

Oral History Interview: Aryeh Krasman

Interviewee:	Aryeh Krasman
Interviewer:	Jason Greenspan
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Jason G:	<p>Interview with Aryeh Krasman, Monday, December 9th, 2024. Location is Jerusalem, Israel. Interviewer is Jason Greenspan.</p> <p>Hello Aryeh. I guess if you want to start just talking a little bit, you know, when you were born, where you grew up, your family, kind of.</p>
Aryeh K:	<p>Oh yeah, start at the beginning. All right, I was born in a small village. I was born in Toronto, Canada. June 7th, 1971.</p> <p>I grew up in the suburbs of Toronto and I attended Jewish day schools for pretty much all of my education from elementary school through high school. Our family were active members in an orthodox community in northern Toronto. That's, I guess, the basic background. What—How can I add on to that?</p>
Jason G:	Do you have siblings?
Aryeh K:	Oh yeah, I do. Okay. Yes, I am one of four. I have an older sister, a younger sister, and a younger brother. We're all very close in age. There's about five and a half years between all of us. Yeah.
Jason G:	And you said your family was very active?
Aryeh K:	Yeah.
Jason G:	In the community, did you feel, like, a part of the community?
Aryeh K:	Absolutely. Yeah. My parents tended to be more like pioneers when it came to Jewish communities. They were very central to the forming and building of, from what I remember from my childhood, at least two communities. In terms

	<p>of—the Jewish community in Toronto was basically stretched along one main street. And this was a small Jewish community. It was starting kind of, like, off the beaten track. There was a community of about 50 families, but I remember my parents were very much involved in that and very active in the community. And the community and the synagogue that we went to was a very central part of our social structure of our community. It was a very important place, and it was a place where everyone felt that they had a place.</p> <p>When I was about 10 years old, we moved to an up-and-coming development in the suburbs of Toronto. And there was another community that was starting and building and growing. And we got in on the ground level. My dad very quickly became very involved in the synagogue, became chairman of the board, was very active in the board, was very close with the rabbi. There was always a—and that was also—there was always a very close sense of belonging. You had your place in the synagogue and in the community.</p>
Jason G:	Mm-hmm. And you went to a Jewish school?
Aryeh K:	<p>Yeah, I went to, for elementary school, I was at the community Hebrew Day School, which was a very large school, several hundred students from all streams of Judaism. I would say probably that the smallest percentage were kids that were from religious homes, but everyone came from some sort of traditional background, whatever. And then for high school, I went to a yeshiva high school, which was modeled after the religious Zionist yeshiva high schools that we have here in Israel, modeled after Bnei Akiva. The teachers were a lot of rabbis that came from, uh, the modern Mizrachi movement, Bnei Akiva, et cetera, from here, that they were our teachers.</p>
Jason G:	And were you active in Bnei Akiva?
Aryeh K:	<p>I was. I was both an attendee, I was a madrich, for several years when I was in high school. After that, I was also very involved in NCSY. Yeah, but being active in community activities also, very much so. Yeah, so, you know, I participated in a lot of NCSY events. And again, as I grew, as I was growing up, whatever, both as a participant, but then also as an advisor. I think I served on the regional board for our region of NCSY. I was the vice president of education. Yeah, I was responsible for making sure that there was content to all of our events. That it wasn't just fun. [Laughs.]</p>

Jason G:	What would be an example of that?
Aryeh K:	Well, it was, so we would have a <i>shabbaton</i> or whatever, making sure that there were <i>divrei torah</i> . And we're planning out like events or whatever, making sure that there was a certain theme, that there was a, you know, certain educational message to the evening, whether it was introducing like a <i>dvar torah</i> , a learning session, or just the actual activities that would somehow relate to whatever sort of thing we had decided on—kind of implementing that.
Jason G:	Mm-hmm. And when you were growing up, was homosexuality something that was talked about in your community?
Aryeh K:	Oh, no, absolutely not.
Jason G:	Mm-hmm.
Aryeh K:	I mean, I was a kid in the '70s.
Jason G:	Yeah.
Aryeh K:	It was very much, I think, I don't know if it was so much a taboo, but it was a very fringe subject and nobody really knew of anything. And I think the representation that you saw in popular culture was very specific stereotypes, but it was certainly not ever discussed. Uh—no—and uh—there were certainly, uh, elements of homophobia that were expressed in the community that I think at the time as a child or even as a teenager, I didn't necessarily register. But yeah, there was definitely that aspect. Also, I was a teenager in the mid '80s, which was like really much at the height of the AIDS crisis. So that, I think that was really the first time that any discussion of homosexuality was ever talked about. But it was always talked about as something that doesn't affect us because we live in a very safe bubble in terms of the Jewish community, the religious community. And, you know, it was, it was something that wasn't going to affect us. It would only affect, you know, gay people who were referred to in very derogatory ways.
Jason G:	And when did you first start realizing that maybe it kind of did affect you?

Aryeh K:

I think that there was always like a sense. I think that there was always a sense of being different. And I mean, I guess the older that I got—as you become a teenager or whatever, you become a lot more aware. You become more self-aware also of the—what's happening around you, what's happening with your friends, you know, the social interactions as people are discovering the opposite sex. And the topics of conversation change from just, like, innocent playing, whatever, to parties and dating and things like that. And I never found my space within that. So I knew that something was up. But there was really no one to talk to about it, nor did I give it too much, like, space. It's like, okay, like that's interesting about me or whatever, but I'm going to put that aside and not really deal with it. Because whatever it is, it's probably temporary anyway. And as you know, eventually things will straighten themselves out, I guess. But it was uh—there was definitely a lot of loneliness in that space. And I remember, like, particularly there were certain—there were two stories that I remember. I mean, one specific story that I remember, which I included back in the day when I was sharing my personal story for Shoal [Orthodox LGBTQ organization in Israel]. This was one of the stories that I shared.

So I remember that—the layers of irony of the story are hilarious. But,uh, when I was in junior high school, we had a morning minyan that started at 7:30. And generally—it was completely voluntary—because generally, you would have one period of your morning classes would be devoted to prayer. So the teacher would lead *tefillah* in the classroom. But we wanted—those who want to have like a proper minyan, you know, with Sefer Torah, *leining* and things like that. So there were a bunch of us between grades seven and nine or whatever. So we'd get to school early and the school would provide us breakfast and we would daven there. And what that meant was that we always had a free period for *tefillah*. So we could just, you know, hang out in the hall or the lunchroom or whatever.

And I remember—I think it was eighth grade. It was around the time, like, bar mitzvah. And someone had gotten for their bar mitzvah a subscription to *Sports Illustrated*. And of course, there was the famous swimsuit issue that would come out. And I remember we had someone brought like this swimsuit issue. And like, we're all flipping through it and checking out all the hot models and everything like that. And, you know, these are the frum kids. The frum kids that the [inaudible] or whatever. So everyone's kind of like checking out the hot models and everything. And like they pass the magazine to me. And I'm like looking through it. I'm like, I—I guess, I sort of can understand what the big deal here is. You know, I can, you know, objectively maybe say that—like it did

	<p>absolutely nothing for me. But I realized like when I saw how like my friends were reacting to this, I was like, oh, I guess I'm supposed to react, you know, in a much more kind of, I don't know, like sexual way or whatever, just some sort of like sexual like response or just like be a horny teenage boy about it. And so like I faked it, you know, like you just kind of like, oh, okay. And I just kind of—and I think from that point onward, I was like, okay, I need to keep myself in check, in terms of how I respond and how I present myself to try to fit in. And part of that was, you know, like I guess kind of faking it, but at the same time also like pulling away enough that I wouldn't have to be in those situations. So that, I mean, the loneliness that I referred to before was really about, you know, like I would like pull away, kind of stick to myself a lot and just, you know, try to kind of fit in or try not to be, uh, noticed or found out, I guess.</p> <p>And I wasn't even sure what that meant. Because like, it's not like I was actually like doing anything that, you know, that you'd want to like some sort of like secret that you like, ooh, you know, like you're addicted to crack or something. [Laughs.] It was just me kind of being very hesitant about me being me. That was, yeah, that was kind of the—that was like the junior high experience, I would say.</p>
Jason G:	And that continued in high school?
Aryeh K:	<p>Yeah, I mean, in high school—yeah, I mean, high school was interesting because the yeshiva high school I was at was a pretty small school. There were like, maybe 60 kids in the whole school, like, from ninth to, like, to senior year of high school. So everyone got a lot more attention. It was a little bit more difficult to kind of, like, hide, because there was so much focus on each individual student, which was fantastic and great. And it did allow me to kind of like, I think, open up in certain ways. But I think that the other thing was that like, as my, like, the more religious studies kind of like, as the years went on, of, like, the <i>limudei kodesh</i> part of things, I found myself being very drawn to that, and almost in a way of clinging to that.</p> <p>[Telephone ringing.] So like, I was developing a really strong, close relationship with God, with religion. And that was kind of like a very safe space. I'm just gonna get that—[Recorder stops, restarts.] It was a certain kind of, you know, I mean, this is also, now that like, I'm a teenager, it was also a time where, uh, you know—you're growing up and and you start to become more aware of your fantasies and your, you know, your sex dreams and things like that. And it was becoming more of a thing that was like, a lot more difficult to kind of like,</p>

