

T-128

Education for Social and Political Change

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Project of Change
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My project of change

In October 1995, at the age of 27, I began working as counselor at a "Therapeutic Residential Home" for young women in Jerusalem. I have worked in "Beit Hatsabarit" for almost four years, going through an experience that had the most profound impact on me, and has definitely influenced and shaped me, both professionally and personally. In this project I intend to examine my position as a counselor in the closet: hiding my bisexual/lesbian identity, which I was in the early stages of exploring when I had started working in the Home. Before I describe my own experience, I would like to describe the character of the Home its residents.

"Beit Hatsabarit" is a unique home for 14 young women between the ages of 18 to 22. They come from all over Israel to a 'last chance' of sheltered environment where they should be able to work, save money, study, and go through a very difficult process of therapy. All of these young women are victims of emotional and physical abuse; many of them experienced sexual abuse, incest, or rape. Some of them come from a sub-culture of crime, gangs, etc, but for different reasons were able to remain resilient and survive on the edge of normative society. (i.e. no criminal background, or jail).

Since they are over 18 (with some exceptions) staying in "Beit Hatsabarit" is voluntary.

However not all of them will stay for the expected period of around 3-4 years, as the framework is too demanding. Some of them feel guilty for not staying and supporting their families, as they have been doing for such a long time. For others, going through therapy is too emotionally challenging, and they find it extremely difficult to face themselves, and their past, for the first time in their lives.

The staff consists of five counselors, each works at a different day of the week in a shift that begins at noon and end the next morning. (Alternating weekends). In addition, the staff consists of the psychologist, the housemother and the director of the home. Once a week all the

staff gets together for a long half-day staff meeting, in which we summarize the week of each one of the young women. At the end of each staff meeting, we would all get together and the director would give a feedback session to each one of the residents.

Besides that very intense gathering, there's a group meeting once a week facilitated by the director and psychologist, in which the young women choose the topics they wish to discuss.

Each of the counselors meet the psychologist once a week for a supervision session, and the five of us get together for an hour of a group dynamic once a week.

The role of the counselor is wide and perhaps vague, but in some ways it is a parent-like role: providing care, guidance and support to the young women, while setting clear boundaries. The later is extremely difficult and intimidating due to the high levels of aggression and self-destruction behavior of these young women. During our 18-20 hour shift we were responsible for the general function of the Home, in terms of meals, cleaning and other chores, to make sure that everybody goes to bed by midnight, and wakes up on time to leave for work. Our time was usually divided between personal conversations with the young women and spending time together with the group, in the kitchen, living room, watching TV, etc.

In general I can say that the role of a counselor in the Home is about interacting with the young women. These were informal types of interaction with no defined time or space, as opposed to therapy session, for example. The purpose of interacting could be fun, social or supportive, but could also become a serious conflict between the counselor and one of the residents regarding issues of discipline, responsibilities or crossing boundaries by the residents. As counselors, we are very exposed. The young women had spent a long time with us, got to know our personal lives, at least the parts that we are willing to share, and being as sensitive as they are, they could "read" us very well, some times see through us. For example: the experience of interaction and conflict was not an easy one for myself, as I grew up in a family in which conflict was a situation I learned, one must try to avoid. Getting into conflict was regarded negatively,

according to my parents' understanding, and trying to avoid it was actually trying to avoid feelings that were difficult to deal with, such as anger, depression or hate. My parents did not have bad intentions. It was their emotional inability to deal with complex feelings on a deep level. In the context of a counselor in "Beit Hatsabarit" my natural instinct of trying to avoid the zone of conflict was exactly the opposite way to go, as it was truly interpreted by the women as fear. Being afraid of them would just proved right their hard feelings towards themselves. If I couldn't handle their aggression and pain, how could I be of support? Throughout my work as a counselor I definitely learned what it is like being in conflict, and why is it so important, though I still have a long way to go.

As it is pretty obvious, being a counselor in such a place necessarily means being very exposed. The fact that I had started working in "Beit Hatsabarit" in the early stages of exploring my sexual identity made it very difficult for me.

As adolescents, the young women are obviously dealing with issues of sexuality and sexual identity. The general tendency among staff members was to see lesbian behavior in the context of these women as a result of their traumatic sexual history. This may or may not be true, however, it created an unconscious notion of lesbianism as an abnormal, deviant phenomenon. The outcome was a homophobic atmosphere, joking and laughing, but no serious discussion around issues of sexual identity. As for myself, such atmosphere was oppressing. I did not have the power to question the general homophobic approach, nor was I able to stand out there when nasty jokes were made. As homophobic notions were radiant from the staff to the young woman, I defiantly feared that they would find out that I am a lesbian.

