

“We” Have Always Been Queer

The Andalusian Poets

I begin with a section of a poem by Moses Ibn Ezra (1055-after 1138), translated by Peter Cole in *The Dream of the Poem*.

Heart’s Desire

Heart’s hope
 and delight of my eyes—
A fawn beside me,
 a cup in my hand.

Many have warned me
 but I wouldn’t listen;
come, my fawn,
 we’ll overwhelm them;
time will wear them away
 and death lead them down.
 Come, my fawn,
 come near me and heal me
 with nectar from your
 Lips for which I’ve longed.

Why would they
 deny me your company
as though I were being
 drawn toward sin?

If your beauty defeats me,
 my Lord will be with me.
 Pay no attention
 to them who dissuade me,
 O my stubborn one,
 try me, come.

And so he was tempted
 and led me home
where he bowed his shoulder
 to the yoke of my burden—
and all through the night

I lay with him:
I stripped off his clothes
while he stripped mine
and from each other's
lips, we drank our wine....

Moses Ibn Ezra is known traditionally in Hebrew as *Hasallakh*, the composer of many beautiful *selikhot* (penitential prayers) that are included in traditional *mahzors* (High Holy Day prayerbooks). We have other homoerotic poems by Ibn Ezra, by Shmuel Hanagid, the leader of the Jewish community of Granada, by Solomon Ibn Gabirol, the philosopher and mystic of Malaga, and other Hebrew-language poets from eleventh- and twelfth-century Muslim Spain. If you are wondering how the Andalusian Jewish communal authorities tolerated these works, the answer is that some of these poets WERE the authorities.

Professor Jefim Schirmann was the first to notice in the 1950s that the object of Ibn Ezra's love is described in the masculine Hebrew gender. Some scholars then explained that this was because the Hebrew word for fawn is masculine, thus requiring the poet to describe a woman in the masculine gender. In the 1980s, Professor Ray Scheindlin of the Jewish Theological Seminary acknowledged that the object was a male, but he noted that Ibn Ezra might very well have been adapting a genre widespread in Arabic among Muslim poets, and that it proved nothing about Ibn Ezra's sexual orientation or behavior. What was virtually unthinkable was that Moses Ibn Ezra HaSallakh actually engaged in homosexual sex.

Inclusion

There has been much discussion in the Jewish world recently about how "including" or "welcoming" Jews of Color into white-majority synagogues, however well-intentioned, is itself distancing. It assumes that "we" white-identified Jews are happy to include or welcome "them", that is, Jews of Color. This implies that the synagogue does not belong to Black or Brown Jews, who therefore must be welcomed as guests or strangers. This is both inaccurate (many Jews of Color, who surveys estimate constitute 8-15% of North American Jews, were born Jews) and contrary to Jewish values (which direct us never to remind a Jew by choice of their conversion).

While LGBTQ+ Jews today are welcomed into most non-Orthodox, majority-straight synagogue communities, there is a widespread assumption among both queer and straight, queer-friendly Jews that this is unprecedented—that for the three millennia before Stonewall, Jews in good standing neither desired nor engaged in sex with same-sex partners. We are told by social scientists that 5-10 percent of men are gay. It follows that, while in many or most places through the generations, rabbinic authorities disapproved of homosexuality, it is reasonable to

assume that 5-10 percent of Jewish men were primarily attracted to men. Why is this important? Because it affects what we mean by “pride”.

Pride

I’d like to focus this drash on the idea of PRIDE. *Ga’avah*—Pride—is not one of the *middot*, the values, to which we normally aspire, as Jews and as human beings. But I understand that in the context of a Pride March or a Pride Shabbat Service, “pride” is meant to signify the opposite of shame. We are proud to be queer, we are proud of our family and friends who are LGBTQI. We and they need not hide in the closet. We embrace them. We embrace ourselves. We affirm difference. For me, it works only if I understand it as an antidote, as a cure, for shame and loathing. Once we were closeted, but now we are out and defiantly proud.

I will speak humbly about my own experience as a gay man who came out after a 25-year marriage to my ex-wife. I am aware that coming out today may be much less fraught, at least in our circles, and that lesbian experiences are not identical to those of gay men. And I do not mean to speak for the experiences and perspectives of trans and gender-queer people. Nevertheless, I hope my personal insights will be of some value.

It is not so easy to overcome systemic homonormativity—the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm, the superior norm. It was so difficult for Jewish scholars to SEE what is obvious about the Ibn Ezra poem BECAUSE from their 20th-century perspective, they assumed that shameful homosexuality could not be associated with a brilliant composer of liturgy.