	<p>ignore. But my comfort, my solace, which maybe was in some sort of kind of like desperation, was being able to pray, being able to, you know, be as devout as I could, you know, determined that—that God was going to help me through this. That was really very much a part of it.</p> <p>What's interesting—so second story—I remember in, this is my final year of high school, we were the, yeah, the senior year, you're in the <i>rosh yeshiva's shiur</i> for Gemara. And we convinced the <i>rosh yeshiva</i> that, you know, once a week, we should, instead of having, you know, instead of like, you know, studying Gemara, we should, we should discuss, you know, topics at hand or whatever. You have like more of a <i>sicha</i> kind of thing. And I never, like, I never volunteered a subject. I never, you know, anything like that, but someone suggested—but again, because this was the '80s, you know, the AIDS crisis and everything—let's have a talk about homosexuality. And yeah, keep in mind, this is like circa 1980, I want to say like 1987.</p>
Jason G:	And what year did you graduate?
Aryeh K:	<p>I graduated in '88. Yeah, so it's like '87, '88.</p> <p>And the <i>rosh yeshiva</i> comes in. And the one, the only source, it wasn't a source of like, not even the <i>pesukim</i> from <i>Vayikra</i>, like, it wasn't that. It was, he brought in, maybe because he thought this was more appropriate for young, young boys, whatever, like, he brought in the, I believe it's the <i>aggadata</i>, maybe from, is it from <i>Gittin</i> or from <i>Shabbat</i> about the destruction of the Second Temple. And how the Romans came, and they, when they destroyed Jerusalem, whatever, they took a lot of people as slaves, and they trafficked a lot of young women and young men. And there's a story of young men who were on a boat heading to Rome, and they decided that rather be sold as sex slaves, that they would kill themselves. And so from here we learn, that it's better to kill yourself than be gay.</p>
Jason G:	Yeah.
Aryeh K:	And that—at the time, like I was doing with most things, it just kind of, you know, like, I kind of shelved that. It's like, okay, that's interesting to know. But somehow, I think that that's kind of been like my—that turned into like the driving force for me for many years. Like, that's the guideline, you know, better

	to kill yourself than be gay. And let's, okay, now let's move forward through life. So that was fun.
Jason G:	[Laughs.] Okay, so that was high school. So after high school, what happened?
Aryeh K:	<p>After high school, I got accepted to architecture school at the University of Toronto. Now, I happened to have been—I think that time has kind of changed that now—but I was an exceptional five-year-old, to the point where I was fast-tracked through kindergarten. So I started first grade, I was only five years old, which meant that when I graduated high school, I had just turned 17. And somehow, I got accepted into the School of Architecture in downtown Toronto. And I walk in there, 17 years old, you know, from the suburbs, from a religious community, and I'm introduced to the rest of the world. You know, Toronto is a very cosmopolitan city, but this is also like an art school to a large degree. All sorts of fantastic, amazing, creative people. But it was the first time that I really encountered gay people of any kind. And it's interesting that through the process of, you know, I suppose, just college, plus, you know, architecture school, plus all like the design course and things like that, I think that there were a lot of people in my program that at some point were coming out. It was a safe environment. It's also the sense of community that you develop around your—that the students develop around the studio space where they're working till the wee hours of the morning, like you become a close-knit group. And I became good friends with a lot of people in my year, and some of them were gay. And I think that a lot of it really reinforced this, this guideline of, you know, better to kill yourself than be gay, because none of them were Jewish. None of them were religious. They led clearly a very different kind of life than me. Obviously, that is not, you know, anything that I could identify with or feel like I could be a part of, you know.</p> <p>At the same point, you know, [glucose monitor beeps] like there's this idea of just even, you know, like talking to them was somehow, you know, living on the edge. [Aryeh checks the monitor.] Okay, that's fine. After two years of architecture school, I took a year off to come to study in Israel. And I studied in Ma'ale Adumim, and I wanted to go there because they didn't, at the time, didn't have an overseas program. So they just threw you in the deep end with regular, you know, <i>hesder</i> kids and, you know, sink or swim. And it was amazing, and I made really good friends there. And I think, I don't know how much learning I got done. I think I realized in that year, yeah, like becoming, you know, a rabbi or a teacher is probably not what I should be doing. [Laughs.] But at the time,</p>

again, it's amazing, I think, that, you know, you don't necessarily understand the lessons that you're learning at the time, or to what degree they actually impact you. But one thing that, and like I say that just in terms of like, you know, like you think you're learning one lesson, when in fact that the lesson is a lot more broader, a lot more powerful.

So I remember, it was, I think it was during the *bein hazmanim* break over Pesach, I was hanging out with some of these guys from my yeshiva. And yeah, it was, it was *Yom Hashoah*, the Holocaust Remembrance Day, and they, I was at a friend's house, we were watching the *Simon Wiesenthal Story*. It was like a made-for-tv HBO movie or something like that, watching it.

And afterwards, like we were talking about it, and I mentioned how, you know, growing up in *chutz laaretz*, even in a place like Toronto, like how we did experience, you know, moments of antisemitism. I mean, not like today, like it's much more prevalent, but you know, and neo-nazis and things like that. And I remember there had been times when I'd be like walking to services on Shabbat, and you know, someone would drive by and like, yell slurs at you, dirty Jew, kike, whatever, you know, that kind of stuff. And my friends said, what'd you do? You know, it's like, I ran. And they're like, why didn't you beat them up? Like, what do you mean? It's like, why would you let anyone talk to you like that? Why would you, you know, someone, you know, insults you, you, you give them like, you put them in their place. And I remember thinking at the time, like, wow, like, I'm gonna, I have to, I want to live in Israel. I want my kids to grow up like that. I want my kids to grow up, you know, like, not afraid. I want them to grow up with pride, and a strong sense of confidence in who they are. And I thought that that was just like such an amazing, powerful thing. I think that the real message there was just like, for me, to just, you know, find the confidence and strength for me to just be me and to stand up for who I am. Like, not just in terms of, you know, antisemitism, but just in terms of me as a gay person. I was so far from actually coming out still, it was, but there was something about that—that really resonated with me.

So went back to Toronto, I finished up my degree, I worked in Toronto for a year or two, and then I moved to Israel a year or two after I graduated. And I was living in the, what they call, "the swamp of Katamon," with a whole bunch of other English-speaking people who had moved to Israel from all around the world. Lots of Shabbat meals, and, lots of people setting each other up, and dating, and people getting engaged, and had roommates that, you know, got

engaged one after another. It's like, Aryeh, it's your turn, it's your turn. It's like, well, I put an end to that.

But I did date. And, uh, like, it was just, there was, again, I mean, I refer back to the, it was always lovely, it was always nice, but at a certain point, it's like, well, what am I supposed to, like, what am I supposed to do here? Like, I just, like, I didn't know, it's like, this isn't, this is, like, I'm stuck. This is like a, you know, they, like, whoever I was dating, they were like, Aryeh, you're, like, they're great. They're waiting for, like, make a move. Like, I'm like, I don't know what to do here. Like, and so it always just kind of ended. And—and with that, I was, like, struggling, because I knew what I was dreaming about at night. I knew what I was thinking. And, like, as much as I was trying to, like, push it aside, and as much as I was trying to, like, pray it away, or whatever, like, I was still being me at the end of the day. It was, it was, it was frustrating. And it was frustrating, because, I, uh—I felt like I was hurting people. Like, I felt these, these, these women that I, that I was dating, I was, like, trying to be something that I'm not. And, and that wasn't fair to them. And I realized, I just, I kind of felt like I have to stop, like, have to stop doing this, because I was feeling like a really horrible person. And I was, like, afraid to, to hurt anyone.

So there was a girl that I dated for months, you know, and it was serious. But, like, when push came to shove, like, I froze. Like, I don't know what to do with this. I'm not—and part of it was also, you know, you could always, for a while, you could rely on the, the whole *shomer negiah* thing to not have to deal with it. Right? But I think that for me, like, being *shomer negiah* was like this safe space where I didn't have to find out, you know, like, I think what terrified me more about kissing a girl or being intimate with a girl was not that I was going to be violating some sort of halacha, but that I was going to fail at it. And I didn't want that validation of the fact that, yeah, you're just not attracted to women. It's just not. It's just not. And I—I was—I hated myself. Like, I hated myself, because I just felt like I was this horrible person who any, I mean, I managed to be very dramatic about it, obviously, that like, you know, any relationship that I, that I, have with someone is going to wind up with them getting hurt. You know, and I'm a, I'm a deceitful person, and I'm better off just not having anything to do with anyone.

