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**MAGAZINE**

(Amir Cohen/Reuters)



## More than one way

**What is co-parenting and what makes it so appealing to the religious LGBT community in Israel? Looking at another option of establishing a family**

**8** Making American football great again – in Israel!

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COVER



# A modern family

**Some gay men and women prefer co-parenting with a member of the opposite sex, rather than establishing families with a same-sex partner. How does it work? And why is this a good solution for some religious members of the community?**

**PARTICIPANTS DURING** Jerusalem's annual gay pride parade.  
(Amir Cohen/Reuters)

• MICHAEL DEMPSTER

**H**e met her online. After three dates they were ready for dinner with one another's parents. A year later, she gave birth to his child.

It's a pretty standard boy-meets-girl story – except that the boy is gay, the girl knows it and their children will eventually know it, too.

Itay Harlap is openly gay and the father of a nine-year-old son. His son's mother, Tal, is straight and lives a three-

minute walk away in their Ramat Gan neighborhood. Their family is founded on a concept called "intentional co-parenting," in which two members of the opposite sex, usually at least one of whom is gay, decide to start a family together – Mom and Dad, raising a child, minus any romantic implication.

"A lot of mothers are actually jealous of Tal, because I'm much more active in my son's life than most straight fathers," says Harlap, a professor of film and television at Tel Aviv University and Sapir College.

"Even though we're both devoted parents, our arrangement gives each of us three or four free nights per week. We don't have any romantic stress between us, so we've never had a huge fight. We're like divorced people, but with a very good relationship."

For many in Israel's LGBT community, this dynamic is more realistic than other paths to parenthood. According to Dr. Sibylle Lustenberger, a Swiss postdoctoral researcher at the University of Haifa who has studied LGBT life in Israel for nearly a decade, international

for gays, and the cost of procuring an American or Canadian surrogate can reach a staggering \$150,000. This leaves LGBT Israelis at a parenting impasse.

It's difficult to get accurate data on the number of co-parented LGBT families in Israel, as each parent is registered with the government as "single." However, anecdotal observation suggests that the phenomenon is growing. This new family structure seems to be a particularly good fit for Israeli society, with its closely bunched mix of liberal and traditional influences.

### Alternative parenting

Merkaz Horut Aheret (The Alternative Parenting Center) is the only organization in the world to focus exclusively on co-parenting. Co-founders Racheli Bar Or and Gidi Shavit, the center's social workers and therapists, conceived of the organization as a response to the burdens experienced by singles who want to become parents.

"In social work, one of our goals is

*'Even though we're both devoted parents, our arrangement gives each of us three or four free nights per week. We don't have any romantic stress between us, so we've never had a huge fight. We're like divorced people, but with a very good relationship'*

"I can't work by myself. I need a partner. He's the father and I'm the mother of the organization. We're co-parenting the center," says Bar Or.

Over two decades later, Horut Aheret has developed into a hub of information and support for prospective co-parents. One of the things the organization offers is group counseling, where attendees learn about the benefits and challenges of this family structure. Inevitably, the center also serves as a matchmaking destination for those that haven't found their co-parent yet.

Emphasizing a structured, planned approach to co-parenting, the organization assists parents to draft a contract of mutual responsibilities. This provides a legally binding framework to guide families through important and possibly divisive choices: How much time will the child spend with each parent? How much distance will there be between each of the co-parents' households? How much will each parent contribute financially to the child's upbringing? Who mediates in

*The Alternative Parenting Center has now guided more than 400 co-parented families, and its founders have seen the first child they helped bring into the world reach the age of 22*



(Srdjan Zivulovic/Reuters)

adoption policies have become far more restrictive since the late 1990s, and popular adoption destinations for straight couples, like Eastern Europe, oppose same-sex parenting.

Domestic adoption policy is similarly unfavorable, she notes, with a general preference given to placing needy children with heterosexual couples. Domestic surrogacy is not available to gay Israelis, and international surrogacy has become financially prohibitive. Most developing countries no longer allow women to serve as surrogates

to discover societal needs and identify solutions. Before we founded our organization, we saw a lot of single women rush into motherhood via sperm banks, only to struggle financially and emotionally as single parents. On the other hand, I saw gay friends that wanted to be fathers, but couldn't," says Bar Or, a social worker and family therapist.

Horut Aheret did not invent the concept of co-parenting, but initially observed it in the mid-1990s as an isolated practice in Israeli society.

