

Book Review: *Found Tribe*
Edited by Lawrence Schimel
Sherman Asher Publishing, \$15.95
Deborah Finkelstein
(505) 577-8686

Originally published in *The Bay Area Reporter*, San Francisco
Republished in South Africa in *Exit*, and in the U.S. in *Out*, *Empty Closet*, *The Letter*, *Crosswinds Weekly*, *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, *The Jewish Link*, *Pride & Equality Magazine*, and other publications.

Can a man be a member of both the Gay and Jewish communities? The answer lies in *Found Tribe*, a collection of essays recently nominated for two Lambda Literary Awards (Best Nonfiction Anthology and Best Spirituality) and the ALA Stonewall Award. Gay Jewish men share their experiences and their identity. Identity often starts with the labels or names that we choose for ourselves, and we are not always the ones who choose these labels.

"Who controls what the names are?" asks Lawrence Schimel, editor of *Found Tribe*. "Do you decide? Or does the Jewish or homosexual community say 'are you one of us?'"

Schimel, who has published over 50 books, says he wants his writing to "always fight for broader levels" and to "create bridges between cultures and communities." In *Found Tribe*, he hopes to build a bridge between the Jewish and Gay community, and reach out to Jewish Gays who feel like they are alone. In many of the essays in the book the writers think that they are the only Gay Jews. Andrew Ramer writes on his discovery that he is Gay in his essay, "I knew that [Gayness] applied to me... and that I was the only Jew in the world to have it."

Ramer is not the only one to feel this way. After *Found Tribe's* predecessor, *Kosher Meat*, a collection of erotic essays by Gay Jews, a Gay Jew contacted Schimel and told him that for 40 years he had not practiced Judaism, and that *Kosher Meat* gave him peace with himself and made him feel that he was not alone. It is this response that Schimel, and publishers Sherman Asher, hope for with *Found Tribe*.

Schimel feels that Jews and Gays have a lot in common. They are both minorities and have faced physical and verbal abuse as well as discrimination. In the introduction to *Found Tribe*, he writes, "While many people consider the act of 'coming out' to be restricted to the provenance of sexuality, in the ultra-secular worldview that predominates gay subculture today, coming out as 'religious' is often met with the same prejudice, hostility, and misinformation and misunderstanding as declaring one's homosexuality can provoke in the heterosexual mainstream culture."

Many Gays have rejected religious Jews. Gabriel Blau writes in his essay, "Gay friends were often more upset with my being religious than my straight religious friends were with my being gay." Schimel also shares that Jewish men have been left out of pornography, and that Gay Jews often feel self-conscious when they see Gay pornography titles such as *Foreskin Quarterly*, which they are left out of because their religion requires circumcision.

On the other hand, Jews do not have a history of welcoming the Gay community, and while things have improved, many Jews still do not welcome Gays. The Bible is discussed in many essays, as well as the essayists' Jewish families' reactions and the response of Jewish communities. In Arnie Kantrowitz's essay, he remembers being an activist in the 1970s, "time after time we demonstrated in the streets and went to City Hall... among our staunchest opponents were members of the orthodox Jewish community... Hassidim arrived in busloads to testify against our rights."

Schimel chose essayists who share their Jewish and Gay identity, but come from a variety of backgrounds, ages, and levels of observance, from Orthodox Jews to secular Jews, from Rabbi Stephen Greenberg (*Trembling Before G-d*) to converts. Essayist Julian Padilla came out to his parents about his Gayness and his desire to convert to Judaism at the same time. He writes that while his parents were supportive, they were both concerned for him, his father was "concerned that I would be setting myself up for discrimination... and how hard my life would be. My dad had been a Chicano activist... he hoped I would be spared from so much discrimination."

Padilla's father's comments echo the similarities between the two minority communities. The Gay Jewish community had been silent until now, while the Jewish Lesbian community has written quite a few books. Schimel will co-edit *Burning Bush* next year, a collection of essays on sexuality and Judaism, by Lesbians, Bisexuals, and straight women, the first time that Jewish women of all sexual orientations have written together; so Schimel will break yet another boundary.

Schimel will keep breaking boundaries. In addition to essays and short stories, he also writes science fiction, cookbooks, children's books, and poetry, including the first Gay love poetry book ever published in Spanish. Besides *Burning Bush*, other upcoming projects include a book of essays on Judaism, and a new children's picture book in Spanish, *Misterio en el Jardin* (Mystery in the Garden). His work has been translated into Basque, Catalan, Czech, Dutch, Esperanto, Finnish, French, Galician, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Slovak, Spanish, and Swedish.