However, having been living in this Katamon Anglo swamp or whatever, I had become good friends with people where we had started our own minyan—or they had started—and I was like a big, you know, helper there, and that was like my shul. It was called “the late late minyan,” and it started like after another service had finished. So like, you know, shul started at like 9:45, which was

	<p>great, and I was around the corner, and I was really good friends with the gabbai, and like it was a good chance. I mean I still had my sense of friends and community, and that was really wonderful. I'd go there, I'd get an <i>aliyah</i> almost every week, being like the token Levi, whatever, there was a kiddush. It was—there was definitely a sense of community there.</p> <p>And I remember like one week, someone was talking about, there's someone in the community who had a really good voice, his name is Neil Greenbaum. He's actually twin brothers with Alex Greenbaum, I don't know if you know Alex—</p>
Jason G:	—Yeah.
Aryeh K:	<p>Okay, anyway. So I didn't really know either of them, but, there's this—and Neil, he would come in, and he would like lead services a lot of, on the <i>yamim noraim</i>. He had a beautiful voice, introduced some really beautiful tunes. Like I still refer back to him, like when it comes to Rosh Hashanah <i>davening</i>, in terms of like the melodies that he chooses, I think are like, wow, that's what makes Rosh Hashanah for me. But I remember my good friend the gabbai saying, so it turns out that his twin brother is gay, and I don't know that I would ever want a gay person to <i>daven</i> in my shul. And I kind of said, okay, I guess that's good to know. Again, just tuck it away, you know, deal with it at another time, and I continued going, and I'd get <i>aliyahs</i>. And I'd be like, I would laugh to myself, you know, if only they knew that, you know, that I'm gay-ish, or whatever, and they're giving me an <i>aliyah</i>. And at a certain point, it just wasn't funny to me anymore. It was like, I don't feel comfortable here anymore. So I'm just gonna stop going there. I'm just gonna stop going to shul. Like as it is, I've gotten used to just detaching from everyone and everything.</p> <p>And the thing that's so absurd about it all is that—I hadn't done anything, like I really, like this was just, all of this was very much still just in my head, and you're right, and in here [points to chest], like tight in my chest. But I did go back, for that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, yeah—wanted to hear Neil daven. And I remember, as well, previous years, particularly during like selichot time, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur. And it's the thing, like when you feel this tremendous sense of guilt for whatever it is, the harder you pound your chest as you say, somehow that's gonna, like, purge the evil out of you or whatever.</p>
Jason G:	Mm-hmm.

Aryeh K:	And every year when it would come time for Yom Kippur, and I'd be bent over, and I'd be pounding my chest. You know, it was just this desperate plea to God to just, like, I'm gonna change, I'm gonna do better, I'm gonna be stronger, I'm not gonna, like, falter—whatever it was, that particular year—
Jason G:	—what year is this?
Aryeh K:	This, so this—oh God, I don't remember. Maybe, I don't know. Let's say that this is—2006, maybe? Somewhere around there, I'm not sure.
Jason G:	Okay.
Aryeh K:	It's all a blur.
Jason G:	It's okay, so that particular year.
Aryeh K:	<p>Yeah, that particular year. I was like, I was exhausted. I was exhausted from having been so hard on myself. I was exhausted from really just kind of—I don't wanna call it suicide, because I think that that's offensive to people that are dealing with suicide. But I had definitely found myself in this place of not living, of like, you know, just like detaching myself from life, where I was kind of just existing, where I was just like, there was—I was, yeah, not a good place. And I remember we got to that Yom Kippur, and here we go again. You get to the viddui, and I'm like pounding it. I just, I can't, I can't do this anymore.</p> <p>Third story, fourth story. No, but this is, like, this was, like, this was a thing. Like, I was standing there, I like, I closed my machzor, and I just—I remember—I was like, it was in the basement of Ohel Nechama. That's where we would <i>daven</i>. And I was at the back, and I was just there, and I was like holding the machzor, I said, okay, God, okay, listen, I can't do this anymore. All right, like—you, you know me. You know who I am. You know what I am. You know how much I've been struggling. And you know—how much I'm trying to, I'm trying to be a good person here. And you know that I have these feelings. And you know that, that I'm gay. And—if I'm not good enough to deserve a place in your world, that's okay. You don't have to inscribe me in the Book of Life. And, uh, there wasn't—I wasn't trying to be, like, <i>chutzpadik</i>. I wasn't trying to be, like, combative. It was just, like, this very honest, authentic prayer. And, and I felt good, like I felt I'd gotten something off my chest. I also just</p>

	<p>assumed that I was going to be inscribed in the Book of Death. And, you know, at some point, I was—this coming, in the coming months, I was just going to get struck by lightning, hit by a car, blown up in a terror attack. Whatever it was, like, and I was like, okay, you know, like, it's okay. You know, there are other people, you know, if I'm not good enough for this world, fine, give my space to someone else. It's fine. I'm really okay with that.</p>
Jason G:	Mm-hmm.
Aryeh K:	<p>So the only problem with that was that I didn't get blown up in a bus bombing, and I didn't get hit by a car, and I didn't get struck by lightning. I was, like, alive, and I was living. And at a certain point, I think it was, like—so that was, like, September time, October time. But like around November, I'm like—am I to understand [laughs] from this that you want me to live? Which was such a strange [laughs] realization, the possibility that, like, yeah, maybe God wants you to try to actually do this being alive thing. I'm like, huh, okay. [Laughs.] That's a twist, but it's like, you know what? You've tried everything else. Like, why don't you just try being you? Try living. But I was scared, and I still didn't really have anyone to talk to.</p> <p>But this is also, you know, the early 2000s where, you know, having internet at home was still a relatively new thing. Maybe it was late 90s. No, it was the early 2000s, I guess. So I had internet at home, and you could look online, and you could find all sorts of places to chat with people. And, you know, did I have—I think I had roommates at the time or whatever, but like, you know, where you could privately, you know, go online and, yes, you know, look for porn, but just find people to talk to and meet and chat. And it felt so safe because it was still relatively anonymous, and I was talking with people that were, like, halfway around the planet. Like, I felt like it's still, like, I didn't feel like I was, you know, like jumping into anything dangerous or whatever. And so around that time, I think there were two things that happened.</p> <p>And, uh, again, I'm sorry, I don't remember the exact dates. Yeah, I'm thinking like around 2009, no, 2008, maybe, something like that. So there was—these were also before smartphones.</p>
Jason G:	Yeah.

Aryeh K:

The first iPhone hadn't come out yet, right? But we had internet, and there was an Israeli site called Atraf, which I'm sure you've heard of. But it was like the precursor to Grindr and Tinder, and all those sorts of apps. But it was from—you'd use it from like a desktop, and it was all in Hebrew. And you could chat with people, and I was afraid to have like a photo of myself up. But it was, again, taking another step to just kind of, like, meeting people. And, uh, I'm chatting with someone, and it turns out—I figure out [gasps]. The scandal. It was amazing how everything was, like, at the time, was, like, so dramatic and everything. [Whispers], I know this person. And I'm like, [raises voice] what do I do? They're gonna know me! Like, it was like, I'm freaking out until, like, it occurs to me. It's like, yes, you're gonna get to know each other. Like, this is not a bad thing. And, as I come out to him—like I say, so I think I know who you are, and I think you know who I am, and whatever. Let's just, like, lay this all out. And we became, you know, good friends or whatever. He says, well, let me introduce you to, you know, other people or whatever, and the *chevra* and friends and Shabbat meals and things like that.

The other thing that was happening around that time. I was very involved in English-speaking community theater. And there was a group in the German Colony that was based out of a place called Merkaz Hamagshimim. No longer exists, it's on, Dor Vedorshav Street. And it was this incredible complex. I don't know how—it was part of Hadassah Young Judea, it was kind of like after Young Judea. They'd set up this center, which was basically, it was a combination of community center and absorption center and activism center. It did everything, and there were dorms that people that showed up on Aliyah, they could get a studio, somewhere to get started. And within that, there was also community theater, which I got very involved in. And the thing that was also a huge part of—coming out, I guess, was being involved in theater, getting to play all of these different roles and exploring characters and the director telling you, you know, your character needs to find its identity and its truth. And it's just like, well, I guess I should do that too. [Laughs.] So that was definitely a part of it.

And there was, at the time, there was someone, uh, who was from the States who was in Israel doing a two-year master's program at Hebrew U, who was a big theater person. And they were out and gay and traditional. Wore a kippah, kept Shabbat, kept Kosher. And I was like—that's not possible. I—how—like, what? I'm like, I have to become friends with this person. And—we did. We became very good friends. And he was one of the first people that I came out to. And yeah, and it was like, ooh, this is mind-blowingly amazing that, uh, here is

someone who is out and proud of their Jewish identity, of being gay, of—being from Atlanta, but okay.

But I started to meet people. And then they said, oh, there is this group called Havruta. You should come. I'm like, I don't think I'm ready for that. And I remember my friend Robbie, he's like, well, here's the information. It turns out that the meeting was taking place in Merkaz Hamagshimim, across the hall from the theater where I was in rehearsals for a show I was working on. I'm like—I'm not doing this. This is too much. But it took a few times. And then eventually—this other person who I had met on Atraf—these two separate people, he shows up. He says, he's like, we're going. I was like, ah, we're going. But I'm thinking, he's like, don't think. Thinking is bad. Just go. You're going to come. It's going to be good. And, I'm, like, nervous. And I remember walking into the room. And I was like, this is—such an overthinker, right? Just like, by walking into this room, I am publicly declaring who I am. And there might be people there who are going to know me. And it's going to be—you know, the earth is going to come crashing down. Luckily, this meeting was, this was the second or third meeting of Havruta. And, uh, that was taking place in this space in Merkaz Hamagshimim. Very discreet. Nobody knew about it. Like, you had to know to like, know. And they—the idea was to have these monthly meetings, and each month would be like a different theme based on the Jewish calendar year. This happened to be the meeting for the month of Adar, so the theme was wine tasting.

