

Religious refuge for gay Jews

By ALTHEA RHODES, Staff Writer

"Judaism teaches us to live in the midst of diversity; not to be tolerant but simply allow people to be," explained 'Bill' during a recent conversation with The Chronicle.

Bill, a strikingly handsome man with the quiet but penetrating eyes of a mystic, detailed the theory of justice that, he feels, is a cornerstone of Judaism.

Bill is an erudite, sensitive, professional who any Jew would term mensch.

Bill is a gay mensch.

Pittsburgh is a loose conglomeration of various ethnic, racial and social groupings. Its Jewish community is no less textured. The congregations run the gamut of 15 Orthodox, 8 Conservative, 6 Reform, 1 Reconstructionist, and one congregation of lesbian, gay, and bi-sexuals.

Bill is a member of Bet

Tikvah, the House of Hope.

Bet Tikvah serves the spiritual and social needs of the tri-state area's lesbian, bi-sexual and gay Jewish community.

Recently, I had the opportunity to join the congregation for a Friday night service. The Sabbath Bride was greeted traditionally by a woman's hands lighting the candles. An Israeli's properly calibrated accented Hebrew served to punctuate the authenticity of each prayer. Announcements were made, "Shabbat Shalom's" were exchanged, and the Kiddush

was recited.

The evening was filled with the sort of warmth, care, piety and devotion one finds in a close-knit, smaller congregation.

Bet Tikvah's prayer book reads:

We, gay Jews, have come together to strengthen our bonds with our people, Israel....We are Jews, but each of us is unique. We stand apart and alone, with differing feelings and insights. And yet we are not entirely alone and separate, for we are the children of one people and one heritage. We are one in search of life's meaning.

The members of Bet Tikvah preferred that only their first names, and in some cases fabricated names, be used in The Chronicle. Bill, the men-

sch, has been a member of the congregation for three years.

"Congregations, in general, are not sensitive to the variations they have among" their membership, he feels. "I'm not married. I'm not divorced. I am with a male partner...it's very difficult for me to sit with an identity where people don't know where to put me."

Congregations tend to create heterosexual social divisions when deriving their social functionings, most of Bet Tikvah's congregants feel.

Terri, a beautiful female nurse, explains: "We come together to be free with ourselves wholly with our religion and our orientation." Her partner, Pat, accompanies Terri to services because of the "affection, emotional support, and the sharing" felt within the group.

Another of the congregation's prayers:

May the door of this synagogue be wide enough to receive

All who are in need of love.....

But may the door of this synagogue be narrow enough

To shut out pettiness and pride, envy and enmity.

All Jews are the Chosen People. All Jews have "the right to be Jewish and worship in a setting that is appropriate for them,"

feels Dr. Walter Jacob, senior rabbi at Rodef Shalom Congregation, speaking in reference to the congregation.

Mark Friedman, director of development of the Persad Center, a research center serving the gay community and others affected by HIV, was one of the congregation's founders.

In agreement with the general heterosexual feelings found in most mainstream congregations, Friedman described that "The family-centered programs of congregations makes people like myself feel excluded and different.

"I called two other people who I knew were gay and Jewish, and we wanted to put together a synagogue for lesbian and gay people...we all felt a connection to Judaism, a sense of pride in being Jewish...but were extremely ambivalent" as a result of the previous alienation, Friedman noted.

A former SAJS student, Friedman is now a well-adjusted 32-year old professional. He is not presently active within Bet Tikvah, but chooses to practice his spirituality through personal, home-based ritual.

Since its beginnings in late 1987/early 1988, Bet Tikvah has grown to have a mailing list of approximately 80 names. For some members, the con-

gregation has represented a haven from the alienation they encountered when previously trying to join a synagogue.

'Reuven' explains, "I called and asked to join a synagogue and never heard from them again. I felt kind of spiritually lost....yes, they knew I was gay."

JGS sets October meeting

The Jewish Genealogical Society will meet Tuesday, Oct. 18 at 7:30 p.m. at the Holocaust Center, 242 McKee Pl., next door to the Federation.

Dr. Corinne Krause will discuss doing oral histories. 1994-95 dues will also be collected.

Midstream editor on 'More'

Mindy Solow, managing editor of Midstream magazine, is the guest of Morris and Shirley Shratter on their TV show, "More Than Just Learning," airing in October and November on cable-TV Channel 21. It can be seen every Thursday at 9 p.m. and the weekend of Oct. 28-30 at 1 and 8 p.m.

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