

= Trembling Before G @-@ d =

Trembling Before G @-@ d is an 2001 American documentary film about gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews trying to reconcile their sexuality with their faith . It was directed by Sandi Simcha DuBowski , an American who wanted to compare Orthodox Jewish attitudes to homosexuality with his own upbringing as a gay Conservative Jew .

The film received ten award nominations , winning seven , including Best Documentary awards at the 2001 Berlin and Chicago film festivals . However , some criticized the film as showing a one @-@ sided view of Orthodox Judaism 's response to homosexuality . These include South African Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein as well as Agudah spokesperson Avi Shafran .

The film is mostly in English , but also has some subtitled Yiddish and Hebrew . The film follows the lives of several gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews and includes interviews with rabbis and psychotherapists about Orthodox attitudes towards homosexuality . During the film 's six @-@ year production , DuBowski met hundreds of homosexual Jews , but only a handful agreed to be filmed due to fear of being ostracized from their communities . Many people who agreed to be interviewed are shown only in silhouette or with their faces pixelized . The majority of the participants are American Jews , with one British and one Israeli Jew also featured . The film was successful at the box office , grossing over \$ 788 @,@ 896 on eight screens by its close date .

= = Background = =

While a variety of views regarding homosexuality exist within the Orthodox Jewish community , Orthodox Judaism generally prohibits homosexual conduct . While there is disagreement about which acts come under core prohibitions , all of Orthodox Judaism puts certain core homosexual acts , including male @-@ male anal sex , in the category of yehareg ve 'al ya 'avor , " die rather than transgress " ? the small category of Biblically prohibited acts ( including apostasy , murder , idolatry , adultery , and incest ) which an Orthodox Jew is obligated under Jewish laws on self @-@ sacrifice to die rather than commit .

Familiarity with sociological and biological studies , as well as personal contact with Jewish homosexuals , has brought some Orthodox leaders to a more sympathetic viewpoint , which views homosexuals as mentally ill rather than rebellious and advocates treatment rather than ostracism or jail . In the 1974 yearbook of the Encyclopedia Judaica , Rabbi Norman Lamm , a leader in Modern Orthodox Judaism , urged sympathy and treatment : " Judaism allows for no compromise in its abhorrence of sodomy , but encourages both compassion and efforts at rehabilitation . " Lamm compared homosexuals to those who attempt suicide ( also a sin in Jewish law ) , arguing that in both cases it would be irresponsible to shun or jail the sinner , but equally wrong for society to give " open or even tacit approval " .

When Orthodox rabbi Steven Greenberg publicly announced that he was homosexual , Rabbi Moshe Tendler , a leading rabbi at the Modern Orthodox Yeshiva University where Greenberg was ordained as rabbi , stated " It is very sad that an individual who attended our yeshiva sunk to the depths of what we consider a depraved society , " giving his opinion that Rabbi Greenberg 's announcement is " the exact same as if he said , ' I 'm an Orthodox Rabbi and I eat ham sandwiches on Yom Kippur . ' What you are is a Reform Rabbi . "

= = Synopsis = =

Trembling Before G @-@ d interviews and follows several gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews , many only seen in silhouette , and also interviews several rabbis and psychologists regarding their views on homosexuality in Orthodox Judaism . The film repeatedly returns to several characters :

David is an observant Orthodox Jewish doctor from Los Angeles who has spent a decade trying to reconcile his homosexuality with Judaism . He has tried numerous forms of " treatment " , from eating figs and praying to wearing a rubber band on his wrist to flick whenever he thinks of men , but to no avail . During the course of the film , David decides to visit the Chabad rabbi to whom he first

came out .

Israel is a 58 @-@ year @-@ old New Yorker who decided he couldn 't be gay and Orthodox , and turned his back on his religion , though not before his family forced him into electroshock therapy to try to cure him . Now a tour guide in the Haredi neighborhoods of New York , the film follows him as he gives a tour , psychoanalyzes himself and decides , on the 25th anniversary of being with his life partner , to call his 98 @-@ year @-@ old father , a rabbi , whom he has not seen in over twenty years .