Now you understand Aryeh a lot better—he walks into Havruta meeting, grabs a glass, runs, finds a corner, and just, just like, drank like, three glasses of wine. And I'm like, okay, okay. Like, everyone was, Like, surprisingly friendly and like nothing was creepy about it. And I was like, oh, okay. And once I had gone, it's just like, so now the big thing after the Havruta meetings is that afterwards you go out onto Emek Refaim for like, for coffee, for whatever. And, you know, and all of a sudden I had like—I had gay friends. Religious gay friends. It was, it was bonkers. And I remember I was invited to a Shabbat meal, and I'm sitting around the Shabbat table—and they asked me to make kiddush. And so I make kiddush, and when we got to the words “*kivanu vacharta*,” I was just like, this is nuts. It was just like, whew, yeah.

So in a nutshell, that's my story—of how I came to Havruta. But like once I came there, became good friends with, at the time, the people that were organizing it, the legendary Benny Elbaz, and his partner at the time, Nir, and

	Nati, and the other people who—I don't know if they want their names shared or whatever.
Jason G:	Yeah.
Aryeh K:	<p>But we became good friends. And then I just kind of fell into this whole new group of friends, of community. And we were all kind of in similar places in terms of where we had come from religiously—although most of them were Israeli, which was also fantastic that finally, like I've been living in Israel for so long, I was out of this Anglo bubble. I was friends with Israelis now. I was friends with Hebrew speakers. I suddenly felt like I was—like things all started to fall into place. It was kind of amazing.</p> <p>So I did—so things that I remember from that time were just like Benny and Nir, they lived in Beit Hakerem. They lived on Rechov Herzl, Sderot Herzl. We would—they would come to Friday night services at Shira Hadasha, and then we would all walk, we would traipse across Katamon, across Gan Sacher, all the way to Beit Hakerem for Friday night dinner. And then, you know, and then walk back. It was like, it was crazy, but it was wonderful. It was just, it was this incredible sense of community. And they were so like, we're so happy to have you here. Like, we're so happy that you're a part of our community. And, you know, again, that having that sense of community and that sense of belonging and like, oh, okay, like, I want to do stuff. I want to help out. And I did—I helped them plan their wedding. I did that.</p>
Jason G:	[Laughs.]
Aryeh K:	<p>But the thing, the big thing, I think, was at the time that a lot of us were just starting to come out. You know, like, we hadn't yet told our families, or maybe someone had told their parents or a sibling or whatever. Like, and every month, like, we'd get together at these meetings or whatever. And it's like, oh, like, I told my brother, I came out to him, and like, we all were really supporting each other in the coming out process. And, you know—I hadn't done that. I hadn't come out, really, to family or friends or anything like that. But I realized I want to—it's something that, like, I need to do this now.</p> <p>And I was in Toronto. So, yeah, I flew back to Toronto, and I came out to my parents. Story number five? What story are we up to? Whatever.</p>

Jason G:	Yeah.
Aryeh K:	<p>Anyway, I came out to my mom first. And she was like, oh, thank God. We thought that you would become a drug addict. We knew something was up. We knew something was wrong. We could see that you were miserable. We didn't know what. But we thought, you know, you knocked up a girl and were afraid to tell us. You were in trouble. And it's just like, now I know. And then she got sad because she goes, but it really hurts me that you were struggling all this time, and I couldn't help you. Now, no, go tell your father. You know, I don't want to have secrets. We don't have secrets, but this is something that you need to tell him, and you'll feel better when you tell him. And I'm not going to share this with him. You have to do it yourself.</p> <p>I'm terrified of my dad. So I made sure to tell him while he was driving a car. [Laughs.] So he's got both hands on the steering wheel. And I came out to him. And, uh, it's funny, because his questions were just like all the things that I had struggled with and questioned myself about, like how to live my life. He was just like, well, have you thought about marrying a woman, about having an open marriage? I'm like, that's really open of you, dad. But no, no, this is just who I am. And then he said, you know that we love you, and we know that you don't make decisions lightly, and we respect your decisions, and we're proud of you. And those are things that I'd never heard my dad say, but it was kind of this, well, I guess when push comes to shove, this unconditional love thing, it's actually a real thing.</p> <p>And he didn't crash the car. We got home, and my brother and sister-in-law were waiting for me. And they're just like, they're waiting at the front, and they're like, we have to talk to you about something. I'm like, okay, I'm really, this has been a very kind of emotionally exhausting day. Fine, okay. So it's like, well, meet us in the rec room after dinner at 7:30. So we go to the rec room and sit down. They're sitting on one sofa. I'm sitting on the other side of the room. They're like, okay, we have something really serious to ask you, and we don't want to make you uncomfortable, so don't feel that you have to answer it. But, you know, we've been married now for a few years. We're starting a family, and we're thinking about our future—I'm like, this is a weird way to ask if I'm gay. And they're like, so we're thinking ahead in terms of if, God forbid, something were to happen to us, who would look after our kids? And we think that you, more than anyone in the family, would have our best interests in mind, would you be the legal guardian of our kids? And I turn white, because, like—now I have to come out to them. Like, now, they need to know. Like, before—and my</p>

	<p>sister-in-law, she was like, no, we're not planning on dying. She just thought that I was horrified by the idea. I was like, no, no, no, I love my nieces and nephew. Please, let's arrange for an Acme piano to be dropped on you now. That's not the issue. So I come out to them, and they were very loving and accepting, and it doesn't change anything. And, yeah, and then I—eventually, I came out to my sisters, who are both significantly more religious, I think, more on the Haredi side of things. But there was also, like, it was very, very positive.</p> <p>But yeah, it was a very, very slow process. And in the meantime, like, once I'd come out, I suddenly found that I had all of this, like, excess energy, because, like, all of that energy that I had been spending looking over my shoulder, and being afraid, and being in the closet, and just, like, it is incredibly tiresome, burdensome, you just, like, it weighs you down. I'm like, now I can actually do something. Now I can help. Like, now I can volunteer. Now, like, I—I can do something good with this energy. So I got a lot more involved in Havruta, and that was around the time that Benny and Nati had decided to step away. So they invited a bunch of the, more active members, and they just kind of threw this on us. They said, by the way, we're leaving, so you guys are in charge now, do with it what you will, and, you know, we trust you, and we're happy to, you know, hand over this baby to you. And I'm like, I'm going to be involved. I'm going to do something, I'm going to make change—what I didn't realize was that the people that they had been, like, scouting, these were some pretty serious activists with, like, political ambitions. This was going to be a very different Havruta than what I had grown up into. And so I jumped in, you know, and then I'm like, you're talking with the other people involved, and I'm like, oh, okay. This is also taking Havruta from this very kind of small, discrete, once-a-month thing with, like, <i>tiyulim</i> on Sukkot and Pesach and turning it into, like, a real organization, which meant coming out, which meant kind of adopting a very different philosophy—</p>
Jason G:	—that meant the organization coming out?
Aryeh K:	The organization coming out, yeah. But with that, the organization up until that point, there had been very, very, like, between Benny—the three people that were leading it were Benny and Nati and, what's his name?
Jason G:	Amit—uh, yeah—

Aryeh K:	—Whatever his name. You know, I've, like, so, like, been sworn to, like, not say his name in public that I don't even remember what it is now. Something with an Aleph and a Lamed, but anyway, not important.
Jason G:	Yeah.
Aryeh K:	<p>But he was very, [claps] very [claps] much of a very strong conservative mindset, and he invested a lot of—he did a lot in terms of keeping Havruta going. He even started, like, the original Havruta website, but his position was very much about having very strong, emphasis about, conversations with rabbinical authorities, and being very, very discreet about who we are and what we do and to earn the favor of those rabbinical authorities that he deemed worthy. And it was a very strict list or whatever, and it was, you know, it was, the mindset was very kind of—I don't know what the right word is, you know, like, it was more than conservative or whatever, but, like—these are rabbis you can talk to, these are rabbis that you can't. Like, these are not, like—and generally the rabbis that, like, you can only talk to ones that were [laughs] incredibly homophobic, you know, but they're talking to us and we don't want to burn that bridge.</p> <p>And when the decision was made that Havruta is going to come out—I think a combination of that and the fact that the balance of power that he had with Benny and Nati was completely gone and he felt he, you know, he was completely outnumbered, he completely disagreed with the vision—and he left. And that was it.</p>
Jason G:	Mm-hmm.
Aryeh K:	I was very hesitant about the direction that Havruta was going in. It scared me. Like, it's still—I think that, like, so many years in the closet, and as I've shared with, you know, the very, very tiny steps that I took over a very long period of time in terms of coming out, I've always been kind of very hesitant about being public, about, you know, being in the spotlight, and being, you know, front and center. Doesn't mean that there's not what to do. And of course, I was happy to do, you know, the background stuff. Every organization needs, you know, someone who actually organizes. [Laughs.] But my concern was that what was once deemed like a safe, discreet space, that that safety net was very quickly disappearing. And that, that, made me uncomfortable, because I—

