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The Boy's
Own Manual
To Being A
Proper Jew

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THE BOY'S OWN MANUAL TO BEING A PROPER JEW
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*The Boy's Own Manual
To Being A Proper Jew*

Eli Glasman

ONE

READING AN ARTICLE online from one of New York's Jewish newspapers, I found an advertisement offering a Jewish alternative to homosexuality. I followed the link and read through everything the website had to say. The administrator of the website was a guy named Rabbi Pilcer. It took me three weeks to get up the courage to send him an email asking if I could speak with him.

He replied immediately, despite the time difference, saying that we could talk on Gmail chat. I double-clicked his name, wrote Are you there? and hugged myself as I waited for him to respond.

I'm here, he wrote back. What's your name?

I drew in a deep breath, took the rubber band off my wrist and rubbed the tender welt that had formed on my skin. *Flick the rubber band every time you have a sexual thought about another man*, the website had advised. *You'll associate the pain with these thoughts and soon they will stop.*

It hadn't worked at all.

I pocketed the rubber band and squeezed the bridge of my nose. I felt uncomfortable giving a stranger information about me, especially over the internet, but I had to know if there was something he could do.

Yossi, I replied.

Hello, Yossi. What's on your mind?

I scratched the skin around my thumbnail. Maybe he wouldn't be able to help, I thought. He was a rabbi, after all. What would he know about this? Although, I figured, just because he was a rabbi, it didn't mean that he didn't have another qualification. He could have been a psychologist or something as well.

The rubber band thing isn't working, I wrote.

The cursor blinked in the text box for a few seconds before Rabbi Pilcer entered his next sentence.

So, you believe you're a homosexual.

I winced at the sight of the word 'homosexual'. Maybe I shouldn't be telling him this.

I leant forwards and rested my head on my hands, knotting my fingers into my mesh of curly hair, accidentally causing my Yarmulke to fall off and land on the keyboard. Feeling the air against my naked hair made me uneasy. I put my hand on my head while I picked up the Yarmulke and nestled it back into place.

Yossi? Are you there? the rabbi wrote.

I stared at his question for a few moments and then sighed. Even with the safety of distance and

anonymity, I felt uncomfortable talking about it.

I closed the chat box and set my laptop to sleep.

I then stood up from my desk and dragged my feet across the carpet to the other end of my room, building up static in my fingertips that was zapped out with a gentle prick as I touched the metal handle of my window and pulled it open.

From outside came the noise of traffic and chatter, and the smell of smog. We were positioned on Carlisle Street, the shopping strip of the Melbourne Jewish community, between a Jewish bookstore and a bakery.

I'd lived in this house my entire life. I belonged here. My place was amongst other Jews, keeping alive traditions that were centuries old. I couldn't imagine a life where each day bled into the next with nothing more to punctuate existence but payday and a piss up on the weekend. A life with no God, no holy days, no prayers, no significance to food or clothing.

I rubbed my wrist again, feeling the slight lump on my skin. I knew that there was only sin in acting on my impulses, not simply in being the way I was. And yet, just having these terrible feelings made me feel like less of a Jew.

At that moment, a droning buzz broke into my thoughts. I turned to my desk to see my iPhone light up. I looked at the screen, rolled my eyes and walked out of my room and down the hall until I reached the front door. I opened it to find Menachem standing

there with his phone at his ear.

‘Why don’t you just knock like a normal person?’ I asked.

‘This is more efficient,’ he replied, ending the call. ‘If I prank call you, I know you’ll be the one to answer the door.’

Menachem stepped inside and peeked down the hall towards the kitchen. I could hear my father in there. I figured Menachem was scared my father would see him here and tell his parents he’d been playing violent video games, which was, after all, the reason he’d come. All the public libraries were closed and his family was too religious to have internet in the house, so he had to come to mine to fulfill his gaming needs. Menachem tiptoed into my room and I followed close behind.

As soon as the door was closed, he started a game of *Grand Theft Auto*. I didn’t like to watch those sorts of games, nor listen to them, so I made him play with the sound off.

For ages he sat hunched in front of my laptop, hardly talking, while I lay sprawled on my bed singing Jewish hymns into a handheld electric fan. I liked the way the spinning blades chopped my voice so that I sounded kind of mechanical.

After an hour of playing, Menachem stopped and turned from the screen.

‘Who’s Rabbi Pilcer?’

‘What?’

‘He just sent you a message on Gmail chat.’

I turned off the fan and quickly sat up in my bed. Crap, I hadn’t logged out of my Gmail account.

‘He’s written that he implores you to give it more time. *Implore*. What a loser. Who is this guy?’

‘Nobody.’

‘Do you want to respond?’

‘No, just log out of my account.’

‘All right.’

‘Now!’

‘Okay, okay.’

‘Yossi,’ my father suddenly called from the kitchen, ‘dinner!’

Menachem smiled at me and gave me a silly thumbs-up.

‘We need to add one,’ I called back to my father.

‘Okay, who’s here?’

‘Menachem.’

