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An old story finds new life in LGBT haggadah By Nick Street, Contributing Writer

Asher Gellis talks about his life with a modest but clear-eyed sense of wonder that fits his role as a young community activist who is just beginning to hit his stride. Next week, JQ International, an organization that has helped to nurture his development as a leader, will host a seder that will include readings from a new haggadah weaving the history of gay and lesbian people into the story of the Exodus.

Like the Jews emerging from their captivity in Egypt, Gellis said his own experience of oppression lent a special urgency to his quest to establish a community for people wandering in a spiritual desert. A decade ago, he was just out of college -- and just out of the closet -- and feeling very much alone in the wilderness.

"There was no place to be Jewish and gay in Los Angeles," he said. "Some temples had gay programming, but they seemed more oriented toward people who were partnered, had kids."

As a young man just discovering himself, Gellis said, he simply didn't connect with communities oriented around family identity -- conventional or otherwise.



JQ International's alternative seder plate.

Then he discovered a scattered group of like-minded young gays and lesbians who were beginning to coalesce into a community. They had a variety of backgrounds -- from secular Jews who had been involved in JCCs to Orthodox Jews who had been through yeshiva.

"JQ International evolved organically," said Gellis, who is now executive director of the Los Angeles-based organization, which focuses primarily on people in their 20s and 30s. "It's a true grass-roots organization. Once we had a critical mass of people, things just took off."

With deep roots in the Jewish communal experience, JQ International has grown to more than 600 members from the dozen or so who gathered for the organization's first meeting in 2002. Most are in Los Angeles, but new chapters have just opened in New York and Arizona. JQ's programs are at once social and socially aware -- a game night doubles as a food drive, a picnic is also an occasion for planting trees in a local park.

And observances of Jewish holidays become opportunities for young LGBT Jews to mend the rift they often feel between their religious and sexual identities.

"It's essential to the process of coming out to learn how to lead a less-compartmentalized existence," Gellis said.

Integrating elements of Jewish identity into their experience as gay men or lesbians also encourages JQ's relatively youthful members to develop a sense of pride in the legacy of LGBT activism.

"Often there's no sense of transmitting history in the gay and lesbian community," Gellis said. "A lot of younger gays and lesbians don't know what Stonewall [the New York riots that prompted the LGBT liberation movement] was about, or they don't know how they came to have the rights they have. That's what being Jewish is about -- having a good strong knowledge of who I am and where I come from."

The upcoming Passover seder, which will be hosted by Hillel at USC on April 26, exemplifies the organization's focus on integrating Jewish and LGBT identities through activism and traditional observance. A distinctive feature of the event is the alternative Seder plate -- which holds a coconut.

"The coconut represents young closeted gay people," Gellis explains. "Even though they're sweet and tender-hearted on the inside, they're also stuck inside a hard shell. It's our way of remembering people who can't be with us because they're not out [of the closet] yet."

But the element of the seder that's generating the greatest excitement in JQ's community is a new haggadah that documents the tradition that's emerging as JQ evolves from an organization into a movement.

"Stories in gay and lesbian experience find a lot of parallels in the Passover story," said Kevin Shapiro, a member of JQ's board of directors and a graduate student in the MBA program at USC. "The main theme of Passover is exodus. The Jews went from being enslaved and not living lives of integrity to a period of freedom where they gained knowledge and a new level of awareness. That's a good mirror for the experience of coming out."

Shapiro joined JQ in 2004, after he heard about the organization through a friend and went to a Chanukah party where he met young people who were gay, Jewish and eager to integrate and deepen those identities through activism.

"I especially liked the fact that it was nondenominational," Shapiro said. "Everyone was there because of the common experience of being gay Jews, regardless of their background."

Shapiro said that while developing the haggadah has been a collaborative effort from the start, he traces his own enthusiasm for the project to his experience leading JQ's seder two years ago.

"I took a couple of weeks to prepare," he said. "I learned there were lots of different types of haggadot -- for example, since the '70s, there've been feminist versions and environmentally aware versions, in addition to basic historical narratives. But even though some of them included gay and lesbian elements, there was nothing that really worked for our people."



Shapiro and the other members of the JQ community involved in the project have assembled the gay and lesbian components of other haggadot and added additional elements from LGBT history that resonate with the Passover story to produce an entirely new document that reflects the distinctive experiences and knowledge of their group. "Each haggadah captures the unique experience of the Jewish community that created it," Shapiro said. "We're taking a tradition we've created and putting it in the body of literature that sustains the Passover tradition. This has really been a codification process of a new chapter in Jewish history."

Shapiro also points out that JQ's haggadah is as much about recovering history as making it.

"Whether or not we've been out, we've always existed," he said. "That's why simply acknowledging our existence now isn't the same thing as inclusion or integration into the tradition."

Gellis echoes Shapiro's sense of pride in JQ's accomplishment. "This fully integrated version of the haggadah mirrors our goal as an organization -- to fuse our identities as gay Jews in order to complete us as a people."

To learn more about JQ's Seder or to receive an electronic copy of the organization's LGBT haggadah, e-mail info@JQish.org.