Jason G:	—what was an example of that?
Aryeh K:	<p>I think that no one, yeah, nobody really knew what Havruta was. Havruta had originally started off—it was a project of the Jerusalem Open House. They got its funding from the Open House, and the Open House was, from my understanding, you know, was like, we want to have this program for religious gays. We understand that religious gays don't want to have anything to do with the Open House—that that's like taboo, they would be afraid to set foot in the building, it would, you know, that in religious society, you know, the Open House is seen as a—I'm trying to think of what would be the right negative word for, to describe the Open House, as like this house of sin.</p>
Jason G:	[Laughs.]
Aryeh K:	<p>—I guess. You know, that, uh—so they provided us with money to rent a space that wasn't the Open House. Nobody knew, had to know that, like, the Open House was behind this. So I think that, uh, there was going to be, there was going to be more acknowledgement of who our allies are, and I think that that was something that people would be uncomfortable with. I think that the idea of things being discreet, you know, like nobody knows who we are, people are going to start saying who we are. You know, that, like, we're not, we're not a group of, you know, guys on <i>miluim</i> who are getting together—we haven't seen each other for whatever. No, we're a group of, you know, religious gay men. I think that, like—things like that, which, in retrospect, I mean, it's nothing, you know, outrageous, but I think for the, for the sense of, of, of fear for—that so many closeted people had for their own lives, and I, you know, I'd come from that, and there were a lot of people that were still in that place, and that's why Havruta was so dear to them, that I think that they felt that that was going to be too large of a, a jump for them, and that was going to be, that was going to be difficult. But with—but when you have, you know, strong-minded activists that are really running the organization, then that's, you know, that's the direction that it's going to go in.</p> <p>And my job, to some degree, was to kind of, like, really kind of keep in mind, you know, this is still a place for the, for the closeted gays. And so in terms of—that's why keeping the monthly meetings was very important to me. Keeping some sort of sense of, of, of discretion, was very important. And, uh, and making sure that there, you know—there were some events, there were some things that maybe you weren't going to feel comfortable being a part of, but</p>

	<p>there always needed to be, like, there always needed to be that safe space. And also to realize that, you know, the, the more we run forward, there's a larger chance that we're going to be losing people, because they're not going to—either they don't want to move forward at all, or they're not going to move at the same pace that we're moving at. And that was a big concern for me.</p> <p>That was either compounded or maybe solved by the fact that—Yiram, who had left Havruta, started his own breakaway group, called Kamocha, religious, uh, uh, what is it, Orthodox—Orthodox homosexuals. You know, where it felt like so much of the, the, the spirit of Kamocha was to live with the struggle. To, uh, to live with the conflict. You know, this conflict that we have, to constantly be in this state of, of, of tension. And a lot of people needed that. A lot of people wanted that. And they found, you know, they found a home there. So in a way that kind of solved a lot of the problems, because there was a home, there was an address for that. But at the same time, uh, when the focus stopped being less on community and more about activism, then that sense of, of, uh—you familiar with the show Cheers?</p>
Jason G:	Mm-hmm.
Aryeh K:	<p>You know, you know, like some, some, you know, you go where some, where everybody knows your name, like that kind of thing. That was like, I was like, I was, I wanted to hold on to that. So I focused a lot, in my time at Havruta, on, uh, programming, on monthly events, on, keeping everyone posted with, with, uh, with what was going on.</p> <p>Uh, and then part of that process was also the decision for Havruta to become an official organization. Which was twofold, because first of all, what it meant was breaking off from the Open House. And the second was starting your own organization. And we did a lot of research and a lot of, uh, got a lot of help from a lot of good people. From Shatil, we got help. From the former, oh—Jerry Levinson.</p>
Jason G:	Yeah.
Aryeh K:	<p>Amazing guy. He just had like this incredible history of the Open House, of how it got started, of all the, the pitfalls to avoid, the things to do. How to approach the Open House, in terms of breaking away. And I'm very much, he—I think people didn't have patience for—for listening to everything they had to</p>

	<p>say because everyone was like, we gotta do this, we gotta do this. And he's like, let's be calm about this. And we planned out how we were going to have a very polite conversation with the Open House—that bridge got burnt really fast. Just like, wow, that was, uh, and I remember Jerry was at the meeting and I could just see the look on—the look of horror on his face. As—who was the chairman at the time? Eyal was the chairman at the time. How he just, he just said, we owe you nothing. I don't know if he said that. I'm sorry. Like, whatever. It was just like very clear. We are breaking away. We, you know, we're done.</p> <p>There's another thing about like Eyal had—the only way that you can donate to Havruta was through the Open House. But the Open House had their own financial problems, so money that got donated to Havruta—was earmarked for Havruta—never made it to Havruta because of the Open House. So Eyal, I think at some point threatened to take them to court. Like it was just like, it got like messy and ugly and very quickly. [Laughs.] And I'm like saying, I hope we can still be friends. [Laughs.]</p> <p>I don't know. But the other thing was that these people, like it was very interesting that the people that were running Havruta, they really had strong ambitions in terms of being, in terms of activism, that that was like almost like a career choice for them, just pursue, you know, some sort of form of like activism, politics, you know—serving in the nonprofit world. You know, I'm a self-employed architect. [Laughs.] This is my volunteer work, really. This is like—the aspirations are like very different for me. And I think that in a way that, that was a very interesting dynamic. I learned a lot from them. Yeah. But I think that, you know, because I had less of like a—this wasn't something—this is something that I might have added on to my CV, you know, as like hobbies. Whereas this was like, this was their, like, work experience. That was really very much, you know, running organizations and things like that. And I—so I think that put me in a very different headspace than them.</p> <p>I feel like I've been talking for a long time now, so I'm going to, like, take a pause.</p>
Jason G:	Do you want to—we could take a break.
Aryeh K:	No, I just want—if you want to like ask a question to kind of like refocus or just like direct, or I could just like talk, you know, on and on, but like.

Jason G:	Well, do you want—just one second.
1:09:28	[End Part 1.]
[Part 2.]	
Jason G:	All right, so tell me then—talk to me about those years then where you were volunteering in Havruta. Meaning what—
Aryeh K:	—right.
Jason G:	To reach that vision of how you wanted Havruta to be—
Aryeh K:	—right.
Jason G:	—you were on the board.
Aryeh K:	Yeah.
Jason G:	You know, what were you doing? What do you remember doing?
Aryeh K:	Okay. We ate a lot of popcorn. We did. All of our meetings, we would get—it was microwave popcorn, it wasn't even good popcorn, whatever. A lot of times we would have them at Eyal's house in Tel Aviv. So we'd go to Tel Aviv on Sunday evening, we would have the Havruta meeting, and then we would, if we're already in Tel Aviv, we would go to, whatchamacallit, to the, what's the gay bar?
Jason G:	Shpagat?
Aryeh K:	No, no, it was before Shpagat. It became Leila, before it was Leila, it was Evita. We'd go to Evita on Sunday nights, it was Eurovision nights, so you'd go and they'd play all the Eurovision songs, lovely. Okay, so my—like I said before, my job was very much a behind-the-scenes kind of organizer, and with that I did a crash course with a wonderful advisor from Shatil, who taught me about fundraising and putting together. How to put together fundraising material and

how to articulate what Havruta is in a concise way. So yeah, I wore several different hats.

One thing—so I'll talk about the monthly meetings, that was something that was important for me to continue. So it's the monthly meetings, the *shabbatonim*, and the *tiyulim*, to plan those. So we had, I think it was one *shabbaton* a year, two *tiyulim* a year, and monthly meetings. And running the meetings, it was, you know, just getting the basic organizing—all the stuff that people don't like to do in terms of like, going shopping, you know, setting up whatever, but it was also programming. A lot of the things, I felt like I was going back to like my NCSY days, you know, when I was the Vice President of Education of the Canada region. But just to like find what the point, the purpose of, like, the Shabbat is, what the event is going to be every month. And I tried to put a strong emphasis on the monthly meetings of inviting—you know, we had, like, these big events. I remember, where we got Ivri Lider to come for like one of our Hanukkah meetings, you know, and everyone was like Ivri Lider. He didn't sing. [Whispers] Not that interesting. He's just— [Laughs.] But that's fine. Anyway, no, this is—I would try to bring in people who are actually of our community. I brought in—we had like an evening of like of psychodrama, someone who's a psychodrama therapist or whatever, to do, like, fun, like, theatre games and things like that. And it was also about, like, keeping people involved. There were people still there—so there are all these like closeted people who would be afraid to come to meetings if it was like too exposed. It's like finding that balance, giving people a space to feel comfortable, and keeping it interesting also, which is why it was fun, because like I got to be creative with it. And I mean, so that was one thing, and planning the *shabbatonim* was also—it's a bit of a bigger project, but like finding, like, the right, like the fun activities to do there.