Michelle is another New Yorker , in her forties , who believed she was the only Hasidic lesbian in the world and as a consequence allowed herself to be pressured into marriage . However , she got divorced and was subsequently ostracized by her family and community when they discovered she was homosexual . The film shows her visiting her old neighborhood and an Orthodox fair .

Rabbi Steven Greenberg , one of the founding members of the Jerusalem Open House , a gay rights organization in Israel which provides support to gay Orthodox Jews and their families , who is sometimes called " the world ' s first openly gay Orthodox rabbi " , discusses parents ' reactions to their children coming out , as well as traditional interpretations of the prohibitions on homosexual acts in the Torah .

Shlomo Ashkenazy is a gay psychotherapist who has run a confidential support group for Orthodox gay men for nearly 20 years . He is interviewed about the effects of Orthodox attitudes to homosexuality and the reactions of rabbis to gay Jews .

Mark is the English son of a Haredi rabbi . Coming out at 15 , he was expelled from seven yeshivas for homosexual activity before becoming a drag queen , and is now dying of AIDS @-@ related illness . He visits several yeshivas and other religious sites throughout the film . He remains upbeat , at one point saying , " Being a Jew is such a nice present to receive . "

" Malka " and " Leah " are two observant Orthodox lesbians who have been together for ten years , which has destroyed Malka 's relationship with her family . They speak frankly about their lives in the film and discuss their fears that they may not end up in heaven together . They are shown preparing for Shabbat , and Leah gives advice to a married Hasidic lesbian who is terrified her husband will find out and take away her children .

" Devorah " is a married Hasidic lesbian living in Israel . She only appears in silhouette with an electronically modified voice . She considered her twenty @-@ year @-@ long marriage a lie , and can only cope by taking antidepressants . The film follows her as she attends her first gay pride parade , where she is offended by the anti @-@ Orthodox sentiment of its speakers .

= = Production = =

Sandi Simcha DuBowski was making videos about the Christian religious right when he began to examine his own upbringing as a gay Conservative Jew , and began making a personal video diary of his search for homosexuality among the Orthodox Jewish community . On the making of the film , DuBowski said , " I don 't think it was until I met people who were kicked out of their families and their Yeshivas , in marriages betraying their spouses , that it became clear why I was doing this film . But then , for me it assumed an enormous level of responsibility to the people I met , to the issue , to the community . " He met thousands of people , but only a few agreed to appear in the film , as most were too frightened of being expelled from their community . Even when interviewing those who did agree to appear , DuBowski had to hide his film equipment so their neighbors would not know that they had agreed to take part . As a result , the documentary took six years to complete .

There is no narration , and the film may be considered to be an example of cinéma vérité . The film is also interspersed with silhouetted tableaux of Jewish religious practices , for example Shabbat . The language is predominantly English , with passages in Yiddish and Hebrew that are subtitled . Also subtitled are passages with significant amounts of " Yeshivish " , Yiddish @-@ influenced technical terms in Judaism ; for example , posek is translated as " judge on Jewish law " , and daven is translated as " pray " .

The title is an allusion to the word Haredi ( Hebrew : ??????? ) , which can be interpreted as " one who trembles " in awe of God . The spelling of the word G @-@ d in the film 's title reflects the

Jewish practice of avoiding writing a name of God . By omitting the middle letter , the word is not written in full , thus eliminating the possibility of accidentally destroying the written name of God , which would violate one of the 613 Mitzvot of Judaism ( number 8 on Maimonides ' list ) .

