

[Leaving My Ultra-Orthodox Home and Finding My Trans Self: Part One](#)

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By [Abby Stein](#) Tagged: [Footsteps](#), [lgbt](#), [Orthodox](#), [personal profile](#), [TDoR](#), [transgender](#), [Transgender Day of Remembrance](#)

[Abby Stein](#) grew up in an insular, Hasidic community in Brooklyn. When she realized she wanted a different kind of life, she contacted [Footsteps](#), an organization that helps formerly ultra-Orthodox Jews integrate into mainstream society. It turns out, that would be only her first transition.

When I decided to leave the religious community where I grew up, it was primarily about religion: ideology and belief.

I didn't believe in that way of life. I even told myself that once I left, this – whatever it is – is going to go away. Then, when this did not work, I thought that when I got my high school diploma, or when I got to go to college, when I got to date someone, it was going to go away. I tried it all the time, nothing worked. Yet, throughout this whole time I knew what it was, I knew in my heart that unless I could align 'myself' with my mind, I would continue to suffer. But I was terrified by the idea, so I chose to ignore it.

From ages 6 to 20 I was convinced that I was crazy because of what I had in my mind. In my mind I had several different ideas on how to become the girl I was. For example, from ages 7 to 9, I read a lot, collecting different articles about organ transplants. I had this idea in my head that I could do a full body transplant. It was the only idea that I had. I didn't know about gay people then, I certainly didn't know that anything like transgender people existed. I thought gay people were just something that existed in the Bible, like [nephilim](#).

If only I had known growing up that [trans](#) people existed. Nothing might have changed when I was 10, but just hearing someone mention it would have helped me so much.

I didn't know anything about transgender people until after I got married, when I was 18, and moved into my own home, where I finally got access to the Internet. It was the first thing I looked up online: My first Google search was "boy into girl" or something like that. I had been taught that the Internet was a terrible place to "find out stuff," so I was happy to be able to "find out stuff."

For the next three to four years, I read up a lot on the subject. I got to know a lot of trans YouTubers – trans vlogs are an important outlet that trans people use. I read everything that

there was to read. Years later, when I finally got to the doctor and he told me what would happen, what was possible and not possible, I was already an expert.



When I joined Footsteps, I started meeting for the first time queer identified people, several of whom became my close friends. Footsteps has always been a place where personal identity and self-determination is not just accepted, but encouraged in the most positive way possible. It was here that I remember thinking for the first time that if I ever transition, I will have support and encouragement. However, at that point I was terrified by the idea of transitioning; even so, knowing that I had a support network was the biggest relief at the time.

It was obvious to a lot of people that I was hiding something, especially the social worker I was talking to a lot in the beginning of my move away from my community. I always got the sense that he suspected something was going on. It's only recently, when I came out to the Footsteps staff, that one of them said, "Yeah, I knew something more was going on from the moment you joined."

Last year in school, I struggled a lot. My adviser asked me what was happening and told me that if I wanted to continue, I had to go and see a psychologist. She referred me to a really nice, Jewish therapist at Columbia Psychological Services, and after three sessions the doctor said, "Listen, I will write you the letter and tell your adviser that you're okay. But you're hiding something." I said, "I don't know what you're talking about," but of course I did. In the spring, I went to see a specialist at the [LGBT Community Center](#) for the first time, and four sessions in she said, "Listen, you are [trans](#). If you want to continue running from it, go ahead, but in my experience it only gets worse."

Abby's story continues in [Part Two](#).

[Leaving My Ultra-Orthodox Home and Finding My Trans Self: Part Two](#)

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/keshet/leaving-my-ultra-orthodox-home-and-finding-my-trans-self-part-two/#>

By [Abby Stein](#) Tagged: [Footsteps](#), [lgbt](#), [Orthodox](#), [personal profile](#), [TDoR](#), [transgender](#), [Transgender Day of Remembrance](#)

Abby Stein grew up in an insular, Hasidic community in Brooklyn. When she realized she wanted a different kind of life, she contacted [Footsteps](#), an organization that helps formerly ultra-Orthodox Jews integrate into mainstream society. It turns out, that would be only her first transition. This story begins with [Part One](#).

