finding her voice
An ex-Hasid leans into her role as a transgender activist
By Rahel Musleah

ABBY STEIN KNOWS HOW TO WORK A ROOM. “How many of you have had a bat mitzvah?” she asks the audience at a session on the transgender Jewish community she led last winter at LimmudFest UK, the flagship celebration of Jewish education and culture held in Birmingham, England. Hands go up. “How many of you have had a bar mitzvah?” Other hands go up. “How many of you have had both?” Only Stein raises her hands and jokes: “As you know by now, I’m a bat mitzvah.” Stein, 28, is the first openly transgender woman who was raised in a unisex bathroom at a mall, was raised in a unisex bathroom at a mall, and is being diagnosed. “I found words to describe who I was.” “transgender,” she says. “It was like a wake-up call to Transgender Woman Journey from Ultra-Orthodox Rabbi Becoming Eve: My Recent memoir, of followers on social media. Her is filled with sensual, stylish poses from and Aramaic. Traces of her Yiddish, was 20, also studying in Hebrew and Aramaic. Traces of her Yiddish accent still cause her to drop her “th’s” (“dee” instead of “the”). At the Limmud session in December, she was dressed in a fuzzy, glittery, cropped red sweater and slim black pants from an affordable POF Fit subscription. A slash of glittery, cropped red sweater and slim black pants from an affordable POF Fit subscription. A slash of vivid lipstick almost always brightens her face: Her favorites are a hot-pink appropriately called “Eve” and a shade of red called “Lilith,” both from the Fempower Beauty line of cosmetics. Her clothing and makeup palettes of pinks and reds are self-admittedly stereotypical as well as a feel-good rebellion against the constricted male black-and-white world she grew up in.

“To embrace my femininity is an act of power,” she says.

She was able to unpack her feelings about covering her hair for Unorthodox with the help of a progressive Muslim friend who chooses to cover her head. When a woman on the Unorthodox set suggested that she must be against women covering their hair, Stein responded: “I am against women being forced or even just obligated to cover their hair.” The show, she contends, is extremely accurate in its portrayal of the Satmar community. From a young age, Stein had a rule-breaking, almost subversive side. “Not knowing how to rebel against being raised as a boy, she questioned religious authority. “I had no faith in anything I was told; if every authority in my life told me I was a boy, and I knew I was a girl, how could I believe the rest of their claims?” she writes in her book. “If they were wrong about my gender, they could be wrong about God, too.” Though she wasn’t forced to become a rabbi, she says she was “groomed from birth” to follow the traditional path to rabbinic ordination, which she ultimately received at the Vizhnitz kollel in Monsey, N.Y. Along the way, she immersed herself in the culture as a “survival technique” to escape her identity issues. She was transferred from yeshiva to yeshiva and, using religious arguments to make her points, was dubbed by yeshiva officials as “the kosher rebel.” “I knew that one day I’d leave the community,” she writes in her book, “I wanted to know exactly what I was rebelling against.” “I like to shake things up,” she adds, predicting a role in an interview in her Upper West Side apartment in Manhattan. “It’s a way of changing things. Making trouble is actually helping. It would be very easy to stay...
in my bubble,” in the overlapping communities of ex-Hasidic, LGBTQ people and Romemua, a Jewish Renewal synagogue in Manhattan. “I’ve gotten enough attention without saying anything controversial ever again.” But, she adds, it’s a “responsibility and an opportunity to bring awareness and change.”

One topic that is off-limits is her son, in part because of a custody agreement that grants Stein’s former wife, Fraidy, the right to raise him Hasidic. “The only way I can make sure he has a better life than I did is to make some changes in the Hasidic community, and I think that has already happened,” she says. “No Hasidic child will grow up as I did where I didn’t know trans even existed. Because of what I did, people are talking about it whether they want to or not.”

She also won’t discuss her transition. Many people, she says, are only interested in the “exotic” aspects of her story: Have you had surgery? How do you have sex?