The work that I did with, uh, in terms of fundraising. I think that was really, really helpful and interesting, because like I said, it really got us to focus on who we are, what our mission is, what we're about, what it is that we're fundraising for, and to be very clear about it. And it was an interesting experience for me also, because then to like meet with donors, meet with potential donors, and actually see what sticks, you know, what actually works. With anyone that's done fundraising, you know, like they know that, but to like, all of these things to help really kind of clarify what our message is.

And at this time, like Havruta, you know, had—Havruta was like, we are an activist organization that we're paving the way for, you know, creating, you

	<p>know, a more fair and less discriminatory society in religious communities. And dah, dah, dah, dah, dah—I feel like, and also, you know, we're creating a sense of community. And, you know—like we—I'm sorry, I completely forget what I was going to say. The—there was always a lot of focus on activism. But, but not a lot of focus on what it meant to be religious activists. And for me, like, it was really important that like, we're not the Aguda, we're not other organizations, we come from a specific place, we come with a specific message or whatever. But specifically, like what we are trying to do is a fairly overwhelming task of being this bridge between, you know, between both worlds, which doesn't really exist elsewhere. So things I know that I was like, involved in—I remember one of the—I'm sure that I've shared this with you, but it hasn't been recorded. But I remember, I forget the name of the politician, he's since passed away.</p>
Jason G:	Uh, Uri Orbach?
Aryeh K:	<p>It was probably Uri Orbach. It was Uri Orbach who referred to religious gays as double agents, where neither side wants them. Like that we're playing both sides of the field. But there was, what I found were these incredible opportunities to be a light in both directions. A light to, to the larger gay community, to the larger queer community, in terms of showing a more accepting, friendly, all-encompassing approach to religion, to observance, to tradition, to spirituality. And then on the other side, you know, toning down the rhetoric on the religious side of “<i>ve’ahavta le’reacha kamocha</i>,” you know, and God knows that there's a lot of work to do in both directions there. So I think that being in, in that middle, in the middle there, that was really kind of what drove a lot of, of the things that I did there.</p> <p>Specifically, you know, it led to other things like, and there were some, there were some hits and there were some misses [laughs] along the way. One of the, one of the hits was Pride Parades in Tel Aviv, certainly in Jerusalem, for a while there. And this, this wasn't specifically me, but it was like being part of the organization, being involved with, with Batkol, being involved with the, the dynamo that is Zehorit Sorek. In terms of what we, what we would bring to the, the Pride Parade, you know, which was, you know, Hasidic music. There was a year where like, was also the, when the, the Pride Minyan was, was being formed. So they would have like Pride services, like Kabbalat Shabbat, that Friday night at the Pride Minyan after the, after the Pride Parade in Tel Aviv.</p>

	<p>And so Batkol arranged, you know how, like whatever, like little, like tea light Shabbat candles.</p>
Jason G:	<p>Yeah.</p>
Aryeh K:	<p>With like, you know, with the brachot, but also with like an invitation to the, to the Pride Minyan. And the thing that was, that blew me away about that was the, the—the positive response that, that so many people had to that in terms of, like, having a positive interaction with something religious that wasn't in force, that wasn't, you know, being forced upon them. It was just, it was an invitation, you know, to, to, you know, dance, whatever. It was an invitation to like, you know, be a part of it and to not feel that you have to have that split. Which for me is, you know—that for me was really powerful because so much of my time in the closet was, was spent, you know, about it's either or, you know. Like you're either going to be religious or you're going to be gay. My experience of only meeting, you know, like non-Jewish gay people, just everything was very black and white. And to kind of break that down and to say, you know, again, to have this like bridge thing was really, was really powerful.</p> <p>So that was a lot of the, the, the work that I did. I think that in terms, also in terms of the fundraising was to kind of understand that the role that Havruta has in terms of, of not just for itself. You know, like we talk about—we talked a lot about, you know, being like the, the Foreign Ministry and being the Ministry of the Interior, you know. I was very much a Ministry of the Interior person, but I felt that like, you know, like, but, but I thought that the message that worked for everyone was this idea of, of this idea of, of, of, of integration or intersection, as they say nowadays, whatever it might be a little bit, but it's, but it was more about integration, about like being whole. And I found that that was something that really, that really resonated, I think, with a lot of our donors. But I think of all of that, it was just also trying to sound legit. I don't know, that's not, that's not the right word, but to like, to take ourselves seriously. And I think that's really what it was about for me in terms of what I tried to do. So again, as the, the native English speaker, I did a lot of the proposals, I did a lot of the writing, I did a lot of the, the, the communication, but also it was really about being, being able to articulate things in, in a, in a way that, that didn't sound like we were being hit over the head. But also to take ourselves seriously.</p>
Jason G:	<p>Who were, who were the type of donors that you were able to reach?</p>

Aryeh K:	<p>We—it was mostly private donors. There were, there were some—or again, because we were starting off small then, we had just started to kind of, like, find the, the, the big organizations that could really tap into. I mean, now it's huge. I know like the, the, the money that, because they're getting—Havruta gets money from the government now. But at the time it was, it was mostly private donors. And at the time, like for us, that was huge, you know, because we, we were used to—you know, like—again, you know, settling up with, with the Open House. It was, you know, we were talking like nickels and dimes and stuff like that. But now it was, like, serious things about like thousands of shekels, if not thousands of euros.</p> <p>One of the, the big projects that I got to work on was for the Republic of France every year has a, they give out awards for work in human rights. And we put together a proposal for the—specifically in the area of, of combating homophobia and, and equal rights for, for the queer community. We put together a, an entry that—originally it was supposed to be a Havruta project but I, I insisted that this be something that was more all-inclusive. I mean, when I, I mean, it's not just about, you know, embracing and integrating, you know, within ourselves of our struggle and whatever is as gay men, but also of the community. And so what we presented was a, a joint proposal of Havruta with Batkol and with Shoval for the, the work that, uh, that Shoval does in terms of education. And uh—and we, we received high praise for it. We, we weren't given any money, but we were given a really nice medal and a reception at the, at the French ambassador's house. But it was like, but we were on the map, like, like, this is what we're doing. And it was really, it was a very powerful message, I think, about—about what it means to be a bridge. And it was also a very powerful message of what it means to be an Israeli organization that's recognized in a positive light in the field of human rights, which, well doesn't happen a lot.</p> <p>Yeah, there were—I don't know, yes, another question, until I—.</p>
Jason G:	<p>So at the, at the same time that you were involved with Havruta, you were on the board, right? And you kind of mentioned this before. I mean, you're also, you're also have your, your life as, as an architect. And you're involved with Shoval, if you want to talk about that a bit, as well as kind of maybe a separate thing, if you felt it that way. And you're feeling a sense of integration in, in your, in yourself. How's that affecting your, your life in, in Jerusalem? Or your community? Kind of touched on a few things, but.</p>

Aryeh K:

Mm-hmm. Yeah, there are—there's definitely a lot that was coming together. I think that in general, when, when one is doing things that they like to do, that they feel is important—it's, you feel, you feel full. I certainly feel that my involvement in Havruta did take its toll on my professional life in terms of just finding that good, [glucose monitor beeps] like, work-life balance. [Aryeh checks the monitor.] Never found it.

Um—but, but I think that's okay. I—I don't know really how to answer that. I mean, I'm trying to think about, you know, like everything. Things were going well. Again, I think that beyond the, the formal organization of Havruta, there's like the, the, the communities of the circle of friends that you develop from beyond that, that are, become your, you know, your, your own personal community, that become your, your chosen family. And I'm very lucky with, with the friends that I've made through that, that just, just, you know, help navigate through life in that way. Yeah, I think that I kind of did what I felt that I could do at the time. But, but at a certain point, I definitely felt burnt out. And I think that that was like when I realized, you know, I really need to be—as much as I'm focusing on these things that are really important to me, I do need to focus a little bit more on myself. And it was around that time that I said, you know, after being on the board for however many years it was, I'm like, it's time for me to take a step back. Which I think is— was hard. It was hard to like let go of, of this very precious thing that I helped create. But, also, because I knew that the people that were taking over, of course, they weren't going to do as good a job as we had done, or as I had done or whatever. But, you know, that's—I mean, it's the nature of the beast. But at the same time, like when I see how it's grown now, clearly, you know, they know what they're doing, you know, and they're doing things that, that, you know, that I don't know that I would have ever been able to do anyway.

