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Contact: Esther Smigel, esther@nehirim.org • www.nehirim.org/qsdc

**Unique "Queer Shabbaton" to be Held in Washington, D.C. February 5-February 7, 2010,
Groundbreaking Weekend of Gay/Lesbian Jewish Culture, Community, Spirituality**

"Homosexuality is a gift from God," says retreat director Jay Michaelson

Washington, D.C., December 17, 2009. Nehirim, a national organization that runs spiritual retreats for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) Jews, partners, and allies, will host over 120 GLBT Jews for its "Queer Shabbaton," February 5-7, 2010, at the Washington DCJCC, 1529 16th St NW, in Washington, DC. The "Queer Shabbaton" program has sold out in New York for three years running; this will be the first such program in D.C.

Said Jay Michaelson, Nehirim's executive director and co-director of the Queer Shabbaton D.C., "There are some who pretend that religion is against homosexuality, against same-sex marriage, and against freedom in general. They are wrong. Homosexuality is a gift from God."

The shabbaton, presented in partnership with the Kurlander Program for Gay & Lesbian Outreach and Engagement (GLOE) at the D.C. JCC, features an array of teachers including Dr. Sharon Groves of the Human Rights Campaign, George Washington University professor Yaron Peleg, and ALEPH Rabbinical student Holly Taya Shere.

D.C. economist Alex Greenbaum, Vice Chair of GLOE and co-director of the retreat, added that, in the wake of defeats around the country on the issue of same-sex marriage, the shabbaton will also include practical workshops such as "legal alternatives to marriage," as well as networking sessions for people looking for work. "We are mindful of the difficulties many in our community are facing, and we want to help," Greenbaum said.

Said Michaelson, who was recently named to the *Forward* newspaper's "Forward 50" list of "the men and women who are leading the American Jewish community into the 21st century" for his work with Nehirim, "For people excluded and marginalized from their religious communities, as well as for those who simply want to celebrate their queer and Jewish identities, coming to Nehirim is like coming home."

Founded in 2003, Nehirim ("Lights") is a pluralistic, independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, and is supported by the Charles & Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, the Walter and Elise Haas Fund, the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston, and the Jewish Community Foundation of San Francisco, as well as individual supporters.

For questions and interview requests, please contact:

Esther Smigel, Operations Manager

(347) 677-3542

esther@nehirim.org

www.nehirim.org

Nehirim: GLBT Jewish Culture & Spirituality

308 West 92nd Street, #5B

New York, NY 10025

www.nehirim.org

Teacher Bios

Dr. Sharon Groves is the deputy director of the Religion and Faith Program of the Human Rights Campaign. She has published a number of articles on such topics and religion and marriage equality, the importance of religious advocacy within the LGBT movement and the struggle for equality within world religions. She is a lay leader at All Souls Church (Unitarian), where she has chaired the Committee on Ministry and worked extensively on issues of racial justice, community voting rights and neighborhood outreach. Sharon received her Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of Maryland in 2000 and since then has engaged in extensive course work in theology and sexuality from Wesley Theological Seminary and the Chicago Theological Seminary.

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*, *AnotherWord for Sky: Poems*, and this year's *Everything is God: The Radical Path of Nondual Judaism*. 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). In 2009, Michaelson was included on the *Forward 50* list of "the men and women who are leading the American Jewish community into the 21st century."

Professor Yaron Peleg is associate professor of Hebrew at George Washington University. Peleg grew up on Kibbutz Usha in the north of Israel. After serving in the Israeli army, Mr. Peleg completed his B.S. in film and television studies at Emerson College, Boston, and worked in the film and television industry in the US and in Israel. Dr. Peleg taught Hebrew language, literature and culture courses at Brandeis University and a course on Israeli film at Princeton University. At the George Washington University, Professor Peleg is the director of the Hebrew Program and teaches courses in Hebrew literature and contemporary Israeli culture. He is the author of three books and a study of homoeroticism in early Hebrew literature.

Holly Taya Shere is a folklorist, ritual artist and educator on women's spirituality and Renewal Judaism. She spent several years priestessing in earth-based spiritual communities and working as a healer before returning to Judaism and becoming a student, teacher and organizer in Jewish spiritual communities. Holly is co-founder and co-director of Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute, an organization and training program devoted to reclaiming and innovating models of embodied Jewish spiritual leadership, creativity and community from an earth-honoring, feminist perspective. Since 2006, Holly has held the rabbinic pulpit at Olney Kehila Jewish Congregation, where she serves as Spiritual Leader. In addition, Holly serves as Education Director of Yavneh on the Hill and teaches Judaism and facilitates life-cycle ritual in many Washington, DC area Jewish communities.

Born and bred in the modern Orthodox Jewish community in London, **Alex Greenbaum** is vice chair of Washington DC JCC's LGBT program, GLOE. In the last couple of years, he has become increasingly involved in Jewish community organizing. A macroeconomist in his professional life, Alex works with developing-country governments and private sector groups to establish effective economic policy. Alex has a Master's degree in Economics and Econometrics from the University of Manchester.

Calendar Editors

WHAT: The first annual Queer Shabbaton DC: A unique conference of GLBTQ Jews

WHEN: February 5-7, 2009

WHERE: Washington D.C. JCC, 1529 16th St NW, in Washington, DC.

COST: Ranges from \$100-\$180. Student scholarships and financial assistance are available. Register online at www.nehirim.org/qsdc

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PRESS: For additional press materials, photos, and to arrange interviews, please contact Esther Smigel at (347) 677-3542 or esther@nehirim.org