In the fall of 2001, I got a call from Mitch Marcus, who explained that he was heading an ad hoc committee to decide whether Malkah Binah Klein and Neysa Nevins could get married on this bimah. GJC at that time had no policy because nobody had ever made this request. Rabbi Gordon intended to organize a process the following year to include all parts of the GJC community to decide the question formally, but in the meantime, Neysa and Malkah Binah needed a provisional answer, which would be made by an ad hoc committee. Mitch was tasked with enlisting representatives from each of the minyanim, and I had come out as a gay man six months before.

When I had come out to many individuals, I assumed that everyone I knew would have heard. It had been and continued to be a difficult process for me for many reasons, one of which was because even though I was proud, I was fearful of other people’s reactions. My pride was implicitly defiant—accept me as I am—and to the great credit of this community, I was not the talk of the town. On the other hand, that meant that most of the members on the ad hoc

committee, with whom I had interacted over the previous dozen years, would not have heard. They knew me as a rabbi, a straight man with a wife of 25 years, and three children.

I agreed to participate, but I was tense. When others on the committee raised the concern that GJC members might resign if we permitted this wedding, I was prepared and I said, "I am gay, and I know many gay-and straight-people who have not joined GJC because we are not inclusive of lesbian and gay people." It did not escape my notice that when I said, "I am gay," heads in the room jerked in surprise and discomfort. I was proud of my courage, but I was exhausted by the effort. Being proud to be a gay man did not inoculate me from less-than-warm responses. I had taught medieval Jewish homoerotic poetry at RRC for twenty years; I had voted in 1983 to admit out lesbian and gay applicants to rabbinical school; and I had been the Academic VP who advocated for them as an ally in many communities, but I was still in thrall to the homophobic culture. I was also still ashamed.

In fact, as I had moved closer to the coming out moment, I discovered that I had more internalized homophobia than I suspected. I had been careful to cross my legs like a man. I had envied David Teutsch's nonchalance about wearing pink shirts, which I could not do because I didn't want anyone, God forbid, to suspect that I was gay. So it should have come as no surprise that several months before I came out, leaving my therapist/coming-out coach's office, I saw two men holding hands, and without thinking, I had regarded them with pity as *miskenim*/pitiable folks who were fated to be unhappy.

Professor Martha Nussbaum at the University of Chicago has written about The Politics of Disgust. Every culture regards its marginalized groups as disgusting. George Orwell wrote about how he was raised to find the odors of working people to be disgusting. Whites in America have been disgusted by the bodies of African Americans, because they have seen them as animals, as less than human. And on the cusp of coming out myself, I still reflexively regarded that gay couple as limp-wristed fairies who used words like *fabulous*.

Around that time, I came out to Rabbi Brian Walt and confessed that I, Jacob Staub who was known far and wide as the paragon of fearless HONESTY, would be despised when people found out that I had been lying about my sexual orientation for 50 years. Brian, God bless him, replied, "Jacob, gays get beat up and killed all the time. Nobody is going to blame you for having been closeted." That conversation moved me a step closer to letting go of my shame. But at that ad hoc meeting at GJC later that year, I was still embarrassed. Proud, but ashamed.

The rapid reversal of American attitudes towards gays and lesbians over the last four decades is often attributed to the fact that when straight people got to know more and more queers when

they watch TV shows like “Will and Grace,” they became less homophobic, less inclined to be disgusted by difference. It took ten years after RRC first admitted queer students for the first one to be appointed as rabbi of a Reconstructionist congregation. And then it became easier at a startlingly rapid pace. The first time I walked into a meeting of the Gay Married Men Support Group and the William Way Center on Locust, was the first time I had ever been out among a group of twenty men who were also out, at least to one another. It was the first time I didn’t have to come out. We were all regular people, in all of our diverse circumstances. That’s the quickest way to shed disgusting stereotypes.

How do each of us respond to the revelation that Moses Ibn Ezra was attracted to men and made love with them? And even if the poem is an unconsummated fantasy, that he fantasized in that way? Are we incredulous? Suspicious? In denial? To be PROUD as Jews means we can accept that same-sex love has been a constant throughout Jewish history, and not just by people on the fringe. It means being happy for Ibn Ezra’s love, even if his cultural context did not allow him to marry the object of his love.

There is an enterprise called “Queering the Text” that has developed over the last several decades. The book “Torah Queeries” collects queering interpretations of each weekly parshah. To “queer” means, among other things, to read the text without heteronormative assumptions.

Can we imagine that David and Jonathan were lovers? David says to Jonathan (2 Sam 1:26):
I grieve for you,
My brother Jonathan,
You were most dear to me.
Your love was wonderful to me
More than the love of women.

We don’t know whether they were physically attracted to each other or if they made love. The question is whether it is imaginable to us, and if we can be proud if they were. We have no idea if David uttered these words, or even if David was an historical person, but what could have been in the mind of this writer, who wrote centuries before the Holiness Code of Leviticus called some form of male homosexual love a *to’evah*, an abomination.

