



Changing Lives, Making History: Congregation Beit Simchat Torah

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Anecdotes of the LGBT Jewish experience bring emotion into how people perceive their religious community and identity.

Since it was founded in 1973, the New York-based Congregation Beit Simchat Torah (CBST) has served as a progressive temple for LGBT Jews and allies. To celebrate its first forty years, the synagogue has compiled *Changing Lives, Making History*, a tome of stories and photos that tell the history of this congregation and the people who formed its membership.

Changing Lives, Making History strikes the right balance of institutional history, personal stories, and scrapbook mementos to create something members should value.

The primary text is straightforward but informative, describing how the temple began as a way to serve a need in the gay Jewish community, and how it evolved through embracing multiple Jewish traditions, bringing in new members, and organizing holiday celebrations. One chapter deals with the AIDS crisis, with touching tributes to members lost to the disease and a discussion about the temple's attempts to raise awareness and promote safety. Another describes the dedication of the congregation's Torah, which was rescued during the Holocaust. The book also makes excellent use of sidebars, with memorial tributes to the deceased, longtime members telling the stories of how they joined, and anecdotes that simply talk about an aspect of the gay Jewish experience. The first-person essays about different aspects of the congregation are a definite strength, bringing emotion and warm nostalgia to this story and demonstrating how members feel about their religious community.

Changing Lives, Making History is also enhanced with lots of interesting visual elements. Photos and documents appear throughout the book, capturing the changing times just as effectively as the text. From notable guest speakers to members marching in parades, to two-page spreads of holiday events, the photos alone make for a solid collectible work. Seeing the congregation's fliers through the years or the pictures from similar celebrations decades apart gives a sense of CBST as an enduring institution with history worth remembering and a future built on those experiences.

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