

Activity Name: Discussion of “Coffee and Cake” by Harriet Malinowitz

Purpose: To discuss a queer Jewish short story

Time: 1 hour

Materials: copies of the story which can be found in Beck, Evelyn Torton. *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.

Notes: While this activity is portable, the a story about coming out and thus fits well with National Coming Out Day

Activity: Hand copies of the story to participants as they arrive. Once it seems like people have finished reading it, proceed with the discussion questions.

Changes/expansions: If you include food at your events, you could provide edible coffee and cake to go with the title of the story

Discussion Questions

On pages 212–213 the narrator compares her situation to that of Chava from *Fiddler on the Roof*. In what ways are their situations similar? In what ways are they different? To what extent is there an element of choice for Chava, the narrator, and their families? Can a person ever really cease to exist?

On page 213 Steven says to his sister, “I don’t understand how you can *decide to define* yourself as a lesbian.” To what extent do we decide how to define ourselves? How do you define *yourself*? What identities do you emphasize; what identities do you ignore? Why? What makes one identity more important than another?

Near the bottom of page 214 the narrator describes her old friend Rema as “feeding the world’s stereotypes.” What can we tell about Rema from the narrator’s description? To what extent is the description colored by the narrator’s own views? Do you think Rema is purposely trying to pass as a straight woman, or could she simply be expressing her identity?

On page 215 the narrator expresses relief at having come out to her brother. Why was it so important for the narrator to come out? What did she gain from doing so? What changed for her? Can you relate to this experience? How?

At the very end of the story, the narrator says that she had hoped to see her brother dance. What do you think she meant by this? How realistic is this hope? Is there a point in a lesbian’s life when she can see her family dance in her honor? If not, can we create such a time?