What about Ruth and Naomi? Ruth says to Naomi:
Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the LORD do to me^b if anything but death parts me from you.”

The same question. How do we feel contemplating the possibility that Ruth, the great grandmother of David, and thus the progenitor of the Messiah, was erotically involved with her mother-in-law?

One more: Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in Baba Metzia 84a:

One who wishes to see something resembling the beauty of Rabbi Yoḥanan should bring a new, shiny silver goblet from the smithy and fill it with red pomegranate seeds [*partzidaya*] and place a diadem of red roses upon the lip of the goblet, and position it between the sunlight and shade. That luster is a semblance of Rabbi Yoḥanan's beauty...

The Gemara relates: **One day, Rabbi Yoḥanan was bathing in the Jordan River. Reish Lakish saw him and jumped into the Jordan, pursuing him.** At that time, Reish Lakish was the leader of a band of marauders. Rabbi Yoḥanan **said to** Reish Lakish: **Your strength is fit for Torah study.** Reish Lakish **said to him: Your beauty is fit for women.**

Five to ten percent of people are queer, they tell us. Can we imagine that there was a mutual attraction between Rav Yohanan and Reish Lakish? The two became inseparable, and we are told that Reish Lakish took sick and died when Rav Yohanan once treated him badly. Sounds like love to me. This is only disrespectful if calling someone gay is an insult.

Why is it valuable for us as Jews to queer texts in this way? Because to have PRIDE is to go further than welcoming and including queer people—THEM—into OUR midst. To truly acknowledge that 5-10% of our ancestors—whether Moses Ibn Ezra, Rav Yohanan or our grandparents—were queer, and to be **proud** of them, is to affirm their value and legitimacy, and our own.

The current ruthless assault on trans young people and their parents is unconscionable. Ideally, we have to hope that, as was the case for the acceptance of lesbians and gays, transphobia will diminish as more people get to know trans and nonbinary people. It is about seeing people as beautiful human beings, about relinquishing disgust that comes from unfamiliarity and dehumanization. Professor Buffie Longmire-Avital just published an essay on the website Evolve that reports on her research findings that most liberal parents do not teach their children to intervene when they observe homophobia or transphobia. It can seem dangerous, it can BE dangerous, to come out as trans-friendly or queer-friendly in the presence of aggressive, angry transphobic or homophobic people, and we all need training about how to do so effectively. Otherwise, we are complicit. Queer folks are not the only ones who need to develop pride as an antidote to shame. Pride is for everyone. Pride is an act of *tikkun olam*.

I want to close with a poem I wrote about 15 years ago, as I prepared to lead a Kabbalat Shabbat service at a Shabbaton of the organization *Nehirim*, which brought queer Jews together in the oughts to experience being queer and Jewish at the same time. It was my introduction to *Lekha Dodi*, which the Kabbalists of Tzefat sang to welcome the Shabbat Bride,

All Souls

*Come, my beloved, let's greet the source of blessing.*¹

Jacob J. Staub

I recognized you during the fifth stanza.
Your neck flushed red, and the hairs on mine
tingled as I recognized your voice distinct
above the effervescent chorus
singing, "Arouse yourself! Arouse!"

I'd been staring at your knitted
black *kippah*² and the fringes dangling
from your belted, narrow waist,
embarrassed to be thrilling to the image:
you patrolling some yeshiva in Judea
with your Uzi, trusting in my heart
that that was long ago, nevermore.
Yours was not a settler's neck!

Bursting left and right, anticipating
you sighting my back as we turned
around to welcome the Sabbath Bride,
the memory blushed like the pink pastel
of the Galilean sunset: the two of us,
dressed in whites, jostling down
the dusty road to the city gate
pretending that our bumps and humps
were accidental, as if we hadn't
longed all week for this parade,
through our all-day text parsing,
through our late night shuckling,
alone, inseparable in the study hall,
as if we were the only two kabbalists
in Safed for whom Queen Sabbath,

¹ *Lekhah Dodi*, composed by the kabbalists in sixteenth-century Safed, sung on Friday at sunset to usher in the Sabbath.

² skull cap

bless her, was our beard.

Five centuries ago, ecstatically
dancing her back to the prayer hall,
the Master the Lion waiting entranced,
we never thought to long for a day
when lovers could embrace on the same side
of the gender divide. Come my beloved,
we have sat in the valley of tears oh so long,
arouse yourself, the light bursts forth,
the Holy Presence shines from us!

First Published in *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction* 26/4 (December 2020). <https://www.sdicompanions.org/media/presence/presence-26-4-december-2020/all-souls/>

Barukh Hamafli La'asot. Blessed are You, the One who performs wonders, opening up the vessels of our bodies, opening up the blockages of our minds.

Shabbat Shalom.