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The 2nd Annual Nehirim West Retreat
A unique spiritual gathering of GLBTQ Jews
Walker Creek Ranch, Petaluma, CA. May 8-10, 2009

Petaluma, CA... Nehirim, a national organization that provides spiritual and cultural community for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (GLBTQ) Jews and their partners and allies, is hosting its second annual weekend retreat in the San Francisco Bay Area after its successful 2008 gathering (nearly 100 participants) and five consecutive years of sold out retreats in Connecticut and New York. The retreat will be presented in partnership with Jewish Mosaic: The National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity.

Nehirim retreats are unique gatherings that bring together GLBTQ Jews (as well as non-Jewish partners and straight allies) for a weekend of spirituality, education, and community. Teachers at Nehirim West will include Retreat Director, Dev Noily (Rabbinical student, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia), Caryn Aviv (Director of Research, Jewish Mosaic: The National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity), Rabbi Camille Angel (Sha'ar Zahav, San Francisco's GLBT synagogue), Rabbi Julia Watts Belser, Ph.D. (Religious Studies professor, Missouri State University), Rabbi Joshua Lesser (Congregation Bet Haverim, Atlanta), Rabbi Elliot Kukla (Bay Area Jewish Healing Center), Karen Erlichman (Jewish Mosaic, San Francisco), Max Strassfeld (Stanford doctoral student, gender diversity in the Talmud), Jay Michaelson (Executive Director of Nehirim and author of *God in Your Body*), along with numerous musicians, singers, dancers and celebrants of GLBTQ Jewish life.

"Members of sexual minorities have unique ways of relating to spirituality due to the ways we experience love, on the one hand, and an often hostile society, on the other," Nehirim's Jay Michaelson said, noting that the experience of gays and lesbians is in many respects similar to that of Jews in non-Jewish societies. "Being queer and Jewish is a gift—nor a predicament."

The weekend retreat will include opportunities for traditional and innovative Sabbath prayer services as well as meditation, text study, movement, dance, spiritual direction, hiking, performance art, writing, and ritual. "Nehirim brings together people of all different kinds of Jewish and GLBTQ identities and their allies to form a single, varied community," Retreat Director Dev Noily said. "There's a spirit of celebration and of openness to new ways of being Jewish and queer."

Held at Walker Creek Ranch, 40 miles north of San Francisco, the retreat will bring together a diverse community ranging in age from 18-73, and from Orthodox to secular; singles, couples, and families (there is a childrens' program component.); "professional Jews" and unaffiliated ones, rabbis and political activists. Workshop feature topics include queer theology, Hasidic music, social justice activism, re-reading Leviticus, secular Torah study, and the Divine Feminine. No knowledge of Hebrew is required.

Thanks to support from The San Francisco-based Walter and Elise Haas Fund, the Charles & Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, and The Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, Nehirim is offering considerable financial aid: part and full scholarships for attendees. "Especially in this economy, we are committed to making Nehirim accessible to all," said Michaelson.

Nehirim means "lights" in Hebrew, and more specifically the radiant colors of the rainbow and the sky. The word thus represents not only the spectrum of GLBTQ sexual identities and the popular rainbow symbol, but the spiritual essences of those constituent parts as well. Founded in 2004, Nehirim is an independent non-profit organization that creates authentic spiritual and cultural community for GLBTQ Jews, and their partners and allies.

Workshop Leaders' Bios

Dev Noily is a student at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia (class of '09). She develops readings of Jewish text and tradition to serve queer Jewish lives. A longtime member of Congregation San Francisco's Sha'ar Zahav, Dev has served as a student rabbi there as well as for LGBT-founded Jewish communities in Atlanta and Amsterdam. She currently offers spiritual care in the transgender communities of Philadelphia, as an Albert Schweitzer Fellow, and serves as rabbinic intern at Congregation Beth El of Bennington, VT. Dev also works with the Jewish Dialogue Group, facilitating conversations about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other controversial issues.

Rabbi Julia Watts Belser strives to blend passionate scholarship with prophetic witness, teaching classic Jewish texts in a way that speak to our contemporary longings. Currently an assistant professor at Missouri State University, Julia has taught in diverse university, synagogue, and community-based settings, including the Graduate Theological Union, The Leaven Center for Spirituality and Social Change, and The Masorti Lehrhaus in Berlin. Julia's written work is engaged in crafting feminist theology and nurturing earth-based Jewish practice. She co-authored *A Health Handbook for Women with Disabilities*, published by Hesperian Foundation.