So I was definitely not OUT for the young woman, and only after a year and a half of working there, have started coming out to some of the staff members, first one of the counselors I was closer with, and later to the new psychologist who have joined the staff.

My Outing:

At a certain point, after about 2 years of working in "Beit Hatsabarit", I had found out, by the other counselor, which I was out to, that there is a big rumor going on among the young women that I was a lesbian. I was devastated.

It felt as if the horrible truth has been exposed, and now I will be kicked out of there. I was also very hurt by the way I have heard about it. The counselor I was out to, called me and told me that the young women were talking about me with the housemother, and telling her that they think I am a lesbian. It is obvious that the housemother, did not feel comfortable to bring this directly to me, and that is why she had told about it to the other counselor. Usually, in the Home, we would try to be very clear about talking directly to one another, about anything that would come up, and not talk behinds one back. The fact that the housemother, who was a very strong and important figure in the Home did not come talk to me, was sending a message that this is a too sensitive topic to deal with and that nobody felt comfortable enough to touch it.

I was in great fear, but I knew I must confront the housemother and talk to her. It was obvious that if our residents fear the fact that I am a lesbian, without openly talking about it, my role as a counselor is very doubtful, and I could not do my job effectively. Three conversations took place in a short time: with David, my director, Ruti, the housemother, and Varda the psychologist. With the psychologist I had weekly supervision sessions, and luckily I felt right away that I can trust her be open with her. She was my biggest source of support throughout the time I was working there, and I was definitely out to her. Another interesting reason that made me feel alliance to Varda, was the fact that both of us shared an "abnormal" position in the Israeli society. A Jewish woman who is married to an Arab is usually viewed with prejudice, and in the context of our Home this was also complex, as some of the young woman had certain connections with Arab men that were not approved by the staff, since they were

involved in crime. Varda, the psychologist, made a point of the staff knowing that her husband is Arab immediately as she joined the Home, but she did not share it with the residents. She did not allow any racist remarks or jokes being made about Arabs, and was able to look at her own life with honesty, pride and humor. Her approach made me in a way jealous, and that was certainly a model I would have wanted to adopt, whether I had the strength to do so about my sexual identity.

As it became clear that our residents are not at ease with the rumors about me being a lesbian, I spoke to the director of the Home, again a difficult conversation for me, because I imagined he would need to know, whether or not this is true, and I did not feel that I was able to come out to him. However, he took a very professional approach and made it clear to me that we should work with the young women and reflect their fears back to them. Why are they so intimidated from the issue of lesbianism? What does it mean to them? He also made it clear to me that he has no interest in what my sexual preferences are, and that the discussion should be about the girls not about myself, even though they had chose me to transfer their fears and thoughts around this issue.

Group Discussion:

I was invited to be part in one of the group's discussions, facilitated by the director and the psychologist. The director had told the group, that lately some of them had felt uncomfortable with me, and it is very important to open up any issues that they had. Of course, there was a lot of embarrassment, but finally one of the young women was able to say that they think I am a lesbian, that they do not feel comfortable with the way I touch them, etc. I personally felt rather safe and comfortable in that discussion as it did not come as a surprise to me. Also the way the director and psychologists facilitated it, the topic was not, whether or not Sharon is a lesbian, but what do they fear and what does it mean to be a lesbian? The discussion was a good one in

general. I was mostly listening. It was a very important message for the young women that we are open to talk about any topic.

At one point a comment was made by one to the residents, saying it is impossible that I am a lesbian, because she knew I have or had a boyfriend. I think this information was based on a period of time that I did, in fact have a boyfriend while working in the Home, a fact which I was obviously comfortable with letting some of the Home residents know about. Perhaps the woman who had mentioned a boyfriend did so in order to protect me, and it did actually made me feel more mainstream and comfortable. The result was certain vagueness around my sexual identity, which remained that way throughout the rest of the time I had worked there.

What next?

This group conversation had an important role in 'clearing my name', and in general I felt freer and more at ease working in the Home. I did slowly come out to more counselors I was working with, however this was never a topic that was discussed in the staff forum, only one-on-one conversations. I had never spoken openly to my director about my sexual identity, my partner or our plans to have a baby, though I am pretty sure he would not be surprised. With Ruti, the housemother I did have an open conversation as part of leaving the place, in a closure-concluding meeting the two of us had. Coming out to her was a real struggle for me, throughout the whole period of time I was working at the Home. Her character and role in the Home was as a mother, and it was significant for the young woman as well as to staff. Coming out to her seemed at the time almost as complex as coming out to my mother. Not being able to tell her that I was a lesbian throughout the whole time I worked there was a very difficult experience. I was a constant struggle, and this was a cause of many anxieties and dreams that I was dreaming while working in "Beit Hatsabarit".

