

'Everybody is a homophobe at heart'

Group builds bridges between parents, children who come out of the closet

By Raphael Ahren

A few years ago, Jonathan Danilowitz was forced to hitchhike back to Tel Aviv after his bike had a puncture. He was picked up by man with a small truck, and when the two realized they were both native English speakers, they started shooting the breeze. But the conversation suddenly became very unpleasant for Danilowitz, who had moved from Johannesburg to Israel in 1971, when the driver asked him why he was not married.

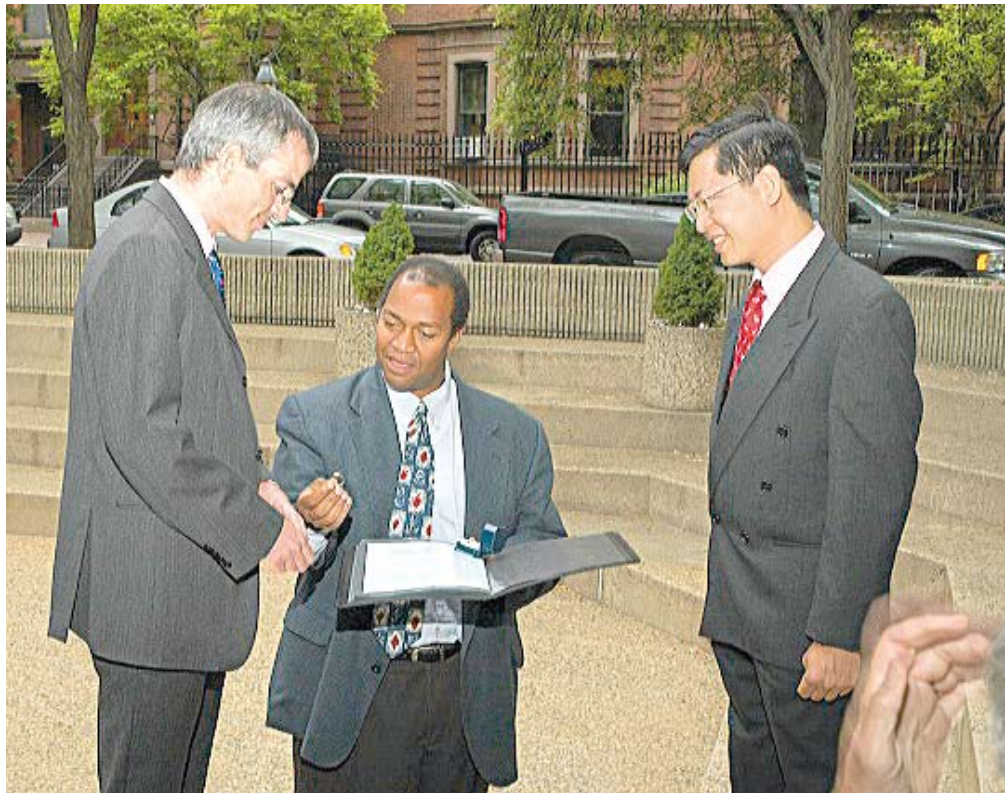
"I live with someone," Danilowitz responded, happy that the English language – as opposed to Hebrew – didn't give away the gender of his partner. But the driver didn't give up so easily and kept pressing with questions until Danilowitz had to tell him the truth: he was gay and living together with a man. "The guy didn't look like somebody you would want to meet in a dark alley," Danilowitz recalled, "and I expected him to throw me out of the car right on the spot."

But nothing of the sort happened. The man just shrugged and said that he, too, had a secret to share: he wasn't a businessman from the U.S. on a trip to Israel, as he had claimed. He was really an Israeli who had been deported from the States for smuggling drugs. To Danilowitz's surprise, the man couldn't care less about his sexuality.

What will the neighbors think?

"These are the stories I think parents need to hear," Danilowitz, 63, said last week while talking about Tehila, a national support group for parents of gay and lesbian children in Israel, "because many parents think how on earth will I tell my neighbors?"

He believes the neighbors more likely to respond they knew all along and were just waiting to be told officially by the parents of the gay child. "This is what happens to most parents," he explained. "It's a story that we at Tehila hear time and time again. It's either: we knew all along or



Arnon, left, and Kai marrying in Massachusetts in 2004. Arnon's parents later threw a wedding party.

what else is new?"

That is not to say that it is easy for all parents to accept their gay children. In fact, many seek help from groups such as Tehila, a volunteer-based non-profit association, which holds bimonthly meetings all over Israel and operates a phone hotline for Hebrew, Russian and English speakers. For Chana Arnon, for example, who was born in The Netherlands but lived in the United States before settling in Israel, it took a while before she came to terms with her son's sexual orientation.