= = Soundtrack = =

= = Reception = =

= = = Critical = = =

Trembling Before G @-@ d was put out on general release on October 21 , 2001 in New York City , where it broke Film Forum 's opening day box office records , grossing more than \$ 5 @,@ 500 on the first day of release . According to Box Office Mojo , it grossed \$ 788 @,@ 896 at the box office during its release . It was very warmly received by critics , one describing it : " With its testimony of anguish and joy , Trembling is a tribute to the human spirit , if not to the institutions that seek to define it . " Critical reviews compiled by Rotten Tomatoes were 89 % positive , the 34th highest rating on the website 's Top Movies : Best of Rotten Tomatoes 2001 rankings . On Metacritic the film received a Metascore of 66 ( " Generally favorable reviews " ) .

= = = Religious = = =

Trembling Before G @-@ d has had a wide impact especially within the Orthodox Jewish world , where the reception has been mixed . Several Orthodox synagogues sponsored showings of the film all over the world , including in Israel . The Chief Rabbi of South Africa , Warren Goldstein , described the film as " intellectually shallow , " commenting that " its one @-@ sided caricature of Orthodox Judaism does not stimulate meaningful intellectual debate . " A rabbi interviewed by DuBowski complained that the film " makes us appear to be narrow and bigoted " . Arthur A. Goldberg , co @-@ director of the Jewish ex @-@ gay organization JONAH , wrote a letter to the editor of The Jerusalem Post lamenting the " film 's biased and faulty assumption that same @-@ sex attraction and behavior is irreversible " and that " opposing points of view were , in the reviewer 's words , left ' lying on DuBowski 's cutting room floor . ' " Orthodox clinical psychologist Adam Jessel commented that , " the film poignantly captures the torment of those torn between their religious beliefs and their same @-@ sex attractions ( SSA ) . One cannot help but feel compassion for DuBowski 's interviewees who desperately miss the lifestyle , community and close family ties of the Orthodox world . Unfortunately , DuBowski 's film goes further . Implicit in the film is the message that homosexuality is desirable , and that the interviewees ' only struggle is having their choices accepted and validated by the community . "

No Haredi Orthodox group spoke out in favor of Trembling Before G @-@ d . Rabbi Avi Shafran , the spokesperson for Agudath Israel of America , one of the largest Haredi organizations , criticized the film with an article titled " Dissembling Before G @-@ d " . In his response , he holds that gay people can be cured through therapy , and that the movie is meant to promote homosexuality :

Unfortunately , though , " Trembling " seems to have other intents as well . While it never baldly advocates the case for broader societal acceptance of homosexuality or for the abandonment of elements of the Jewish religious tradition , those causes are subtly evident in the stark , simplistic picture the film presents of sincere , conflicted and victimized men and women confronted by a largely stern and stubborn cadre of rabbis . That picture is both incomplete and distorted . For starters , the film refuses to even allow for the possibility that men and women with homosexual predilections might ? with great effort , to be sure ? achieve successful and happy marriages to members of the opposite sex .

DuBowski maintains that there is no agenda to Trembling Before G @-@ d " beyond alleviating an immense amount of pain that people are going through " , and that Judaism is lovingly portrayed .

Indeed , several audience members at screenings asked afterwards how they could convert .

== = Accolades == =

== = Legacy == =

The DVD was released in 2003 and contains many extra features , such as extensive interviews with DuBowski and Rabbi Steven Greenberg . There is also a mini @-@ documentary about reactions to the film around the world and what happened to the people who were featured in the documentary . The total running time for the special features is actually over 2 hours longer than the documentary itself .

With a seed grant from Steven Spielberg , the creators of the film have set up the Trembling Before G @-@ d Orthodox Education Project , to teach Orthodox educators and rabbis about homosexuality , as well as convening the first Orthodox Mental Health Conference on Homosexuality and training facilitators to show the film to community leaders . Over 2000 principals , educators and school counselors have attended screenings within Israel 's religious school system . The film has now been seen by an estimated 8 million people worldwide . Following the success of Trembling before G @-@ d , DuBowski produced a documentary about gay devout Muslims entitled A Jihad for Love .