

# Tablet

A NEW READ ON JEWISH LIFE™

## A Rabbi's Grace

How Mike Moskowitz became LGBTQ Jews' 'radical progressive' Orthodox advocate

BY JUDY BOLTON-FASMAN FEBRUARY 11, 2022



Rabbi Mike Moskowitz, at left, with Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum KAREN GIMUL

Sharon Kleinbaum—senior rabbi of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in New York, historically founded for LGBTQ Jews—first met Mike Moskowitz, an Orthodox rabbi, in January 2017 at a Washington, D.C., protest over the treatment of DACA recipients and other immigrants. They were both arrested in the Senate, along with almost 100 Jewish activists. The protesters were handcuffed and loaded into police vans. Kleinbaum ended up

sitting across from Moskowitz and became curious about the Haredi man in front of her.

When the group decided to pass the time by sharing words of Torah, Moskowitz was the first to raise his hand. “I didn’t expect much from Mike,” Kleinbaum said. “But then he gave a pro-LGBTQ *drash*—specifically focused on trans issues, and connected it to Hanukkah. He blew me away.” By 2018, Kleinbaum hired him as the scholar-in-residence for trans and queer Jewish studies at CBST.

Moskowitz sees no contradiction being both a Torah-centric Jew and what he calls a “radical progressive.” He has been a persistent presence on the frontlines of allyship and advocacy for the LGBTQ community.

“It is no small thing to have a cisgender, ultra-Orthodox, straight rabbi on the staff of a queer synagogue,” said Idit Klein, president and CEO of Keshet: For LGBTQ Equality in Jewish Life. “Mike spoke out publicly, and he suffered the financial and professional consequences of becoming an outspoken activist for LGBTQ rights. Yet, he continues to do so in a way that is profoundly and consistently grounded in Jewish tradition.”

In 2020, Keshet honored Moskowitz with the organization’s Landres Courage for Dignity Award. Klein says that when Moskowitz and trans activist and fellow award recipient Abby Stein posed for a photograph, it was a picture of “what Jewish leadership in the 21st century looks like.” Another photo from a different time, yet in the same spirit, shows Moskowitz with Kleinbaum wearing her rainbow tallit.

Moskowitz’s tenure at CBST has given him the time and space to articulate a theology that allows him to root LGBTQ issues in Jewish texts. In his role as the scholar-in-residence, he has written two books and edited an anthology. Moskowitz’s colleague

and one-time collaborator Rabbi Rachel Timoner, reviewing Moskowitz's first book, *Textual Activism*, in *Tikkun* magazine, observed: "[Moskowitz's] encyclopedic knowledge of Jewish textual tradition, enable him to combine sources in totally radical and unprecedented ways, illuminating truths that have been hidden there all along." Last year, Moskowitz co-edited an anthology with Kleinbaum called *Chaver Up: 49 Rabbis Explore What It Means to Be an Ally Through a Jewish Lens*. Contributors included Rabbis Rick Jacobs, Rahel Barenblatt, Shmuly Yankowitz, and Lauren Tuchman.

In his new book, *Graceful Masculinity*, Moskowitz presents the phrase as an antidote to "toxic masculinity." He structures the book around the 54 Torah portions in the year plus the four portions that coincide with holidays, bringing the total to 58 discrete essays. Moskowitz hopes the compactness of the essays in *Graceful Masculinity* will lead to lively conversations at the Shabbat table.

While Moskowitz acknowledges the Christian connotations of using the word "grace," he embraces the concept's Jewish origin. "The first article I wrote using this title *Graceful Masculinity* was with Rachel Timoner, a Reform rabbi," he said. "We wrote about Parsha Naso, in which a jealous husband suspects his wife of being unfaithful."

As Moskowitz and Timoner observed in that article: "The Torah provides a remedy for the man's excessive bitterness and entitlement: The woman is brought before the high priest and must drink a mixture of bitter water and humble earth with God's name dissolved into the mixture. God is willing to have God's holy name erased in order to protect the life and safety of a woman, to heal the wounded heart and pride of a man, and to make room for peace."

Moskowitz has authored over 130 articles during his time at CBST. But when he thinks back to his early activism, he recalls that his impromptu learning session in the back of the police van was inspired by the defining speech he gave in 2015 at the Old Broadway Synagogue supporting LGBTQ rights. He had been a pulpit rabbi at the Orthodox synagogue in Harlem, a position he relished for the opportunity to do community outreach in the neighborhood. However, he was fired from the synagogue for talking openly about LGBTQ issues. His termination set off a tsunami of shunning in his ultra-Orthodox community in Lakewood, New Jersey, and communities he had been a part of across the United States and in Israel. In response, Moskowitz recently reflected, “There’s a part of me that feels aspirationally that I want to be an ally to God, and that we need to reclaim our tradition. So, I recently published an article called ‘Homophobia Is the Real Abomination.’”