"When he came out to us, I was terribly upset," the 69-year-old Jerusalemite remembered. "I was upset. I was confused. I was horrified." She said it took her about a year to accept that Danny, her son, who at that time still lived in their house, had carried this big secret with him without her realizing anything.

"Then, slowly, I got to know his friends who turned out to be all wonderful people. You become accepting. In the beginning I thought he was doomed to a future of going to public parks – because we just didn't know anything about homosexuality... Everybody is a

homophobe at heart, or at least through socialization."

Today, Arnon is very supportive of Danny and his partner, Tao Kai, who have been together for 17 years now. The two were actually among the hundreds of gay and lesbian couples who got married on May 17, 2004, the first day that the state of Massachusetts allowed same-sex matrimony. The Arnons not only attended the wedding in Boston, but also hosted a party for the couple in Israel later on.

Arnon has come a long way in the 20-odd years ago since Danny came out to her. For most of that time she was unaware of Tehila, which Danilowitz founded some 20 years ago. Today, she said she wishes she had known earlier about the group. "To my great regret, I wasn't able to get any help from them during that period of anguish, with somebody holding my hand," she said. "It's a big help to speak out about what you feel and share it with the people with whom you are in a room."

As of now, all Tehila group meetings are in Hebrew, but the organization is currently trying to break through to

Russian and Arabic speaking parents, as well. About 15 years ago, Tehila started a group for English speakers in Tel Aviv. "We decided there was a need – and also because as a native English speaker it seemed logical – but it didn't work," Danilowitz said, adding he is not quite sure why the Anglo group wasn't successful.

Even though he feels that Anglos – and other Western-

ers – are generally more accepting of homosexuality, they are often concerned about procreation. "Many Anglos [in Israel] want continuity – they are afraid they won't have grandchildren," he said.

What about grandchildren?

Although being gay does not prevent a couple from having children, as Danilowitz pointed out, he added: "It's a big problem for parents – also for Israelis, but while Israelis have their families here, many Anglos moved here only with their spouses and feel the need for the continuation of generations."

Not to have any grandchildren from her son Alex was also a major concern for Marilyn Magen, a 68-year-old Ramat Aviv resident originally from Philadelphia. Like so many other parents of a gay child, her first reaction to her son's coming out was "complete shock." She burst into tears, because a number of concerns – including the lack of grandchildren – raced through her head.

"I spent an entire year trying to talk him out if this, for all of these reasons: You need a family to carry on after you, to have somebody to take care of you when get old, and so on," she recalled. "After a year, Alex said: 'Will you come off it already? Stop it, it's enough, you'll never convince me.' So I gave up

and completely accepted it."

Of course it wasn't so easy. It is one thing to accept the fact that your son is gay; it's another thing to talk about it with other people. Magen recalled being particularly afraid of telling her stepfamily, which is modern Orthodox. "I didn't think they would accept it, and I was afraid I'd have to break off with them if they took it badly," she recalled. "I finally did tell them and they took it very lovingly, to my surprise." Though today Magen says she is entirely at peace with Alex's homosexuality, sometimes the typical Jewish mother does show through: "I hope he'll have a biological child one day, I hope, I hope, I hope," she said. "He's too wonderful to let this go to waste."

For more information, please call the national Tehila hotline at (09) 885 5822 (Hebrew) or (03) 953 1545 (English) and visit <http://tehila.org.il> (Hebrew).



Jonathan Danilowitz

What does Tehila tell parents who find it hard to accept a gay child?

Many distressed parents of gay and lesbian children attest to the fact that it can be extremely helpful to talk to someone who understands what they are going through. But what exactly would a Tehila volunteer tell a person who cannot get to grips with his or her child's sexual orientation?

"If you feel that you do not want to accept your child – that homosexuality is something totally unacceptable to you – they will try to investigate why you feel that way," said Jonathan Danilowitz, who founded Tehila in 1988 and until earlier this year was the organization's chairman.

"They will give you options of understanding. Perhaps they will show you it's not your

child's choice, that it's like blaming your child for having green eyes."

A Tehila counselor might also try to find out what the parents feel so strongly about, Danilowitz added. "Maybe it's just the neighbors – how will I tell them? How will I tell my own father or mother that they have a gay grandson? What will the rabbi say? The answers are: This is your child, who is perfectly healthy. There's nothing wrong with your child – society has to change."

He adds, "Of course these are not things you can say in the first half an hour with an absolutely distraught parent. But those are the messages that we are trying to convey." (Raphael Ahren)