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For the love of G-d

Mark (foreground) speaks candidly to filmmaker DuBowski (inset) about the rejection he's faced as a gay yeshiva student.

Sandi DuBowski set out to film the hidden world of gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews—and created a real-life shift toward understanding and acceptance **By Michael Giltz**

Director Sandi Simcha DuBowski is sitting on the deck of his Greenwich Village apartment—a quiet, green oasis where he has shared Jewish holidays with friends and held the wrap party for his documentary film *Trembling Before G-d*.

DuBowski's groundbreaking film, which opens at Film Forum in New York City on October 24, has already stirred debate at festivals worldwide with its portrait of the struggles of gay and lesbian Orthodox and Hasidic Jews. These people yearn to reconcile love for their faith with their sexuality and must do so under the threat of isolation from their families and ostracism from their community.

Gay Hasidic Jews? It sounds like an oxymoron. "Believe me," says the 31-year-old DuBowski, "everyone just laughed when I told them what I was working on." The young filmmaker had begun to explore issues of family and Jewish identity with his mid-'90s short film *Tomboy-chik*. But filming the gay lives in *Trembling* meant breaking taboos.

For every person seen on-screen, DuBowski contacted literally hundreds, if not thousands, of Orthodox and Hasidic Jews. "I tried for six years to find any Orthodox parent with a gay or lesbian child who would appear in the film. I could not find one," he laments.

But the people who do appear testify to their love of Judaism despite the



pain they've suffered. There's Mark, a lover of study who's been kicked out of numerous yeshivas for being gay. There's Michelle, a Brooklyn lesbian who feels so isolated that she says that when it comes to Hasidic lesbians, "I think I am probably the only one."

Michelle could take comfort from Malka and Leah, a couple who delight in the rituals of their faith despite facing a lack of acceptance. And at the heart of the film is David, a handsome 43-year-old doctor who is still recovering from the scars of having to endure years of "conversion therapy." (His meeting with the rabbi who had convinced him to go for that treatment is one of the film's highlights.)

DuBowski has done more than simply make a movie. In the course of his filmmaking, he helped form a sup- ▶

port group for Orthodox gays and lesbians in Los Angeles, brokered inter-faith dialogues, put people needing help in touch with those who can give it, and even introduced Rabbi Steve Greenberg—the world's first openly gay Orthodox rabbi—to his partner of two years. Throughout, DuBowski has encouraged those in the shadows—illustrated beautifully by the film, in which people who were afraid to appear on-camera enact Jewish rituals in silhouette—to step into the light.

"If it were just a movie, it would be boring," says DuBowski. "This film has tremendous potential. I don't think I anticipated that. At the beginning it was just my own personal video diary about whether there was homosexuality in the Orthodox world. But when I started meeting people who were kicked out of yeshivas, thrown out of their families, even betraying their husband or wife, it became clear that this was much more than a film and that I had a much deeper responsibility to the people I met."

The results have been astounding, since almost every time the film is shown, it marks a first of one sort or another. A screening at a retreat for rabbis prompted one female rabbi to come out and caused another rabbi—who at first denounced the film as Orthodox bashing—to arrange an upcoming viewing, the first at an Orthodox synagogue. (Note: The hyphen in the film's title reflects the Orthodox belief that the name of God is too sacred to be written or spoken directly.) At Sundance, a Mormon husband and wife talked publicly for the first time about the husband's struggles with being gay.

"What I find inspiring is working with people who don't see eye to eye and yet you find some common ground on which to move forward," says DuBowski, who updates the movie and the lives of the people in it at his Web site. "Rabbi Langer [who sent David to conversion therapy] agreed to appear on the panel in San Francisco. He apologized to David in front of all these people for not going with him on this journey. David was a bit shocked."

David, who at first agonized over whether he should appear in the film, admits he was surprised but not wholly satisfied by Langer's stance. "Here I was, having almost a therapy session in front of 1,500 people, and it was as if no

one was there," says David, who lives in Los Angeles and has traveled frequently with the film. "The audience was so embracing, I didn't feel like I was onstage. I was waiting for Rabbi Langer to say the same [antigay] things as in the movie. But he started off apologizing and saying he felt bad. He didn't say he was wrong, you should get a lover and live happily ever after—which is what I wanted him to say. He apologized for handling it incorrectly. But just [his] being there was great because it was brave."

And DuBowski's realistic desire for small steps forward was achieved. "Afterward, Rabbi Langer agreed to do what we're calling Friday Night Live in the Castro," says DuBowski. "It's going to be a giant Shabbat with hundreds of people when we open theatrically" in San Francisco in February. (The national release of the film is scheduled to begin January 30 in Los Angeles.)

DuBowski knows how much work has to be done. While trying to find people to talk with in Jerusalem, he says, he discovered that until a year ago there were no gay Orthodox organizations or even bars of any sort. He was forced to hand out fliers to men who were cruising each other in public parks. The positive reception of the film there doesn't disguise how far they have to go.

"I was on the street a few days after," remembers DuBowski, "and an Orthodox woman came up to me and said, 'I know your face. How do I know you? O-o-oh, you're the one in the paper.' And she leaned in closer to me away from her friends. 'Can you help me cure my gay son?'"

He took her number but hooked her up with the wife of a prominent rabbi who has a lesbian daughter. The rabbi's wife wasn't ready to appear in the film, but watching it convinced her she was ready to talk to other parents facing the same issues.

"I didn't anticipate becoming more religious," says DuBowski. "I'd always grown up with a love of Judaism. That kernel was there; it just needed something to spark it." ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to periodicals including the New York Post.



Find more on Sandi DuBowski, *Trembling Before G-d*, and links to related sites at www.advocate.com