Like, I think that like, I was—the work that I did was kind of, like, important at the time for where we were, in terms of this young, new organization that was up and coming, and needed to kind of like, get there. And I think that unlike, how, you know, to speak, you know, metaphorically, in a very conceited sort of way, you know, but like my, my skills as an architect, in terms of not being able to kind of like, plan out to figure out, you know, what the, what a concept is, how to develop it, how to, you know, establish strong foundations for something, you know, and build it up in a reasonable way that it won't fall down. I think that that's kind of like where I was really able to help out the most. I think that, you know, there was a part of me that I wish that I was more outspoken. I wish that I was less behind the scenes and more in front of the

	cameras. I was never really prepared to do that. I think that being a non-native speaker really kind of like—I was just, again, because I wanted, I wanted us to be taken seriously. So it was really important that there are people who could speak, who could represent, that could, that will be taken seriously. You know, just help them say things that sound intelligent.
Jason G:	[Laughs.]
Aryeh K:	No, which is, which is, which is really important. And it's interesting because I think that along the way, the disagreements that we had, a lot of times came down to that. Where it was just like, oh no, it's fine, it's fine, it's fine. I was like, no, no, no, this needs, this needs to be accurate. This needs to be honest. This can't just be, you know, fine—with certain things. Yeah. And, you know, I pushed back where I felt like I needed to push back. But I think also that it was just a lot, it was just—it was an incredible learning experience and incredibly satisfying a lot, you know, to say that, that, that, that we're a part of this. And it's important. It's really important. I don't know if that was really the question that you asked me, but anyway.
Jason G:	There's a specific event that I'm kind of curious to hear more about. I don't know if you were involved, which I think was in maybe 2008 or 2009. There was a meeting that Havruta had with an Arab group.
Aryeh K:	I wasn't part of that.
Jason G:	You weren't part of that.
Aryeh K:	Yeah.
Jason G:	Because I had read about that, so forget about that. But—
Aryeh K:	But we, we, I met with the Meretz guy from Tel Aviv—Nitzan Horowitz. Yeah. And again, it was—
Jason G:	—and this was like at the beginning.

Aryeh K:	<p>This was a long time ago. So it was me and, and, and Daniel—I don't know if I was at the meeting and there were some representatives from Batkol. And, and I remember just at that meeting, like, it was so interesting because like, he's a politician and he talks like a politician. And he says, also, like, it's not in my interest to, like, make peace with everyone. Like, I'm not interested in that. And I'm like, well, I am. Like, that's important to me. I mean, it made me realize just like, you know, that I don't want to like, Yeah. I don't want to, I don't want to be on the political end of this.</p>
Jason G:	Yeah.
Aryeh K:	<p>And that, you know, those were, those were arguments that we would—not arguments, disagreements that we would have about, you know, like, there'd be a lot of focus on the, the fact that things that we were, that we were planning, you know—the fact that the event itself was happening. What the event was, what the content of the event was, was of, you know, very little significance. The fact that this happened, that's what was important. And my, I was always very much about, like, content. I was very much about, you know, like I said, being taken seriously. Which is why, also like, so one of the events that I organized for years was we would have megillah and <i>kinnot</i> reading on Tisha B'Av in the Old City every year.</p>
Jason G:	Where in the Old City?
Aryeh K:	<p>We would do it—there is, there's a <i>tatzpit</i> area, there's this lookout area just by the entrance, where crossroads between the Armenian quarter into the Jewish quarter, go up a stairwell, then you're on like a roof that overlooks the Old City. We did it for several years. One year, we even had like a tour guide afterwards, just could like to take us around.</p> <p>I got a lot—I mean, it was interesting, because it was one of these events that like, well, this isn't fun, like who wants to like plan stuff. But I thought, no, but like, I think Tisha B'Av is, I think that there's, there's a certain significance, I think, for, for queer people of Tisha B'Av, about this idea of destruction that was, you know, based on, rooted in baseless hatred, which, you know, a lot of homophobia is very much kind of falls into that category. And being the—on the receiving end of that. And I think also the, the acknowledgement of the, the, the own destructions that each of us may have felt in our journey, in terms of our coming out stories and things like that. And also to just like, yeah—I</p>

	<p>thought that there was like a lot of meaning in there. I was going to say like, and also just like to do an event that is, that is actually kind of like serious, that isn't necessarily just about, you know, fun and games. So those were, like, the kind of things like I wanted to do.</p> <p>So actually one of the, the monthly events that I planned was also—I don't know why so many of my stuff was around Tisha B'Av—I don't know what that says about me, but no, there's another event that we did where like I, I said, let's do, I want to talk about people that, that, that were married. And what that process was like of, of breaking up that marriage, of breaking up that family. You know, from the point of view of just like—because we all talk about, oh look, isn't it great you found your, your, you know, your voice, you found your, you know, your freedom, you found your identity. That's awesome. But like, what about the [laughs] the, the damage that you've left in your wake? Like, can we have an honest conversation about that? You know, about what, about what that is. Like, people do, like, we're not, we're not perfect, you know, we're not angels, you know, and there is, there, there are costs to these things. And, and I wanted to talk about that, like, if people were willing to talk about that, what it meant. I mean, uh, and again, I think that it's, it's things that we see like in, in Rav Vardi's movie also, like about the, the damage that, uh, that happens. Again, you know, I mean, it's not so much about like the, the, the marriage breaking up, but about the marriage taking place in the first place, things like that. Those were things that, again, I don't know how much traction they're going to get. I don't know how many, you know, likes they're going to get or, you know, shares or whatever, but I just like things that I thought that were important. Those, those were the, really the areas where I want to focus—hard, real difficult decisions, but legit.</p>
Jason G:	Meaning if you want to add anything else or—
Aryeh K:	<p>So I do want to share something on the record. I don't know if I actually want you to include this, but just something that just really, really bothered me to, to this day. And it's something that, that I feel that has repeated itself—in terms of, uh, things where I was involved.</p> <p>One of the things that we were involved in, we decided to have a religious, gay, queer art competition, whatever the medium was, you know, a painting, photography, whatever, submit your photos and then you get to vote on them and everything.</p>

	<p>Now so I'm happy—they asked me to—I was, I don't know if I was on the board, I think I was still on the board—to judge it, to be one of the judges. Like, great. Happy to judge it. I have some sense of style, design, whatever. And I realized that one of the submissions is an incredible photograph that not only did I help in the, this, the organization of that photograph, but I actually appeared in it.</p>
Jason G:	Mm-hmm.
Aryeh K:	<p>I'm like, well, I can't, it's not, you know, I can't judge that, you know? And, uh, so I—I sent a message, very clear, saying, listen, this is the situation. I can't vote on this picture. I have to recuse myself. I don't know if I should recuse myself from the whole thing, but at least in this picture. So where there are, four judges voting on everything else, you know, then we kind of have to like do whatever statistical changes so that, uh, you know, however many judges are voting on this picture, you know, takes into account that I'm not voting. And I thought that it was, like, clear that we were going to be fair about this, but they weren't. And so this photo, which actually won because there was one less judge voting on it, didn't win. The results went out—incorrectly, saying, no, no, no, this isn't, this is not correct. This person won. Well, it's too late to change it. You know, and I'm like, can we please, like, let's be honest. Like, I don't want to, like, be a part of this is not, how can I, like, it was so, like, frustrating that, you know, that someone wasn't recognized for, for doing something, you know—and because, because I had gone out of my way to try and be really fair about it, they got screwed. Like, it was just everything.</p> <p>So that was, like, one thing, and it turns out it's the same person. But, like, for example, that mug. [Points to mug on shelf.] Do you know who, who designed that mug? Who designed that logo?</p>
Jason G:	Um, I don't remember.
Aryeh K:	Why do they not get any credit?
Jason G:	Yeah.

Aryeh K:	Like, and I think that those things, I think, were always the most—I think I'm just venting now—
Jason G:	—do you want to say who made that?
Aryeh K:	Yitz Woolf.
Jason G:	Yitz Woolf.
Aryeh K:	<p>Yitz Woolf. And he should be credited with that. Like, you know, but that is, eh, whatever, nobody cares. Nobody, no, like—I don't care if nobody cares. Like, still, like, doing the right thing is still doing the right thing. Anyway, that's, that's, that's my venting.</p> <p>I'm trying to think if there's anything else I want to add. My mind's a bit, you know, tomorrow morning, I'll be like, oh, I remembered something. But, something, like, [laughs] yeah, I think, I think, I mean, if you have any more questions, specific questions or something that I can, whatever.</p>
Jason G:	I guess, just like you mentioned, the—the importance for you of meaning, we're a—Havruta is a religious gay organization.
Aryeh K:	Yeah.
Jason G:	And designing, and, and having that being at the forefront.
Aryeh K:	Yeah.
Jason G:	Of, of what you were doing. And I think, so I think that Tisha B'Av is an example of that. Were there other things that you were proud of that you could put that at the forefront? And, you know, maybe—because Havruta was doing a lot of things along those lines—meaning there was different, the Pride Shabbat in Jerusalem.
Aryeh K:	Right.

