



Trembling on the Road/ Trembling Before G-d: Purim to Passover Campaign Discussion Guide

Background on Trembling On the Road and Trembling Before G-d

Trembling Before G-d was released in 2001 in New York and broke box office records. By addressing sexuality, faith and religious fundamentalism through the stories of Hasidic and Orthodox gays and lesbians, Trembling has touched and transformed lives across the globe. An estimated 8 million people have seen the film.

Sandi DuBowski, Rabbi Steve Greenberg and others who appeared in the film followed the film around to its openings across the globe for nearly three years. Over these years, we took a video camera with us to mark the process of change. In 2005 these segments were woven together into a 40-minute travelogue, *Trembling on the Road* that marks how the film succeeded in creating change.

Trembling on the Road is a dramatic record of dialogues, protests, reactions, screenings, and events from our worldwide tour. It includes _poignant, funny, interesting, and angry reactions and reflections on Trembling and updates on the character's lives. Many people who saw the original film in theatrical release, in festivals and on TV have never seen this dramatic follow-up on the power of film to change lives.

Many people who saw *Trembling Before G-d* found that it was a difficult film to watch. The portrayal of the confusion and anguish, the sense of being torn apart by irreconcilable religious and sexual passions invites the viewer to witness and perhaps experience some of its character's torment. Over the editing room, we wrote the words, "dare to despair." However, as grave and sometimes painful as *Trembling Before G-d* is, *Trembling on the Road* is uplifting, hopeful and even celebratory. The remarkable success of the film to screen in Orthodox synagogues, to bring together families and to engage a wide array of religious leaders turns the sadness of *Trembling* on its head, as the psalmist writes, "those who sow in tears and reap in joy."

Purim to Passover

Purim and Passover are powerful ritual frames for talking about risk-taking and liberation. In the Purim story, Queen Esther, who had kept her Judaism a secret from her husband, King

Ahasureus, takes action and comes out to him to save her people when they are faced with extermination. Passover is a holiday of liberation from oppression when we leave the "narrow place" and join together to fight for justice and freedom.

Purim to Passover is a marvelous ritual time to consider where we have come from, where we are now and where we wish to go. *Trembling on the Road* celebrates the power to make change and asks: Where would you like to make a change in your life? Where can you be a risk-taker? In your family? In your community? In the world? Where can you fight for justice and freedom?

Discussion Guide

We recommend that you introduce the screening with a general welcome and rough sense of what this world-wide effort is about. Some of the description above should help you. This will allow people to watch the film with some sense of what they might be speaking about afterwards.

If you are only screening *Trembling on the Road* then you may want to get a sense of who hasn't seen the original film. This will help you to gauge how much backtracking might be necessary. If there are a number of people who have not seen the original film, you will want to share with the group a bit more about the characters and their stories - Israel, Michelle, Devorah, David, and Leah. (Mark, the singing Yeshiva bachur, is well, but did not wish to be filmed again). Israel z"l, unfortunately passed away. You can decide when this should be done. It can be done before the screening, just after it finishes, or when the topic comes up in discussion.

Let people know that you will be spending about half your time on reactions, responses, thoughts on the film or films and the other half on what has changed and what still needs to change in your local community.

The questions below may help you to conduct your conversation. Remember that it is the facilitator's role to stress that the purpose of the discussion is to search for understanding rather than for agreement or solutions. Given this, people should obviously be both respectful and curious in regard to the different perspectives in the room.

On Trembling on the Road:

1. What feelings did the film inspire? For those who saw and remember *Trembling*, how would you describe the differences in feeling, tone or sensibility of *Trembling on the Road*? What do you make of these differences? What was it like to get an update on the lives of some of the original film's subjects?
2. Was there a particular scene, character or problem that made a strong impression up you?
3. What questions remain for you after watching this film?

Purim and Passover Themes

1. Risk-Taking: In the story of Purim, Queen Esther takes a risk when she tells the king she is Jewish in order to save her people.

- Where did you see people in this film taking risks?
- What specifically do you think they are they risking, and to what ends?
- What are risks you could take to shift a related situation to better ends?

2. Liberation: Passover encourages us to think about liberation, both personal and communal.

- Is liberation an element of this film?
- Is it on an individual or a communal level?

Do you think it's possible to have individual liberation without communal liberation, or vice versa? How do the two interact in this film?

The Power of Change

1. What has changed in your city, community, institution for the better since 2001 when *Trembling Before G-d* was released?

2. What were the vehicles of that change?

3. What work still needs to be done? While this question could be answered with wishes for sweeping social change, here we are intending those incremental and pragmatic steps that push GLBT inclusion further in real ways.

4. What can I or WE do this year to make a difference?

APPENDIX: Additional resources

How should I deal with questions about the Conservative Movement's decision regarding gay and lesbian rabbis and commitment ceremonies?

On the website will be an abbreviated description of the two accepted *teshuvot* (responsa – i.e. written legal briefs answering a question of Jewish law) so that you can explain the factual details. However, the real question is how synagogues can actively engage the questions of inclusion. In Reform and Reconstructionist congregations there are formal commitments of welcome. In Conservative congregations however, a similar sort of welcome has been less public and much less convincing given that the movement until recently did not permit the ordaining of openly gay rabbis or gay marriage ceremonies. Now that there are permissible options, synagogues will have to work their rabbis to come up with policies that navigate between the recent *teshuvot*, the local rabbi's religious convictions on the matters and the sensibilities of the congregation. Rabbis who are supportive of the inclusive move will need to bring their communities along with them. They will need a process of learning about the

issues that ushers their communities into a richer discourse on sexuality, love, marriage, pleasure, companionship, duty and Jewish law. Efforts to bring the film(s) to synagogues where it has not been screened with discussions can be suggested.

As well, a yearlong course using Steve Greenberg's book has already been very successfully accomplished in a Conservative congregation in Columbus, Ohio, Tifereth Israel. In the neighborhood Barnes and Noble, the assistant rabbi ran 8 sessions that were very well-attended and helped to prepare the community for the rabbis' subsequent efforts at inclusion. Following these sessions, the rabbi was able to present the two Law Committee Teshuvot in a much more thoughtful way and to conduct a more effective communal process.

Thinking about how to use these resources in local communities is just what we hope your event accomplishes. The fundamental goal of this discussion is to both to honor what has been accomplished in every community and to imagine what still can be done to make the lives of GLBT Jews better, not only in New York and Los Angeles, but in Kiev, Detroit, Zurich, Calgary and Ramat Gan.

What about the substantive issues of halakhab (Jewish Law)? Where can I find more information?

In particular, we recommend watching Rabbi Steve Greenberg's interview on the DVD. Both personal and substantive, it is a particularly useful tool in approaching the relevant issues. As well, there is more from Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, Rabbi Aharon Feldman, Rabbi Aron Tendler, Rabbi Meir Fund and Rabbi Dr. Nathan Lopes Cardozo on the extra Trembling DVD.

There are two books that work with the traditional textual material in exciting and still very different ways. One is Rabbi Steve Greenberg's book, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality and the Jewish Tradition* and the other is Rabbi Chaim Rapoport whose book is *Judaism and Homosexuality: An Authentic Orthodox Approach*.

We will continue to update the website - (filmsthatchangetheworld.com) with further resources for follow-up to the screenings and discussions.