Rabbi Moskowitz attending a Pride Parade in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. HAROLD LEVINE

Moskowitz considers his speech at the Old Broadway Synagogue as the moment he publicly came out as an LGBTQ ally. The speech coincided with a family member’s transition, which Moskowitz had privately supported. Up to that point, he also wrote blog posts for Keshet under a pseudonym and quietly worked with

Orthodox families whose children were gay.

In that life-altering speech on the third night of Hanukkah, Moskowitz asked his congregation, “What do you want your candle to be?” He sermonized: “Fear, hate, discrimination, it denies the soul spiritual expression. Perhaps the miracle of Hanukkah is the ability to see the darkness as a call and an

obligation to banish it with light. That was God's response to the initial darkness ... 'y'hee ohr,' let there be light."

At the time, he also worked as a representative for Aish, a Jewish educational network for Orthodox outreach at Columbia University. A transgender student, still closeted, confided in Moskowitz about his struggles, confirming to Moskowitz that it was time to go public with his allyship. Moskowitz's knowledge and humility quickly impressed LGBTQ and progressive Jewish communities.

"I was 37 years old at the time, and I had the same sensation I experienced at 17 when I became Torah observant," he recalled, "which is if I know this to be true, do I have enough faith to follow through with what I know is right and deal with the precarity and the consequences."

Moskowitz, who is now 42, grew up in a Conservative Jewish family in Richmond, Virginia. The first stirrings of his religious awakening happened at a regional United Synagogue Youth conference where he took note of the Conservative prayerbook, *Sim Shalom*: "I began reading the siddur, and it was like an epiphany. It was the first time I realized that God made this perfect world, we broke it and it's on us to repair it." He says he was compelled almost immediately to partner with God to fix the world—to shape a *tikkun olam* practice. "I went on a right-wing trajectory pretty quickly, and within a couple of months, I was part of the Orthodox community in Richmond," he said. "I will always have tremendous gratitude to USY for providing access. The Conservative movement inspired many people who got started there and realized it wasn't a long-term home. But it was a very important stop along the way."

Moskowitz's religious awakening spurred him to graduate from high school a year early. From there he went on to study in the rigorous Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem, making him the first person in

his family in generations to forgo a secular college education. Moskowitz lived in Israel from 1998 to 2009, and along the way, he received no fewer than three ordinations. However, after his public support for LGBTQ rights, the ordinations were rescinded by his ultra-Orthodox mentors.

Moskowitz's activism has moved him to describe his religious journey in the vernacular of the LGBTQ community, even as he pronounces words like Torah and Shabbat with a Yiddish inflection. Yet he knows his LGBTQ activism has “disappointed people who I love and who loved me. They won't talk to me, and there's a huge void there for me.” When Moskowitz confided his family member's transition to one of his rabbis in Israel—a man Moskowitz describes as erudite with expertise in education—he recalled his mentor replying, “They're a crime.”

Joy Ladin, a poet, essayist, and memoirist who holds the David and Ruth Gottesman Chair in English at Stern College, recalls being in conversation with Moskowitz about her 2018 book, *Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective*. Ladin observes that Moskowitz “has troubled the foundational binaries of Jewish identity and queer identity. He models that you can be devoutly Jewish and deeply engaged with scholarship and study as a spiritual practice without being anti anything—without being defensively closeted away from other parts of the world and other parts of Judaism.”

For Ladin, Moskowitz's “form of learnedness is a constant state of wonder and openness in new ways of thinking about Judaism and the Torah.” She points out that among Moskowitz's extraordinary gifts is how his erudition never “shuts down” someone's understanding of a given text: “He has an incredibly responsive, enthusiastic, and associative mind. Not only is he accepting and open in responding to others, but he connects their observations to areas of the tradition in which he is steeped. He's imaginatively sparked by it.”

Within his revolutionary advocacy for the LGBTQ community, Moskowitz is committed to the Torah as immutable, infinite, and speaking equally to every generation. It is the Torah that God gave Moses at Sinai and remains as relevant today as it was 3,500 years ago. “God had the same conversations with Moses that we’re having about LGBTQ rights,” he said. “And the Torah includes the relevant conversations today. For me, that’s the living part of the Torah. It keeps evolving. To be in partnership with the divine can only be achieved when it is also within the partnership of people, and it’s not a theoretical document but an applied one.”