Jason G:	And, and, and not only were you proud of, but meaning, did you feel like that also helped you on your own journey? In, in integration, as you put it?
Aryeh K:	<p>Oh, it definitely helped me in terms of integration, you know, to find— to have it, like, once you start doing it, and then like, and you start realizing how much there is, like how much material there is there, how much richness and, you know, just in terms of Jewish tradition—definitely. There was, uh—I remember on the Sukkot <i>tiyul</i>. The whole thing was to go on a Sukkot <i>tiyul</i>. And then we would have, like, a barbecue afterwards. So we tried to find a place that had a sukkah. And for most people, it wasn't really much of an issue. But I said, why don't we just have a sukkah? Why doesn't Havruta just invest in a sukkah? We'll have one. Whatever <i>tiyul</i>, we'll go—and so we did. Well on Sukkot <i>tiyulim</i>, we would go, you know, so two people, whatever, people stay behind to set up the <i>mangal</i>, people set up to stay behind to set up the sukkah, you know. And to, like, that was a part of it, like that we were, like, that our, that there was still a genuineness to our religious affiliation. So I mean, that was, that was something. It wasn't specifically with Havruta, but the Simchat Torah was something where, well, that was a project that Nadav, I mean, through a conversation I had with Nadav about, let's do this, you know, let's, let's get a—God knows how many times I went to the Masorti movement offices to get, like, a Sefer Torah for [laughs] one type of event or another.</p> <p>I'm trying to think of other things specifically—<i>Bereish Galei</i> was also something.</p>
Jason G:	Do you want to talk about that? Explain what that, that was?
Aryeh K:	<i>Bereish Galei</i> ?
Jason G:	Yeah.
Aryeh K:	<i>Bereish Galei</i> was—it's common among religious communities across Israel that flyers and pamphlets around, you know, Shabbat and holidays come out from different organizations with little words of Torah, gets distributed across the whole country to different, uh, different communities, different synagogues. For example, the big one from the OU was <i>Torah Tidbits</i> . We decided we were going to do our own. We wanted to do something about queer Torah. We had a graphic designer design it. I think Chaim Elbaum came up with the name

	<p><i>Bereish Galei</i>, which was wonderful. And it was just a little bit of Torah, something to do with whatever the Chag, Shabbat message—from the chairman of the board, from different members of the community. We do it, like, several times a year. It was going to be an insert in a, in a newspaper, whatever it was going to be delivered to, to throughout synagogues.</p> <p>But it was also for us. It was also that we have our own thing and, we—I don't know if I still have any of the issues of it, but we came out with, with several issues. And I remember, you know, driving around, dropping them off at certain synagogues.</p>
Jason G:	Oh, yeah?
Aryeh K:	<p>We would—we tried, I mean, we'd reach out to synagogues to see who would be willing to accept them. And sometimes we'd just like drop them out. But it was an amazing project that, again, it was like this kind of, in terms of the bridge of, like, within the religious world, we even got like certain <i>rabbanim</i> and <i>rabbaniot</i> to write for it.</p> <p>[Laughs.] So what had happened was, so it was always, it was interesting. I mean, sometimes, sometimes they were good, sometimes they were bad. Sometimes it was really just filler. Like it was just like no one's saying anything, but sometimes there was some, like, interesting, like words of Torah, some interesting, thought-provoking ideas or whatever that really kind of, that were really wonderful. For me, I definitely, like I said, like the fact that it was ours, like it was something that we did, that was for us, that we could share with other people, that we could invite other people into. Like we always talk about, we want to be welcomed into the Jewish, you know, the religious communities and the synagogues. It's just like, no, we want to invite you into our world.</p> <p>There was something really nice about that. But then it turned into a lawsuit—because we wanted to hire a distribution service to deliver and distribute these flyers. And it turns out that there's only one distribution service that does this, and it's under the auspices of a religious right-wing newspaper, and they refused. So now we're going to take them to court for whatever—whatever the crime is here. [Laughs.]</p>
Jason G:	Discrimination?

Aryeh K:	Yeah, let's call it that. Discrimination. Because there are no hate crimes here.
Jason G:	Yeah.
Aryeh K:	So it's discrimination, lawsuit, and then it all became about the lawsuit and all the publicity surrounding the lawsuit. And I'm [laughs] like [laughs], but what about the <i>divrei Torah</i> ? [Laughs.] Like, that was the whole idea. And it might have been like, that was the—they said, so we'll, like, let's take the flyers and deliver them ourselves. Like, let's just do it. The lawsuit. In the news—whatever—big. I don't know if it was settled. I have no idea. I don't really care. Like, that wasn't the point for me. But it did, it did get some traction, and it did—there was some sort of mediation to come to some sort of agreement about it, I think. Oh, it was also, there was another issue about an ad that Havruta wanted to take out in <i>Makor Rishon</i> , that <i>Makor Rishon</i> also said that they wouldn't because it would affect their readership.
Jason G:	Even though Havruta did have certain things in <i>Makor Rishon</i> .
Aryeh K:	Eventually, yeah. They had to figure out how to do it. They've come to some sort of agreement now, I guess. I don't know. Again, it really wasn't my department.
Jason G:	Yeah.
Aryeh K:	Like, but it was, but I think that that's when people start to get excited about it, you know. When it became a lawsuit, when it became political, then people want to jump on board, you know. [Laughs.] Like, I just want to share words of Torah with people, I guess. But that's okay. It's fine—uh, how did we get onto this? I said <i>Bereish Galei</i> , there was one thing?
Jason G:	Just things that create the sense of integration.
Aryeh K:	Yeah.
Jason G:	And the religious and gay identities working together.

Aryeh K:	<p>Yeah. So, it was interesting also, because for a while, we had a budget—it was something that we didn't get to do, but something we really wanted to do was. We had a budget put aside for <i>Bereish Galei</i>, and we were going to use it for. We basically had a budget put aside for publications. And I was the Havruta representative working on Pesach Sheni, which has become an annual event now. It wasn't originally for the queer community, but, you know, we hijacked it. Fine. [Laughs.] But the idea of, like, the non-normative sections of Jewish life or the religious community that traditionally didn't celebrate Passover on the original date, because they were impure or whatever, that they would celebrate it a month later. So it becomes—it's become the unofficial, or is it the official, day of tolerance in the religious community. So, we wanted to put together a queer Haggadah. And, uh, I said, well, we have a budget for publication. So, like, I know that we can help fund it. We just need to write it. But it [laughs].</p>
Jason G:	<p>It didn't happen.</p>
Aryeh K:	<p>It didn't happen, yeah. Yeah.</p>
Jason G:	<p>Okay. I mean, do you want to maybe close with how you relate to the community today, or your role in the community?</p>
Aryeh K:	<p>[Laughs.] I guess my role in the community today is kind of like this elder advisor. I don't know. It's very weird, because, like, I feel like sometimes I get asked, you know, like, what do you think? Do you approve of the way things are today? And I honestly, I don't know. I honestly, like, there's so much I don't understand anymore. [Laughs.] I think that I—I'm still, I still think of things in, you know, ones and zeros and black and white, and still very kind of binary. And I think that, so there's a lot that I don't understand, in terms of what the, the Havruta community looks like today, because it's not simply, you know, gay, cisgender men from religious backgrounds. It's a whole rainbow. It's a whole spectrum. So—you know, I don't know what you kids are doing these days. I don't know what you kids with your music. There's, it's certainly, there's, I say that jokingly, but there is this one, like, I don't, like, I don't know. What I do know is that the values that I, that I had when I was in Havruta, you know, they still are true. And, you know, my relationship with Havruta is still very much that. I want to see, you know, the integration of, you know, of queer life and Torah life. I want to see the, you know, the spaces where everyone feels welcome, and, you know, feels, you know, that they can be themselves.</p>

	<p>I don't want to get into politics. I don't want to get into—you know, like the, I understand how important the activism is. I understand that, you know—it's kind of, it's kind of difficult to live in this country and not be an activist for something. And because so much of it is about, you know, elbowing. But I don't feel the, the, the need for Havruta as much as I used to anymore. Like, it's not, it's, I feel like for a while it was very much my lifeline. And I think that for, it is that for a lot of people, and I'm glad that it is, that it's there for them. But, you know, we grow up, we move on, we move on to other things. And that's what I want to do. Yeah.</p>
Jason G:	<p>Okay. Well, all right. Thank you so much.</p>
Aryeh K:	<p>You're welcome.</p>
46:16	<p>[End Part 2.]</p>
[Part 3.]	<p>[After finishing the recording, Aryeh requested to record one more segment. – Ed.]</p>
Jason G:	<p>Um, yeah—.</p>
Aryeh K:	<p>Well there's something that you mentioned that like, I remember, like—just in case it wasn't clear enough, that at the time of, you know, while I was struggling in the closet, the idea of, of running away from religion or stopping to be religious was not, it was never really like a, a realistic thing for me. I think that, I mean, I toyed with the idea. It lasted for like maybe 10 minutes or something like that. And even though, like, I'm certainly like, you can define, you know, a person's level of religiosity, a number of ways, and I'm certainly the way that I, that I am observant now, and the way that I see myself within the religious world now, is very different than what it used to be. I still see myself very much as, as having that very strong religious connection and like leaving it and becoming secular was never really an option. And I think that with that, I don't think that there's really been—I've never—I don't think I've ever really felt angry with God. Certainly not about being gay. You know, that—there's always been, I guess, a connection, which I feel has only gotten stronger and stronger, the more that I've come more into my own and come out and just kind of try to embrace honesty.</p>

	But I just remember, when I came out to my mom, she said, I'm only going to ask like two things. I don't want you to be alone. And I don't want you to take your kippah off. That was, that was, that was all she cared about.
Jason G:	Mm-hmm.
Aryeh K:	I'm like, those are good things. [Laughs.] Yeah. Okay.
Jason G:	Yeah.
Aryeh K:	That's all.
Jason G:	Okay.
Aryeh K:	I just, yeah.
Jason G:	Thank you for, for adding that.
Aryeh K:	Props to my mom. [Laughs.]
2:15	[End Part 3.]