Rabbi Joshua Lesser leads Atlanta's growing Congregation Bet Haverim as a place dedicated to celebrating all aspects of Jewish life and creating a spiritual home that is accessible to those who have not connected in other settings. As a former Teach For America corps member, Rabbi Lesser is committed to creating innovative programs and events to further their Jewish education in fun and exciting ways. At Bet Haverim, he has worked with a wide variety of groups and coalitions to build a better community for Atlanta including the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta's Task Force on Healing and Spirituality. In partnership with the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta and Jewish Family & Career Services, he founded The Rainbow Center, a place of support and information for GLBTQ people, as well as their families.

Rabbi Camille Angel was ordained at the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in New York. In 2000, she became the rabbi of Congregation Sha'ar Zahav, a prominent GLBT synagogue in San Francisco, after serving as Associate Rabbi at Congregation Rodeph Sholom on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Rabbi Angel has been a guest lecturer at the HUC-JIR in Practical Rabbinics and a Scholar-in-Residence for Women of Reform Judaism. She has written widely on creative liturgy, Judaism, and women. Her work has been published in the *Journal of Psychology and Judaism*, *Walt Disney/Ideal Books*, and other magazines as well as academic journals and books.

Jay Michaelson is the founder and Executive Director of Nehirim. He is also among the most widely-read Jewish writers of his generation, as a columnist for *The Forward*, a featured contributor to *The Huffington Post*, the Founding Editor of *Zeek: A Jewish Journal of Thought and Culture*, and the author of *God in Your Body: Kabbalah, Mindfulness and Embodied Spiritual Practice* (Jewish Lights, 2006) and *Another Word for Sky: Poems* (Lethe Press, 2007). A recent visiting professor at Boston University Law School, Jay holds a J.D. from Yale and teaches widely on issues of religion and sexuality; his work in the area has been featured in *The New York Times* and on NPR. Recent publications on the subject include *Queering God, Torah, and Israel* in *The Passionate Torah* (2009), *Chaos, Law and God: The Religious Meaning of Homosexuality* in the *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law*, and *Boundaries and the Boundless: Homosexuality, Liminality, Judaism* in *Jews and Sex* (2008).

~ See next page for additional Workshop Leaders' Bios ~

Dr. Caryn Aviv is the Director of Research for Jewish Mosaic: The National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity and the Posen Lecturer in Secular Jewish Culture in the Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Denver where she directs the Certificate Program in Jewish Communal Service and teaches courses about contemporary Jewish communities. She is the co-author of *American Queer: Now and Then* (Paradigm Publishers, 2006), *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora* (New York University Press, 2005), and *Queer Jews* (Routledge, 2002). Caryn is currently working on a book project that examines the role of American Jews in Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation movements, media, and philanthropy. She also writes a blog about queer Jewish life for the Israeli daily newspaper, Ha'aretz.

Karen Lee Erlichman is a licensed clinical social worker in private practice in San Francisco, where she provides psychotherapy and spiritual direction. She is also the Director of Jewish Mosaic's San Francisco Bay Area office. She is a past co-chair of the Jewish Women's Caucus of the Association for Women in Psychology and a current member of Spiritual Directors International.

Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla has been an activist, writer, and educator for more than a decade. He has taught widely about sexual and gender diversity in Judaism in the US, Canada, and Israel. His writing has appeared and will be published in upcoming issues of numerous magazines including *Lilith*, *Shm'a: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility*, and *Zeek: A Jewish Journal of Art and Culture*, as well as in anthologies published by New York University Press, *Jewish Lights*, and The Union for Reform Judaism Press. For the past 2 years, Elliot served as the rabbi of Toronto's Danforth Jewish Circle, a congregation grounded in social justice and inclusion. Elliot was the Rabbinic Organizer of Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE) in LA.

Calendar Editors

- WHAT: The 2nd Annual Nehirim West: A unique spiritual gathering of GLBTQ Jews
- WHEN: May 8-10, 2009
- WHERE: Walker Creek Ranch, 1700 Marshall-Petaluma Rd, Petaluma, CA
(40 miles north of San Francisco, in northern Marin County)
- COST: Ranges from \$200-\$400. Student scholarships and financial assistance are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Register online at www.nehirim.org/west
- INFO: www.nehirim.org/west • info@nehirim.org
- PRESS: For additional press materials, photos, and to arrange interviews, please contact publicist, Lisa Geduldig at (415) 431-7363 or lisag@jgc.org



JewishMosaic
The National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity

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