Why should things be different?

In retrospect, it is very clear to me that the experience I was going through was of oppression and powerlessness. I was not free and comfortable with who I was, which meant I could not be myself in a place where authenticity is the only way to act and succeed in the different human interactions. As I examine my work as a counselor in "Beit Hatsabarit" where authenticity is so essential, I realize that not telling the truth about myself is the worst service I can do for the people I worked with, as well as for myself. If I cannot be who I am in an educational setting, if I have to invest so much energy in hiding, I will definitely be a less affective and authentic educational figure.

I would like to differentiate between coming out to the staff and coming out to the Home residents. When working in any educational or therapeutic setting, it is true that we must be conscious about our privacy. The psychologist made her decision by sharing her personal life with her colleagues, and not with her patients. I will soon explain what I believe are the significant aspects of coming out to the young women in our home.

In terms of the way I felt with the staff members I was also in an awkward position. At that time I was already in a relationship with my partner Yael, which some of the staff members have met, but whenever other people were sharing their experiences with their partners, things they did over the weekend or other personal stories, I felt very limited with what I was able to tell my colleagues. I feel now how much I lost, and in a way, we all lost, all counselors and staff members in general. Working in such an intense and emotionally draining place, we all must find as much support in one another, and be able to provide as much support as we can. In order to fully do so, we should be able to feel safe with the rest of our colleagues, and totally be who we are.

How can things be different?

"Beit Hatsabarit" does provide support systems for its counselors. Each one of us had a weekly supervision session with the Home's social worker or psychologist and in addition there was a weekly group dynamics session for all the five counselors. When I began working there, the social worker did not insist on setting the supervision meetings with the counselors, and it was supposed to be of our own initiative whenever we had felt the need for help. Luckily, that changed when the new psychologist had joined. I believe that some kind of supervision on a regular basis is extremely important in such a therapeutic environment. It took me a very long time to figure out the place, and to realize how much I do not know. With the new psychologist I was free to expose myself, and therefore able to get support. So this is the one-on-one support system, which is essential in any educational and definitely therapeutic setting. In the future, I have to insist on receiving such support, and allow myself to make use of such a space. I have to fight my tendency to act as if I am strong and so confident in a new place, as well in a place that is no longer new, but very challenging and demanding. In such a supervision setting I must constantly examine how comfortable or intimidated I am about my sexual identity, and how does that affect my professional ability. I also have to make sure that in any place I will be in a position to influence or direct, each one of the staff members will have such an opportunity. In terms of group support, and this is very important, I feel today how seriously I regret not taking use of the weekly group meeting to ask for the counselor's support, and discuss the difficult position in which I was at with the Home's residents. I am sure that if I had done so, the group of counselors would be able to provide me a lot of acceptance and guidance, which would have made my life there much easier, whether I would have decide to come out to the young woman, or not. I also know that exposing myself to the group of counselors, would influence the general atmosphere within our group, and allow other people to expose and share

their difficulties in such a workplace, and of course we all had difficulties that had to do with who we are, our family history, etc.

Coming out to the young woman:

The residents of our Home were obviously dealing with issues of sexual identity, some with regards to their own history of sexual abuse, and some not. The age they were at, 18-22, and the therapeutic environment they were part of, made these questions very relevant to many of our residents. Unfortunately, there was no serious attempt by the staff members to raise a discussion about lesbian or homosexual issues. Creating the right environment for such discourse around these topics would obviously do a great service to the young women, especially to some of them who have seriously struggled with their sexual identity.

I am sure that if I was able to be out and comfortably discuss my lesbianism to the group, it would be something they could have gained from. For those who struggle their own identity, this would be a chance to feel much more safe to discuss and experience it, without fear of the group's reaction, nor of the staff's reaction, as the staff members would also be challenged to deal with their acceptance. The fact that they are often labeled by mainstream society as non-normative, due to their backgrounds, family-history, or not doing what other young people their age are doing, in terms of joining the army or getting ready for college, etc... This could create a positive alliance with me, and a good example that it is possible to fight for, and create your own life, regardless of society's prejudice.

I would be able to share my own experiences, or to invite other gay people, perhaps closer to their age, to come and talk to the group and share their personal stories.

In fact, for the past five years, there is a group of gay volunteers who are affiliated to the "Jerusalem Open House", which is the center of the gay and lesbian community in Jerusalem. These volunteers go to schools and different other educational settings, and share their personal experiences as gay and lesbians in the society. Some time they are invited to talk to teachers or

staff members, and in other occasions to the students themselves. Inviting and initiating such an activity in "Beit Hatsabarit" would be of great contribution.