Orthodox world (a process dubbed “off the derech,” or OTD). The connection was life-saving for Stein, who later helped jumpstart its Cana- dian counterpart, Forward. Footsteps, which counts over 30 percent of its 1,700 members as LGBTQ, taught her how to dress, talk to people of the opposite gender, eat out in restau- rants and more. In 2014, she enrolled in Columbia University’s School of General Studies with scholarships, graduating with a degree in gender studies and political science. Her parents cut her off financially when she told her father she was trans and no longer spoke to her. Two of her siblings and a dozen of her 200 first cousins still maintain contact. Only the support of friends saved her from homelessness. Her apartment, which she rents and shares with a roommate, a trans man, is the first space she has lived in for more than a year since her college dorm days at Columbia’s Bayit, a Jewish communal coop. Her room is spare—bed, desk, bookcases crammed with Jewish titles, including The Bible Now, by biblical scholars Richard Elieff Friedman and Shavna Dolansky, and URJ Press’s The Torah: A Women’s Commentary, both of which she often pores over early on Shabbat mornings.

“I’m addicted to my books,” she says. A rainbow flag decorates the window. With a childlike eager- ness, Stein shares her treasured objects: a stuffed Santa from her first non-Jewish friend; a few mugs from the 100-odd Hillels at which she has spoken; and a thick stack of board- ing passes tied with a rubber band from her travels. Name badges from her speaking events dangle from hooks on the door. “To me, they are my biggest achievement,” she says of those talks. She has every magazine issue that has profiled her and opens them to show me. “I wish I had had the opportunity to see stories like those as a child. It’s very powerful, a strong proof of my work.”

Daniel, a transgender participant in a recent Foot- steps conference at which Stein was a panelist, says that she was “the first trans person I knew existed and the first OTD person I was aware of. My first reac- tion was shock and horror. I couldn’t process it.” As he became aware of his own doubts about his gender and his religion, she became a source of hope and inspiration. “She is a true trailblazer,” says Daniel, who asked that his last name not be used. “She made the road map of what it means to be queer and OTD. Because she’s so vocal, she’s enabled me to find my voice, where before I was silenced. I never had a role model for any part of my existence.”

Part of Stein’s agenda is to moti- vate progressive communities, both Jewish and non-Jewish, to move from tolerance to celebration. “I like to say tolerance is meant for lactose or nuts, not for people,” she says. “When a teenager comes out to their parents, they don’t want the reaction to be, ‘I love you; I accept you,’ but rather, ‘This is so exciting! Let’s have a party.’ That is how we are taught to celebrate in Judaism. Go out of your way to show you want people not in spite of who they are but because of who they are.”

Stein celebrated her own combina- tion bat mitzvah-coming-out ceremony in 2016 in her hometown of Romemua community. Born Yisroel, the same name as the Baal Shem Tov, and nicknamed Sruli, she chose the name Abby Chava, which has biblical and familial connections but “doesn’t scream Hasidic.” A YouTube video shows her walking into the sanctuary to the song “Hagalah Na” (Reveal Yourself). She has posted the ritual she created with Romemua clergy on the TransTorah website (TransTorah.org), a collection of resources, books, texts, rituals and liturgy. “I am stuck by Abby’s kindness, her courage, her wisdom beyond her years, and her ever-evolving relationship with Torah,” says Rabbi Jessica Kate Meyer, a former co-rabbi and cantor at Romemua who is now part of the clergy team at The Kitchen, a Jewish religious start-up in San Fran- cisco. “She has reached out to and cared for so many others, often at the expense of her own needs. Abby shares her boundless courage and light with those around her, and even those across the world who have read her words, or her story.”

Before she started transitioning, Stein battled depression and addic- tion to alcohol that had begun as a teenager and pills that started after oral surgery in 2013. She went sober during Hanukkah 2014, but the depression lingered. In addition to seeing a therapist, a simple ritual— lighting Friday night candles—helped to ground her, she says, forcing her to mark the week that ended and to do something to celebrate Shabbat. It became a mental health and spiritual practice. She now posts different pictures of herself lighting candles or at the Shabbat table on Instagram almost every week. “My Judaism today is not remotely because of how I grew up,” she says. She no longer is Shabbat observant but she celebrates Jewish holidays, Jewish texts, Jewish food—like latkes and schnitzel—and has visited Israel over a dozen times (her father and his family are Israelis). “My family roots and heritage will always be a part of me,” she says. “Instead of fighting it I’m leaning into it and enjoying it. I love the power to pick and choose. Find what works, and whatever doesn’t—just let it go!”

What would the Baal Shem Tov say about his descendant? Stein doesn’t hesitate. “His message of unconditional love taught the equal- ity of every person,” she says. “He would love me.”

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