes hard to admit there may be real differences between Jews and gentiles -- strengthening and enriching, and sometimes painful differences. But ignoring our Jewishness is as sad and unnecessary as ignoring our gayness.

In J.'s and my early days, I once talked to a lesbian rabbi friend about my disappointment in the way my Jewish-wedding-and-family dreams turned out. Trying to comfort me, she said that she would marry us. Really? I asked, imagining for a second the clapping and dancing, the exuberant singing at our wedding. She said, "Of course, if J. converts." My heart sank. I knew J. wouldn't consider it. She doesn't like religion in general, having grown up Presbyterian in Texas. And more importantly, she's happy with who she is. My friend was offering to marry two women. She didn't understand that this wasn't the problem.

So, I struggled. I didn't want J. to feel bad for lacking something I happened to want, when she was perfectly fine and whole. But of course she did, whenever I mentioned my sadness. Who wouldn't? I knew I had to get over it.

Meanwhile, J. was most supportive of my Judaism -- from the beginning. She joined my observance when she could. When we decided to live together, she agreed that we would keep our house kosher. She knew what the rules were by then -- at least as I interpret them. And she understood that we wouldn't shop together or do the laundry or any other work on Saturday, the Jewish sabbath. We wanted it to be a special day for the two of us. We disagreed at times on what constituted work, and we still do, at times. (In Jewish terms, work is not simply activity you don't like; it's anything involved with the "work" of creating. J. is an artist for whom creating is not work.)

When Christmas came around that year, I said I didn't want to have a tree. J. said she knew plenty of Jews who had pine trees -- Christmas trees or Hanukkah bushes -- but she didn't really care, because we weren't going to be home anyway. In those days, we went to our respective families' houses in Texas.

By the time we were spending Christmas together at our house several years later, I didn't feel the same way. In fact, just as she's sometimes the one who remembers we need wine for Friday night kiddush (though she doesn't drink), I became the one who wanted a tree -- for both our sakes. I liked it because it was green and smelled good and the lights were pretty,

and she liked it because it symbolized the family love and childhood excitement that for her are the essence of Christmas.

A couple of things had happened: I now knew the extent of J.'s respect for my Jewishness and my needs, and I had come to value her family traditions (which are more pagan than Christian: an enormous, red stocking full of presents -- and a tree -- at Christmas, big family dinners at Easter, mushy cards the rest of the year). I could enjoy them -- at least in private -- without losing myself.

In some ways we have arrived at a typical mixed marriage between Jew and gentile. In December we light Hanukkah candles, give a few Hanukkah presents, decorate a pine tree with lights and handmade ornaments and a Kiss-me-I'm-Jewish button on the top, eat latkes, and, on the 25th, open more presents. When Easter and Passover fall close together, we have dyed eggs at our seder table.

The difference is, of course, that we're both women. So it's a little more complicated.

I wish that choosing to go to services on Saturday morning didn't mean I had to leave J. But I know that even if she were Jewish, she wouldn't go to synagogue, because she's not religious. (I don't consider myself religious either, but I like to go to synagogue occasionally, for the gathering of the community. Unfortunately, the traditional community is full of homophobia. But I must note that the one rabbi in Burlington with whom I've spoken openly, at the Reform temple, has welcomed me and J., warmly.)

Sometimes I wish J. knew more Jewish songs. But being Jewish is no guarantee of knowing Jewish songs. Besides, what kind of songs? Israeli, Yiddish, Hassidic, Sephardic? There are so many ways to be Jewish. Anyway, J. knows the Shabbat and holiday blessings, and she's learned songs from me. She's also taught me some -- like a silly kids' song about fruit that we've incorporated into our Tu b'Shevat seder (the New Year for Trees). And I know her songs because as a Jew you can hardly help but pick them up from mainstream culture.

There are times when I feel particularly torn, and go through dramatic agonies of indecision -- when I have to choose between leaving J. to go to a gathering of Jewish women, for example, and staying home. Sometimes I go, sometimes I stay. That choice will always be hard, because usually I prefer her company. But sometimes I long for the particular comfort of a roomful of Jews.

It makes sense that I feel the pull of both. Being with J. and being Jewish are my two greatest joys.