In the future I would also like to join these volunteers, and in addition to the important activity, which I have described, to also develop a support group within the "Jerusalem Open House" for gay and lesbians who are working in educational environments. Such a group would provide a safe space for professional educators to share their experiences, and to discuss the cost of remaining silent about their sexual identity, as opposed to exposing it. In each of the options, unfortunately, one has to pay a price.

I am sending the following letter (translated to Hebrew) to David Tenne, who has been the Home for the past eleven years."director of "Beit Hatsabarit

Dear David,

I have been planning to write to you for quite some time, and I am glad, that finally I am able to sit down and do so. The last time I saw you was in "Beit Hatsabarit" about a year ago, when I asked you for a recommendation letter for my graduate studies in the US. You were of course generous and helpful, and I did not follow my own promise, which was to update you on the results of my applications. Where, here I am, now a year later, writing from Boston, as I am almost finishing the first semester in the Harvard Graduate School in Education. Isn't this incredible? Well, my life is even more exciting than that, since I am here with my partner Yael, and our five month old baby, Arnon, whom she gave birth to, this past summer, two month before we came here. So, I never came back to tell you I was accepted to Harvard, and this is partly because by then Yael was already at the last stages of pregnancy, and later gave birth, and, yes, I did not feel comfortable enough to talk about it with you, but also felt very bad about not sharing it with you. So avoidance became the easy way out...

The fact that I am a lesbian, I am sure is not of any surprise to you. You might have heard about it from Ruti, Varda, Nili, or other people, and of course, sensed it with your healthy senses. You might have already heard too about my partner and baby. What you would probably not believe, is this letter that I am writing is part of a project I am doing in my class: "Education as Social and Political Change". It is part of a project in which I examine my experience as a counselor in "Beit Hatsabari", and the whole struggle I was going through while slowly discovering my sexual identity as a lesbian, and at the same time feeling very intimidated about revealing it with the staff as well as with the young women we were working with. Only in retrospect, I am allowing myself to realize how extremely difficult it was for me to be 'in the closet' in "Beit Hatsabari". I wish I had been strong enough to first of all be open with the staff members and be able to gain their support, and perhaps to also be open with our residents. As you well know, I was not comfortable about myself, which was something not only you, but also the young women have sensed, and I believe that you remember the group discussion about me, which I was present at.

I always appreciated the fact you never had any need to challenge me about my personal life. You made it clear that my life is my own business, and if the young women had issues around lesbianism or their own sexual identity this is their stuff that we have to deal with, they only choose to project it on me. Your approach did make me feel somewhat safe. As I said, in retrospect, I wish I would be much more strong and confident in myself, that I could be out to the staff and perhaps even to our residents. I also think that we, as staff, were not doing our best job while dealing with sexual identity issues that our residents were struggling with. I am afraid that as a staff, we radiated our own feelings of unease to them, which definitely did not contribute to those who were struggling with their own sexual identity. I think we should have encouraged more group discussion around issues of sexuality and sexual identity and perhaps have guest speakers or movies brought to enrich the discussions. I am, of course, aware of the

fact that in the context of our residents these issues are highly sensitive due to the fact that most, if not all, of our young women have been sexually abused. I believe that this linkage between sexual abuse, or the distorted sexual past of our residents, and between lesbian identity is what made it so difficult for me to be open and strong about my choice to live as a lesbian.

I wonder what would it be like if I did have the power to be an 'out' lesbian counselor in "Beit Hatsabari". Would you back and support me, or any other gay or lesbian counselor?

I believe that this would actually have a good impact on the young women, on the long run, but would take a lot of hard work and difficult interaction between that counselor and the residents and staff as well. As for myself, I was definitely not at the stage that I was able to personally cope with such a challenge. However, part of my choosing this kind of reflective project is deal with these questions in order to better prepare myself to future educational roles that I will be taking. Now that I have a family, a partner and a son (and hopefully more children in the future) I do not want to be at all secretive about my personal life. I don't plan to brandish the lesbian flag either, but definitely not spend all my energy in hiding. This energy, I believe, should be invested in being a better counselor or educator. And if there is one thing I learned from you and from working in "Beit Hatsabari" (and I have learned much more than one) is the importance of authenticity.

As I write I become more and more curious to hear what you think about all this, and hopefully we can meet this summer when we return to Israel. My program is a yearlong one and it seems like we will not stay here more than that. Do you still plan to come explore America for a year or two?

I hope things are more or less stable in "Beit Hatsabari", and that everything is good with Leah and yourself, any grandchildren expected?

I wish you all the best,

Sharon Bronner.