"We had heard about a gay Israeli guy who'd had a child with a gay female friend of his. So we went to meet with them, to learn about how they built their relationship, and what their struggles and successes were. We saw happy parents and a thriving child. Financially, emotionally and practically this arrangement made for a healthy family," says Bar Or.

Bar Or and Shavit, both of whom are straight, then founded the organization as a means of developing and promoting this parenting solution in Israel.

the case of a serious disagreement?

Not all co-parents take this structured approach when starting their families, but in retrospect, many seem to agree that it's preferable to consult social workers and psychologists on some level and create a formalized co-parenting framework.

**ONE FATHER**, who prefers to remain anonymous, neglected to draft a legally binding agreement with the mother of his now four-year-old daughter. The two parents began having >>>



**THE ALTERNATIVE** Parenting Center's co-founders Racheli Bar Or and Gidi Shavit. (YouTube screenshot)

*'Today in Israel it's actually better to be a gay person with a child than a straight woman without a child'*

*'We work with a couple who are Palestinian citizens of Israel. The father and mother are gay and they're raising a child together. We also recently started working with LGBT members of the Orthodox Jewish sector'*

in a world where culture wars have raged over the right for same-sex couples to parent children. Yet it also suggests a maturing of the conversation, at least in Israel. The emotional and financial tolls of surrogacy, single parenting and adoption have pushed LGBT Israelis down another path.

Not all LGBT people who choose co-parenting do so solely for reasons of practicality. In Israel, where a liberal, permissive culture exists alongside more conservative family values, many gays want their children to have what they had: a mom and dad. What was once a fringe movement among secular gay Jews is now spreading to other, more conservative sectors of society.

"For example, we work with a couple who are Palestinian citizens of Israel. The father and mother are gay and they're raising a child together. We also recently started working with LGBT members of the Orthodox Jewish sector," notes Bar Or.

### **Close connectivity**

Lustenberger thinks conservative sectors of Israeli society are changing their attitudes toward LGBT parenting because of what she calls Israel's "unique social connectivity."

"Israeli society is very interconnected. Switzerland, for example, has a population size similar to Israel's, but we have a different sociocultural fabric. I don't see the same level of person-to-person connectivity there.

"Celebrations in Israel, such as weddings and bar mitzvas, bring a large number of people together from all spectrums of life. In Switzerland, these kinds of events might include immediate family, the grandparents and maybe a few cousins. In Israel they not only draw the cousins and the grandparents, but also friends, coworkers, the friends and coworkers of the cousins and the grandparents and on and on. Israeli family networks and social networks are very extensive."

This overlap makes it harder to stay in a bubble. Secular and religious, liberal and conservative, gay and straight

serious interpersonal issues after the child's birth and the mother dramatically restricted the father's visitation hours with his child. He did not take legal action in the matter, as, without a formal contract in place, he feared courts would side with his daughter's mother. He now feels somewhat estranged from his daughter, and believes that his role as a father has been reduced to that of sperm donor and ATM. Oddly enough, he has considerable professional experience in contract law. When asked if he often dwells on the irony of his situation, he replies, "I think about it a little; I cry about it a lot."

Bar Or has seen this scenario play out more than once.

"If they don't sign contracts and carefully plan these decisions, it can become utter chaos the minute after they leave the hospital with their newborn. With our method, all of the planning is done before pregnancy. If they don't agree, they can separate and no harm is done. If they start planning only when there is already a pregnancy, emotions are much stronger and it's harder to compromise."

The Alternative Parenting Center has now guided more than 400 co-parented families, including Harlap's. Bar Or has seen the first child they helped bring into the world reach the age of 22. Since the center's founding in 1994, she has also watched Israeli society grow and evolve.

"In the beginning, we were very radical. Not today. Now we're considered almost conservative, because we offer a family structure in which a child is connected to both his or her mother and father," says Bar Or.

Advocacy for kids to have a mother and father is perhaps counterintuitive



frequently dine at the same table.

"With this level of connectivity, a social phenomenon like LGBT parenting quickly ceases to be some abstract thing that's unfamiliar or unrelatable. You see it in front of you, and it just becomes another family. It takes it to a much less threatening level," says Lustenberger.

All of the LGBT co-parents interviewed for this article started their families because they desperately wanted to have children, not because they sought out some form of social acceptance. But some, like Harlap, do notice a difference in the way they are treated by a conservative-leaning country after they have kids.