I had a summer job working at Camp Ramah, and while I managed to stay afloat, I think, I was socially very awkward. I think everyone just assumed I'm gay. But really I wasn't in the mood to think of sexuality while I was still working out gender. I got back from camp in July and my depression hit me again, really hard. I live in a Co-Op, we have a kitchen where there's always food, so I never had to leave the house. It was really bad. That's not a life. I was used to it being a cycle, battling gender dysphoria every few weeks, but this time it didn't get better. So eventually I gave up. I went back to the [LGBT Community Center](#) and saw a doctor.

My last 10 weeks, for the first time since I remember, I have not had to battle that depression. Ten weeks ago I started Hormone Replacement Therapy.

I slowly started coming out to close friends.

I sent an email to the other members of the Co-Op where I live, and I came out to a few other people who are close to me, like one of the rabbis at my [campus Hillel](#). I came out to some people at Footsteps, and I've been going to trans events at the LGBT Community Center, at [Nehirim](#), and at [JQY](#).

Finally, last week I came out in public, or as some would call it, I made it "Facebook Official." The love and support I have received since has been above anything I ever imagined.

I would not let how my parents react be an obstacle. But I have been in touch with them since I left the community, and they've come a long way. I wouldn't call them accepting, but they are making their peace with it.

They think of having a child who has left the community as being like having a child with cancer: am I going to reject him? Of course not. I don't go there that often, but I visit for a Shabbat three or four times a year, some holiday meals, my siblings' weddings. Because I felt like they deserve to hear it from me, last week I came out to my father. He took it very badly. He said, and I knew before that he might, that he has to think about it, but it is possible that the family will not be able to stay in touch with me. It is hard, but I can live with that.

A few years ago Oprah had a [segment](#) with a few [Hasidic](#) women from Crown Heights, and she asked them what they do if someone is gay in their community, and their response was that it doesn't exist. And even

as gay becomes more visible and accepted – maybe not in the [ultra-Orthodox](#) community, but certainly in the [Modern Orthodox](#) community – trans is still extremely taboo.

I am connected to a few other trans people who are still living in the Hasidic world. I have a [blog](#) with only a few posts, but these trans people reached out to me through my blog. I assume that for however many people reached out to me, there are probably a lot more who didn't. The rate is probably the same within Hasidic communities as it is everywhere else. They say it's 0.3 percent everywhere else, there's no reason it wouldn't be the same there.

Right now, my goal is not to achieve acceptance within the Hasidic community. I just want visibility. I don't even think in the general media there is broad acceptance for trans people, just more visibility. But that's a step, and that's what I'd like to see happen in the ultra-Orthodox world.

I titled my blog "[The Second Transition](#)," because I think of leaving the ultra-Orthodox world as my first transition. There are a lot of parallels between the trans experience and the OTD ("off the *derech* (pathway)," a term formerly religiously observant Jews use to describe themselves) experience. It used to be that when you left, you assimilated into whatever other part of the Jewish or secular world you went to, and that was it. There was no movement, no OTD community, no Footsteps, nothing. In the same way, trans people used to transition, move away, and fade into their new lives without announcing they are trans. Even when I joined Footsteps, they saw themselves as a stepping stone to that assimilation. They slowly started doing more community development and just de facto turned into a community, and now they offer programs they never had for people 10 or 15 years after leaving, as well as scholarships and fellowships. There are over 150 OTD-themed Facebook groups right now, ranging from cultural, social, philosophical to gatherings, meet-ups, etc. I feel like the same thing is happening in the trans community.

I still don't identify myself as trans.

If I have to give an exact identity, I think of myself as a woman of trans experience rather than a transgender woman. Everyone has their own way of looking at it. My goal is not to live my life telling everyone, "Hi, I'm trans." I plan on living my life as a woman, all the way. But I will always still talk about it. I have a few role models that I look at, like [Jennifer Boylan](#) and [Joy Ladin](#): They live their lives fully as women but speak openly about their trans experience. Hopefully years from now, it won't be necessary, if people just say, "You want to be a girl, a guy, whatever? It's all the same." But it's going to take awhile to get there.

About Footsteps: [Footsteps](#) is the only organization in North America that provides comprehensive supports to individuals grappling with the consequences of leaving ultra-Orthodoxy. Through its social, emotional, and practical support services, Footsteps has assisted more than 1,100 men and women define their identities, build communities and lead self-determined lives.