

BY DOREEN WACHMANN

Shattered Glass had enough of living in chassidic community

As a New York chassidic girl of marriageable age, Dr Sara Glass, author of the memoir *Kissing Girls on Shabbat*, had many skeletons in her cupboard.

Not only was she physically attracted to her girlfriend Dassa, but her family life had been torn apart by mental illness.

When she was seven, Sara's elder sister Shani was hospitalised and diagnosed as bipolar.

Shani's illness triggered off an extreme reaction in Sara's mother, who, to this day, remains virtually isolated in her Brooklyn home.

Although receiving therapy from the age of 15, having been brought up in a strict Ger chassidic household, Sara knew that her only salvation from her sins with Dassa lay in a chassidic marriage in which the will of her husband would be paramount.

So she agreed to marry Lakewood Yeshiva student Yossi.

After an unconsummated first night of marriage, before the first sheva berachot, her husband asked why Shani had not been at the wedding.

Sara explained that the flight from Israel, where Shani was, would not have been good for her mental health and that it could

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have triggered off an episode.

Yossi had obviously not been informed by their shadchan of Sara's family background of mental illness.

His response to the emotional situation was to retreat into becoming much more *machmir* (stringent) in his approach to halacha.

When, just after being confirmed pregnant, Sara bled heavily on Shabbat, her husband refused to break the holy day to take her to hospital. She lost the baby.

After giving birth to a son and a daughter — and having another miscarriage after their rabbi had refused her request to continue with birth control — Sara was "done".

She writes: "I was done being a vessel. I was done being owned. I was done with men telling me what to do with my own body. I was done fighting to stay alive just enough to shield my babies, but not enough to truly live."

After they divorced, Sara was allowed custody of her two children and received her *get* on condition she continued to raise them according to halacha.

At first, Sara, whose ambition



PICTURE: NOA GREEN

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER: Sara with Jordan

was to gain a PhD and become a psychotherapist, tried to comply, often living a double life.

For the sake of her children, Sara persevered in trying to have more positive experiences with kippa-wearing Jewish men.

After a dangerous relationship with Ben, who played Russian roulette with her, she eventually married modern Orthodox Eli, who supported her in her PhD ambition.

She said about modern Orthodoxy: "It was better in a couple of ways. I was allowed to have a career, I was able to get my PhD.

"I was respected among my friends. I worked with men and women and we supported each other. There was a lot more openness to me as a woman living a more fulfilling life."

But the suicide of her sister and rape by a masseur were too much for Sara and her second marriage ended in divorce after she discovered that the clause in her *get* from her first husband was not legally binding.

Renouncing her bisexuality, she came out as a lesbian.

By this time, Sara, who was practising as a psychotherapist, had decided that there was no longer a space for her within Orthodox Jewish society.

She told me: "Even in the modern Orthodox Jewish community there is still not enough space for people who are LGBTQIA.

"There is no space for someone to be out, for a woman to live with another woman and have a family.

"You can't send your children to a modern Orthodox school.

"There are only one or two schools it would be safe to send a child to."

She continued: "I ended up falling in love with someone who wasn't Jewish.

"Because I wasn't going to be accepted in the Jewish community that I came from, I almost felt it didn't matter."

She and her non-Jewish partner had a child, Silas, through IVF.

Having subsequently split up, they are now co-parenting the four-year-old. Her older children, 18-year-old Victor, formerly Avigdor, and 17-year-old Jordan, formerly Shira, are currently graduating from a pluralistic Jewish school in New York.

Sara said: "We chose that school because I wanted them to have positive experiences with Judaism. It was important for me that they should have a place where they could choose for themselves.

"The school has multiple minyanim. They can choose an Orthodox, egalitarian or meditation minyan.

"You have to write a life story to get accepted at university. My children had quite fascinating stories about how they now hope to attend college and choose their own futures instead of just getting married."

At home, she said, "we do Shabbat dinner on Friday night and celebrate holidays."

"Some of the things she was struggling with, I didn't want to create further stigma around. I didn't want to tell her story for her, given that she is still alive."

Sara maintained that her mother was able to live on her own.

She said: "My sisters connect to her to whatever extent they are able. They live in Brooklyn, so they are local.

"Maybe that was why I felt so alone in the marriage I entered into. I just didn't have a mother to call. I was at a disadvantage going in.

"I just had a feeling that I needed to compensate for parents who were not getting on that well and a mother who was struggling.

"In the chassidic community in which I grew up, you needed to take whoever you could get in marriage because you were probably not going to get many options."

Having discussed Sara's personal relationships, I asked her what was her relationship with the God to whom she used to pray daily.

"That is a complicated question to which I have given a lot of thought," she told me. "The God I grew up with was an angry old man, who was very judgmental. The Gerrer God is called kalt (cold), as he is not so loving.

"In one way, coming out of the Orthodox Jewish community and coming out of the closet have kept me really busy.

"I had to single parent my children and financially support them. I haven't had so much time to think about matters of faith because a lot of the time I'm more focused on matters of survival, how do I get from one day to the next, how do I get this child to the doctor or the dentist and not miss work?"

"But I do still have a personal relationship with God. Every single day when I go into the office as a therapist, I have faith that there is a reason why I was put to be a therapist for these sort of people.

"I pray that I will be a conduit for them. I pray that I will find the right words to say."

Sara is the clinical supervisor for the Jewish Queer Youth drop-in centre in Times Square, Manhattan, where she said: "Kids from Orthodox households can come on a Thursday and sit around on rainbow-coloured chairs and have kosher pizza and feel they can be Jewish and queer in the same space."

Sara is hoping that her book will make the Orthodox world more accepting of people like her and the kids she supervises.

■ *Kissing Girls on Shabbat* will be published by One Signal Publishers on Tuesday.

Israeli singer Toren loses cancer battle at 63

ISRAELI singer, composer, and actor Dan Toren died at Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv after a battle with cancer, aged 63.

Toren also worked as a television host and radio broadcaster, and in 2010, was awarded an honorary songwriting award from Israel's music and literary rights association, ACUM.

Toren has been a recording artist since 1987 and has released 12 albums.

He also lectured at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design and the Rimmon School of Music.

A friend of the Movement for Quality Government in Israel, Toren served as a volunteer for the movement for many years.

"His untimely passing is a great loss to the world of Israeli culture, and also to the Israeli protest culture," a statement from the movement read.

"His songs and cultural heritage will continue to accompany us in the fight for a better and more just Israel."