"We are living in a society that encourages us to have children. Today in Israel it's actually better to be a gay person with a child than a straight woman without a child. If you're a straight woman who decided not to have children, society views you as being sick. And if you're gay and you have children," he says. "Wow. It's a form of social advancement for us... like serving in the army. I don't agree with that of course, but that's the way it is."

The growth of co-parenting is occurring at a time when religious groups in Israel have simultaneously begun to reevaluate their attitudes toward LGBT people and their families. In this context, some might see co-parenting as a convenient, albeit unintentional compromise between traditional values and gay liberation. Though co-parenting started in secular LGBT circles, it took a relatively short amount of time to crop up among religious Jews. Lustenberger attributes this to the ways Israel's various sectors influence one another, divided as they may seem.



(Baz Ratner/Reuters)



According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, 25% of Israelis who grow up in religious Zionist families, and 10% of Israelis who grow up in ultra-Orthodox families, become secular in adulthood.

"Cousins on one side of the family might be secular, and on the other side ultra-Orthodox. So the changes happening in the secular world inevitably affect the religious world. There may be a great deal of tension between them, but they're never completely separated," says Lustenberger.

### Productive silence

Ayana Ben Shoham, 40, co-parents a son and daughter and knows quite a bit about the balancing act of being gay and religious. She is Orthodox, gay, and lives in Ness Harim, a small moshav outside Jerusalem. She chose co-parenting because she wanted the experience of pregnancy and childbirth, and also sees value in providing her children with the influence of both a mother and father.

"Growing up, my father was a very important figure in my life. We were very close. It was difficult for me to accept that my children wouldn't experience that joy."

Her kids' father, also gay and Orthodox, consulted with a rabbi before he and Ben Shoham finalized their decision to raise children together.

"At first the rabbi seemed to hope that we would end up together romantically," she laughs. "Gradually he started to understand that there was no chance of that happening, and he gave us his private blessing that it was okay for us to start a family in this way."

However, a private blessing isn't an official endorsement, and religious LGBT parents often find themselves

asking how hard they should push for recognition.

"Today you have some rabbis who identify as Orthodox and are recognized as Orthodox, who have quietly opened the doors of their congregations to LGBT parents and their children. They recognize that there's a human need to give these families a place, though they don't actually give halachic legitimacy to same-sex relationships," says Lustenberger.

Co-parenting might be more palatable for religious communities, as it allows LGBT Israelis to embrace parenthood, while stopping short of raising children via same-sex coupling.

"Co-parenting leaves more room to maintain this kind of silence, because you don't have to address the sexual orientation of the parents," Lustenberger continues.

"I spoke with the *rabbanit* of an Orthodox congregation in Ramat Gan. She said that she personally prefers LGBT congregants to pursue co-parenting rather than same-sex parenting, as it provides the children with a traditional mother-father structure."

Ben Shoham's children attend religious nursery schools. She did not directly reveal her sexual orientation or family structure to the school's administration, but her kids' teachers eventually caught on, and didn't make an issue of it. Her philosophy for balancing her sexuality with the religious sector?

"When you don't wage war, you don't make enemies."

This tacit approval from Ben Shoham's community could be due to her discretion, or it could be an acknowledgment of how well her family has turned out, unorthodox as it

may seem.

"My co-parent and I might not have a romantic relationship, but we have a strong relationship nonetheless," she says.

"We're truly family, and not just by virtue of having children together. We love each other, we respect each other, and we've learned how to resolve problems together."

Her advice for LGBT people that are considering co-parenting?

"Remember that kids are a one-way ticket. They're for life. So don't think of your co-parent as a relationship that you can just break off one day. It needs to last forever, because it's the foundation of the most important thing: your children. Don't rush into your choice too quickly."

Ben Shoham's extended relations, who run the gamut of Israel's social and religious identity, have come to embrace her family.

"My children's father has two ultra-Orthodox brothers. They struggled to accept his sexuality through much of his adulthood, but the relationship changed after he started a family. Now they understand us. They value us. They even send their children to our Shabbat table," says Ben Shoham.

Some conservative Israeli grandparents end up liking the notion of co-parenting a little too much.

"In the beginning, Tal's mother didn't respond well to the idea. She was actually quite homophobic at the time," says Harlap, "but she saw what a good father I am to her grandson, and she grew to really like me. She asked Tal a few years ago if she wanted to have more kids. Tal said, 'Yes, but maybe this time with a romantic partner, a boyfriend.' Her mother said, 'No, no. Have more with Itay!'"

ITAY HARLAP with his son Avshalom, mother Tal, and Ginger the dog. (Courtesy)