

Flashpoint: The Queer Case of the Naches and Temple Beth Sholom



This is the story of Naches's plight for a seat at a shul's table, a Sukkah request, and the battle to speak to a congregation on gay rights at a time when homosexuality was newly decriminalized.

In the immediate years following its founding, Naches had already established a working relationship with community groups in Montréal, fellow gay Jewish chapters across North America, and made in-roads with both local and American Rabbinical. Based on letters and meeting minutes, it seemed their eventual goal was to create a Gay Jewish synagogue, as had been done in New York. Although this never came to fruition, they did work to achieve integration in Montréal synagogues.

In the fall of 1977 Naches approached the Reform synagogue Temple Beth Sholom – now Temple Emanu-el Beth Sholom – requesting use of a sukkah. They received no confirmation of receipt, only a rejection during the holiday via phone. In correspondence with a community group, they stated that when they asked why they were rejected, the Temple was cagey, instead providing a vague counteroffer to host the “Open Forum on the Jewish Gay Community,” scheduled for February 16th, 1978. This came from unofficial channels, and the only print confirmation was an advertisement in the Canadian Jewish News, discovered accidentally. The offer was rescinded after less than two weeks due to “scheduling error.” Naches learned from Janice Arnold, at the Canadian Jewish News, that the cancellation was the result of congregant's complaints over the advertisement, and so charges of discrimination ensued.

It began as a letter writing campaign in December 1977, reaching far and wide. Naches petitioned the synagogue for transparency, with allied organizations like Ville Marie Social Services, Gay Youth of Montréal, and even other congregants at a Pennsylvania shul writing in support to demand answers. They asked, how could a community intimately familiar with what it is to be an outsider, having to hide parts of oneself for survival, not consider their own struggles to foster empathy and solidarity? One letter reads: “as Jews we have seen blind bigotry and hate. But how can you be party to it? And how, specifically if it is possible to weight [sic] bigotry and hatred, can you aim it at fellow Jews.” The shul remained steadfast in its denial. They blamed not only calendar mishaps, but also by-laws which precluded non-members from using religious spaces.

As the synagogue dug in their heels, Naches sought institutional mediation from associations such as the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Union of American Hebrew Congregants, and the Canadian Jewish Congress. The two American organizations, worried of stirring their own internal political controversy, denied Naches’ assistance for arbitration. Two articles were also published in the Canadian Jewish News.

In continuous correspondence with The Canadian Jewish Congress, Harvey Blackman received a series of letters which repeatedly expressed desire for resolution, but hesitation towards action based on so-called “limited availability” of its administrative and rabbinical staff. Two eventual letters stated that the aim towards resolution would be put on hold due to approaching summer vacation.

From available records, it is unclear if a true resolution was achieved. However, during this same period, Naches was invited to attend a study group at Beth Sholom’s sister shul, Temple Emanu-el. This was indicative of the early inroads for queer inclusion made by Temple Emanu-el, one which would benefit the eventual Emanu-el Beth Sholom.

What is clear from this astounding event is Naches’ bravery in such a simple request: a desire to participate in Jewish life. Naches’ actions were authentically queer and Jewish – openly and honestly questioning the status-quo to make space for one another towards a more equitable and fair society.

The Queering of Temple Emanu-el Beth Sholom

Naches’ dream would eventually be fulfilled. Years later, various forces and figures would bring about queer integration in the Temple Emanu-el Beth Sholom. Described here is an evolution from discrimination to embrace, traced by generous testimonials from Rabbis and a congregant.

Hannah Grover, Rabbi Leigh Lerner, and Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, all born outside of Montréal, came to the city for either work, studies, or adventure. Each arrived between the late 1980s and 2010s, each finding a home at Emanu-el Beth Sholom. At the temple, both Grover and Grushcow have found a vibrant queer Jewish community woven into the shul’s fabric. Given

that nearly 5 decades ago, Temple Beth Sholom saw queers quarrel with the rabbinical establishment, it is remarkable to see.

Since Naches' and Beth Sholom's flashpoint, the shul, now known as Temple Emanu-el Beth Sholom, has performed gay marriages, welcomed an out lesbian rabbi as their leader, participated in Fierté Montréal marches, and held Pride-themed Shabbat Dinners. It would be, however, naïve to think that queerness has reached full acceptance with congregants. According to Grushcow and Lerner, homophobia or transphobia surfaces from time to time.

When reflecting on the start of her time at the shul, Grushcow stated: "when I was first hired, there was certainly buzz about 'the lesbian rabbi.' Which, at some point, fortunately died down. I kind of feel like, people realized the sky didn't fall and we could get on with things." This was in 2012, but should not overshadow the temple's overwhelming acceptance, interest, and embrace of queer-Jews – fulfilling Naches' goal, albeit years after the organization's 1986 end.

When asked about the importance of knowing our history, as Jews and as queer people, Rabbi Grushcow credits predecessors, "we have to realize we stand on the shoulders of giants." A partial reference to Naches' disruptive organizing, it is also a nod to other queer Rabbis who preceded her.

Grushcow's response is indicative of how she views herself and her place as an LGBTQ+ leader within the shul. She sees herself as one part of a wider constellation of queer people in the congregation. She is humble when speaking on her contributions, such as leading pride marches, religious ceremonies, and counseling queer community members. She is generous with giving credit to others, pointing to Rabbi Lerner, an instrumental ally in establishing early institutional acceptance.

Lerner, who became Rabbi in 1989, sought common ground between congregants of the two shuls who merged in 1980. He felt it was his duty to make all feel welcome, which extended to the pastoral counseling of parents and newly out children.

In the 1990s Lerner reworked temple bylaws to recognize queer couples, and in 2005, performed the shul's first gay marriage. He brought the shul to its first pride march and started PFLAG, which welcomed parents and their queer children to find common ground. For Lerner, these were all-natural steps to take in reforming the shul and widening its tent; he has queer family, so it was a personal matter. Reform synagogues are, after all, supposed to be a site of religious progress.

Much like Grushcow, Lerner is modest about his contributions, describing them casually and framing them as effortless. He credits Grushcow's work and presence in the shul, as far outweighing his.

Much like Lerner, Grover attests to Grushcow presence as essential in maintaining an active queer culture in the shul. In fact, one of the reasons Grover chose Montréal was due to a positive first encounter with the shul's vibrant queer and warm spiritual leader.

Curious about Montréal, Grover visited in the summer of 2018 and contacted Grushcow who invited her to attend a Pride Shabbat Dinner. At the dinner she heard from the synagogue's queer youth who spoke of their experiences and reflected upon its entanglements with Judaism. Hannah saw the shul as a place where she didn't have to choose one part of herself but instead be whole. Now living here for nearly 5 years, Grover is an active member of the synagogue and will be married by Grushcow in the coming year.

Much like Grushcow and Lerner, Grover, who has also contributed to this publication, sees value in crediting to queer-Jewish ancestors as part of what has brought us here. She sees it as necessary to memorialize "contemporary queer and Jewish history" and a responsibility in how we honour these histories.

There is a cross-over of Jewish values and Queer values. A shared desire to know our histories and honour our predecessors and question the status quo. In the context of the shul, and even in the wider Montréal context, being Jewish and queer can exist together.

Although Naches' did not achieve its goal of a truly gay synagogue, Grushcow at the helm of a congregation, Grover as one of many who occupy its spaces, and Lerner who achieved what his predecessors chose not to do, is a profound realization of a queer and Jewish space.

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