



**Moshe Shokeid.** *A Gay Synagogue in New York.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. x + 264 pp. \$28.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-08461-1; \$84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-08460-4.



**Reviewed by** Christie Balka (Temple University)

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## Standing at the Crossroads

What do lesbian and gay Jewish communities look like? How do their members negotiate multiple and conflicting identities? How does their experience differ from that of their heterosexual co-religionists? These are the questions that Moshe Shokeid sets out to answer in his ethnographic study of New York's lesbian and gay synagogue, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah (CBST).

Shokeid's work fills an important niche between existing scholarly accounts of lesbian/gay and American Jewish experience. John D'Emilio's 1983 study, *Sexual Politics*, *Sexual Communities* traced the rise of an urban lesbian and gay political movement in the United States, and inspired a generation of scholars to undertake studies of twentieth-century urban lesbian and gay communities. For good reason, these have overlooked the involvement of lesbians and gay men in organized religion. Although lesbians and gay men have played substantial roles in organized religion throughout the twentieth century, their presence was barely visible until the 1970s, after the period considered by these studies. Also, these studies tend to emphasize the historical agency of lesbians and gay men, assuming that organized religion is a

barrier to such agency. Mirroring the absence of religion in scholarship on lesbian and gay communities, scholarship on the American Jewish community has ignored the contributions of lesbians and gay men. This is also a result of their invisibility in the past, and of the persistence of a heterosexist bias in contemporary American Jewish scholarship.

The creation of distinctively lesbian and gay religious institutions in the post-Stonewall era has highlighted the visibility of lesbians and gay men in organized religion. Lesbian and gay houses of worship have emboldened members to press for greater tolerance within mainstream religious denominations, offering a counterpoint to the rising influence of the New Right on organized religion over the last twenty-five years. They have also filled a variety of religious, political, and social needs within lesbian and gay communities.

Founded in 1973, CBST is one of these institutions. Located in Greenwich Village, the synagogue boasts over a thousand members, commanding the respect of the liberal Jewish establishment, local gay activists, and elected officials. Shokeid traces its evolution from a small, infor-

mal group in the 1970s to one that instituted formal policies to accommodate religious diversity as it expanded dramatically in the 1980s, to its present state, which reflects an emphasis on professionalism marked by the hiring of its first rabbi in the early 1990s. Throughout this period, membership in CBST has enabled gay Jews to secure their personal and collective identities in a world that regards them as anathema. Traditional (Orthodox and Conservative) Judaism has long denied gays status as moral beings. Shokeid believes that gay life, organized around the drive for casual, anonymous sex, has had the same effect. In contrast, he argues that CBST has affirmed the full personhood of its members through a process of continual negotiation designed to ensure that synagogue practices reflected both Jewish and gay values.

Based on techniques of participant-observation supplemented by interviews and archival research, Shokeid documents the primary arenas in which this negotiation occurred. In consecutive chapters he focuses on religious ritual, sermons, Talmud study, the formal politics and informal social life of the congregation, and its response to the AIDS epidemic. He also includes a chapter on the participation of women, who comprised one-third of CBST's members when he conducted field work in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Unlike other American synagogues, Shokeid argues that CBST's members were united neither by their shared geographic location nor by theological positions. In the absence of the latter, CBST's religious life was characterized by the same diversity that exists within organized Judaism today. Religious practices were hotly debated by those whose Jewish identities ran the gamut from secular to Orthodox and whose gay identities were equally varied.

For the author, the synagogue's Talmud study group brought conflicts between Jewish and gay identity to the fore. Comprised of Orthodox and Conservative Jews, this group met weekly to study the laws of the Talmud, which proscribes homosexuality. By participating in Orthodox communities as well as CBST, its members deftly negotiated conflicting identities while posing an implicit challenge to both. Shokeid sees this as a metaphor for the larger congregation, whose religious practices reflected the values of traditional Judaism, while its social practices reflected contemporary gay sensibilities.

While Shokeid portrays Jewish and gay values continually at odds in the synagogue's religious and social life, he chronicles their convergence in response to the

AIDS crisis. As CBST members watched the disease ravage their congregation, they emphasized the similarities between Jewish history during the Holocaust and gay history during the AIDS epidemic. At the initiative of people with AIDS, they made more urgent demands of the Jewish community. Yet AIDS changed more than the symbolic life of the congregation: pastoral needs overwhelmed its volunteer infrastructure, causing it to break from tradition by hiring a professional rabbi in 1992. Moreover, AIDS created a vacuum among the congregation's male leaders, into which women stepped for the first time.

These issues—the assertion of new political goals based on multiple identities, the evolution of informal, voluntary organizations into highly structured, professional ones, and the subordination of women in male-dominated gay institutions—are no less characteristic of CBST than of literally thousands of lesbian and gay organizations that have emerged in cities over the last twenty-five years. While scholars in anthropology and religion will find Shokeid's description of identity formation illuminating, its value to historians would have been enhanced by placing it in the context of material conditions that have transformed Jewish and lesbian/gay life in the postwar era.

A uniquely urban institution, CBST has been shaped by the geographic mobility and residential patterns of the Jewish and lesbian/gay communities. These conditions have influenced its geographic location “on the frontier between a fashionable residential area and a notorious cruising ground” (p. 38), which is typical of other urban lesbian and gay institutions. In addition to location, public transportation, social class and local political conditions have intersected with Jewish tradition and lesbian/gay culture to shape CBST. Like other voluntary organizations, this one occupies a middle ground between public and private life. Absent from this study is an analysis of how these conditions, which we associate with public life, have influenced CBST members' private identities and vice versa.

Greater attention to material conditions might also have prevented the author from reducing the complexity of contemporary Jewish life to modern Orthodoxy, and reducing the complexity of gay experience to the drive for casual sex, which serve as foils for this study. More familiarity with scholarship on the diversity of the American Jewish and lesbian/gay communities might have enabled him to contextualize rather than uncritically accept these popular stereotypes.

Finally, the subject of this book begs for more attention to gender. When the author conducted his research, women comprised a third of CBST's members, but few of its active leaders. Conflict over gender-neutral God-language and women's leadership persisted in every aspect of synagogue life, from ritual matters to its response to the AIDS crisis. It appears that gender was every bit as contested as Jewish and lesbian/gay identity. More data about the synagogue's female members and greater use of gender as an analytic tool would have resulted in more nuanced explanations of the persistence of such conflict.

Despite these weaknesses, Shokeid has rendered the

voices of his subjects with great skill. Readers will find themselves engaged in the synagogue's myriad controversies, agreeing or disagreeing with its members, and sometimes even talking back to them. As one of the first books to explore the intersections between these two distinctively urban populations, Shokeid's work will surely play an important role in setting the agenda for future research.

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