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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Historic New Partnership of Gay Orthodox Groups Launches Today**

*New collaboration “Eshel” to focus on educational and community programming in the wake of historic statements by Orthodox rabbis and rash of gay/lesbian suicides*

(New York), (NY), (October 7, 2010) -- Today, the leading Jewish organizations working on behalf of gays and lesbians in the Orthodox world announced a historic new partnership to build understanding and community for gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews.

Called Eshel, after the “Eshel Avraham,” the tamarisk tree under which the patriarch Abraham would welcome visitors, the partnership will focus on community programming for gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews (including a weekend Shabbaton, or retreat,

being held January 21-23 in Connecticut), and educational programs, including a speakers' bureau of Orthodox and formerly-Orthodox gays and lesbians and an online database of resources.

The partnership brings together the leaders of the Gay and Lesbian Yeshiva & Day School Alumni (GLYDSA), Jewish Queer Youth (JQYouth), Nehirim: GLBT Jewish Culture and Spirituality, Orthodykes, and Tirtzah: A Community of Frum Queer Women. Eshel's programs will be directed by a seven-person program board with representatives of these organizations and other communal leaders.

Eshel's founding comes in the wake of the historic statement this summer by over 200 Orthodox rabbis, calling for greater welcoming of gays and lesbians in traditional Jewish communities, as well as one week after the suicides of five gay teenagers across the country.

Miryam Kabakov, the founder of Orthodykes and the editor of the recent anthology *Keep Your Wives Away From Them: Orthodox Women, Unorthodox Desires*, said that the timing is apt: "In light of the recent tragic suicides, the need for increased sensitivity and tolerance is greater than ever. The work that Eshel plans on doing could potentially save an untold number of lives." Using the Hebrew term for the commandment to save human lives, she added, "This is a matter of *pikuach nefesh*."

Rabbi Steven Greenberg, Director of Orthodox Programs for Nehirim and the author of the award-winning book *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition*, said that "the Statement of Principles was an invitation to respectful dialogue, and Eshel's educational efforts are intended to promote just that."

Eshel's bureau of speakers, available to come to congregations, Hillels, and other organizations to talk about growing up gay and Orthodox builds on the success of JQYouth's recent programs at Yeshiva University and the University of Pennsylvania, which drew hundreds of attendees. Said JQYouth's Mordechai Levovitz, "I am proud to be working with my partners in Eshel to help tell our stories to the greater Orthodox community with *tzniut* (modesty) and respect."

Eshel can be found online at [www.eshelonline.org](http://www.eshelonline.org).

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