‘He’s more than welcome. Also, tell him to tell his father that I’ll return his tennis racquets on Wednesday.’

Menachem knotted his brow. ‘I’m Menachem *Levin*,’ he yelled.

‘Oh,’ my father screamed.

There was a short pause.

‘Tell your father he still owes me a bottle of Glenlivet.’

‘Uh... okay,’ Menachem said.

‘And come eat or your dinner will get cold!’

I shook my head. 'Sorry about him,' I said to Menachem.

'Don't worry,' he replied. 'He's less of a dork than my dad.'

Menachem paused his game and we both headed out into the hall. As we walked to the kitchen, I thought back to earlier that day when I'd come home from afternoon prayers and caught my father watching *Huey's Cooking*. I had watched him from the doorway to the lounge, his huge bear-like body leaning eagerly towards his laptop. My older sister, Talya, normally did dinner for the three of us, but she was in Sydney going on dates with some guy and my father was left with the task.

With pen and paper in hand, he took down everything Huey said, replacing all the non-kosher ingredients with kosher ones.

'Now, what you'll need is some chunks of pork—' Huey said.

'Chunks of beef,' my father corrected, before jotting down his own version of the recipe.

When Menachem and I entered the kitchen, my father was by the stove on the meat side of the kitchen. We had two separate sides of our kitchen, one for milk and one for meat, as it was prohibited to mix the two by the laws of kashrut. We also had two microwaves and two sets of cutlery and dishes.

'So, what are you boys up to?' my father asked, as we sat at the table.

‘Studying,’ Menachem immediately replied.

‘Eager beavers,’ he said. ‘School doesn’t even start until tomorrow. What are you studying?’

Menachem shot me a slightly panicked look. ‘Uh...we’re....’ he stammered.

‘Practice exams,’ I said.

‘Good,’ my father said. ‘Beth Dovid has finished in the top five schools for the past ten years. I don’t want you boys breaking that trend.’

My father walked from the stove and rested the plates of food on the table.

‘Let me know how it is,’ he said, hovering over us.

Menachem gave me an awkward smile before taking a bite of his dinner. ‘It’s very good,’ he said. ‘Thanks.’

I forked a piece of meat off my plate and ate it. ‘It’s much too salty,’ I said, even though it wasn’t.

Menachem dropped his eyes to the tablecloth.

‘Oh,’ my father murmured. He crossed his arms and lowered his head. His large greying beard cushioned his chin as it touched his chest.

‘We can order in tomorrow night,’ my father said. ‘I’d like to get some food from that new kosher restaurant anyway. It’s important to support them with business.’

I took another bite of my dinner and said nothing. I felt guilty for being mean. I hadn’t really meant to be, but part of me wanted my father to ask me why I was upset and then maybe he could figure out

that something was really wrong. Even though I was terrified of him finding out my secret, sometimes I felt like I wanted him to know so that I wouldn't have to hide it anymore.

I could tell that my father was angry because he didn't eat dinner with us. After the meal he started washing up, something he would have made me do if Talya was around.

'Yossi, I want to talk to you,' he said, after Mena-chem had gone to my room. I'd hung back in the kitchen to say the prayers for after the meal.

I finished the last words of the prayer, kissed the the siddhur – the prayer book – and crossed my arms. 'What?' I asked.

My father was standing in front of the sink on the meat side of the kitchen. He had his shirt sleeves rolled up, and his hands and wrists were lost in the soapy froth. He kept his eyes trained on the dishes.

'I've noticed that there aren't that many dirty towels in the washing basket.'

'So?' I asked.

'Well, whenever you come home from school you normally put your towel in the basket.'

'What's your point?'

He pulled his hands from the sink and flicked globules of soap all over the bench. 'Have you stopped going to the mikvah in the mornings?' Mikvah is the Hebrew word for bathhouse.

I stared at him for a few moments and then

shrugged.

‘Look, you know it’s important. I’m not going to force you. By seventeen you should be doing these things on your own. Just tell me why you’ve stopped.’

Because being in a room with naked men is too tempting, I wanted to say, but instead muttered: ‘I’m scared of tinea.’

My father shot me a look of anger. ‘Don’t be silly,’ he said, heatedly. ‘I know that’s not the reason.’

I glared back at him. After a few moments, my father dropped his eyes, shook his head and dipped his hands back into the soapy water. I lowered my eyes, feeling suddenly angry with myself for lying.

Without saying anything more, I got up from my chair and walked out of the kitchen. When I got back to my bedroom, Menachem was at my desk squinting at the laptop.

‘Did you hear any of that?’ I asked as I fell into bed.

‘A little,’ he said. ‘Well, no, actually, all of it. I’ve been eavesdropping. This game’s on pause.’

He closed the laptop and dragged the wheels of my desk chair over the carpet with his heels until his knees touched my bed.

‘How can he give you shit about not going to the Mikvah?’ he asked gently. ‘You’re the most religious person I know. And you’re like proper religious. I’ve seen you cry when you pray. You’re the most embarrassing friend I have.’