

TEXTS FOR OUR TIMES - In Honor of Pride

"Queering" the Torah

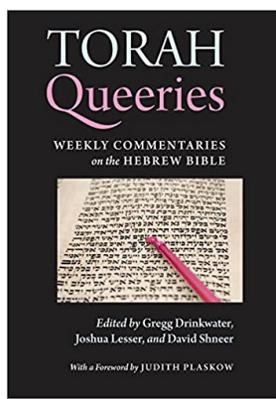
Led by Rabbi Debra Cantor



Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei Torah.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has made our lives holy with Your mitzvot, and commanded us to engage with the words of Torah.

PROFESSOR DAVID SHNEER, selections from "Interpreting the Bible through a Bent Lens"



[This essay is the introduction to **Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible**, edited by Gregg Drinkwater, Joshua Lesser and David Shneer. NY: NYU Press, 2012]

The origins of [the] impulse to set the Bible aside began during the Enlightenment ...But a countertrend attempted to link religion and social justice, especially in the legacies of Liberation Theology and of Christian leaders, such as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, and Jewish ones, such as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. These leaders saw social justice and religion as intimately linked and the Bible as a text of liberation, not oppression. Through their and other religious leaders' examples, progressives, especially in the United States, began to see **new ways of approaching the ancient texts.**

As the foreword by Judith Plaskow so eloquently articulates, **feminism sparked the most powerful form of this textual revolution...Feminism's challenge to Judaism meant women's access not only to Judaism, text, and power but also to the way Judaism was interpreted. A feminist Judaism meant broadening the access points into Judaism. It meant giving education, and therefore power, to more people over their *Judaisms*.**

Feminist Judaism also contributed to **the individualizing of Jewish practices and the notion that one can create new rituals to honor contemporary realities.** *Torah Queeries*, then, follows a history of textual interpretation that is more than two thousand years old. **Reading Torah through a bent lens opens up new insights and allows the text to liberate rather than oppress.** As might seem obvious to many readers, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and for other reasons transgender and intersex people have seen the text as a tool of oppression for as long as the text has been foundational to Western society.

In Christianity, the notorious passage in Leviticus, "Thou shalt not lie with a man as with a woman," at least as the Jewish Publication Society translates it, has led priests, pastors, ministers, and other religious leaders to exclude gays, lesbians, and bisexuals from their communities—dismissing them as "sinners," excommunicating them, or in the most extreme cases, killing them. In some Muslim societies, because of the way these and other holy texts are read, homosexuality is still punishable by death. In the Jewish

tradition, those same Biblical passages function as the basis for a system of religious law that absolutely forbids homosexual relations, at least in the Orthodox, or traditional, view...

However, it is rare to hear even the most conservative Jewish voice calling for the death of Jewish gays and lesbians...This is not to trumpet Jewish triumphalism but is instead to suggest that **Judaism has textual interpretive traditions built into it that make Torah Queeries not just possible but central** to conversations in Judaism writ large...

Reading the Bible through a bent lens, then, puts the nearly fifty authors in this book in a very long line of illustrious readers and interpreters of the Bible...**The very fact of this book suggests that people interested in things queer nonetheless have a deep investment in text and tradition**, and in the way they are used to shape contemporary society. **But reading the Torah queerly also means doing something not very traditional.** This book brings together scholars who are well trained in reading the Bible, like the traditional rabbinic elite, with scholars who are trained to read the Bible in very different ways. For some of these scholarly voices, the goal is **to excavate the meaning of the Bible in its ancient Near Eastern context**, rather than as it has been understood since medieval or in modern times. Others take **the same historical approach for the Talmudic period and ask, "What did the rabbis, in their world, mean by this text?"** These questions lead to some surprising conclusions. And this book includes the voices of social-change activists... These writers focus on **issues of social justice, rethinking community, and understanding power, and they are using re-readings of the Torah to make new commentaries on contemporary social reality.** *Torah Queeries* brings all these voices together in one volume.

Readers have different kinds of "bent lenses" through which they read the text, and they understand the word queer in different ways. Some are highly trained in a body of literature known as "**queer theory**" that **challenges norms, upends hierarchies, and trains people to read against the grain.** These kinds of readings break down boundaries and make everything more complicated than it might seem. Others do not have this literary background and instead bring training as Bible interpreters to the table and **read the text looking for ways to honor the lives of gays and lesbians.** For these readers, **boundaries may be useful, but they should be broadened to include gays and lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people.** For others, the text is a rallying cry to social action, and for others, the story of the Israelites is one of the world's most ancient coming-out stories, considering how many Biblical characters conceal parts of their identities to survive in a sometimes hostile world and the forty years of wandering in the desert before reaching the Promised Land. Because of this diversity of lenses, the authors often do not agree on how to read a particular portion...

Like the Biblical characters being reread, the authors also come from different backgrounds, have diverse identities—men, women, and trans—and identify as straight, gay, queer, gender queer, lesbian, bi, and other; some write in first person, others in a very scholarly third person. Most are deeply learned in Jewish tradition and Jewish text, but **what they all bring to the table are unique ways of reading and interpreting that allow the Torah to speak to modern concerns. Interpretation means looking back at texts written thousands of years ago and simultaneously looking forward to new ways of seeing.**

Questions to Ask When Trying to Read the Torah from a Trans Perspective

Professor Joy Ladin



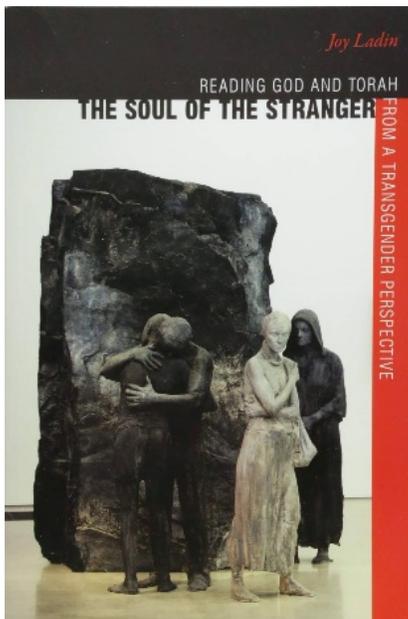
Joy Ladin, the David and Ruth Gottesman Chair of English at Stern College for Women at Yeshiva University, is the first openly transgender professor in an Orthodox institution. The recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in creative non-fiction and a Hadassah-Brandeis Institute Research Fellowship, she has published an award-winning memoir, “Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey Between Genders,” numerous essays and 10 volumes of poetry.

Hermeneutic suspicion

Binary

Gender

Gender Non-Binary or Non-Conforming (note the negative formulation)



1. What experiences have **you** had of feeling or acting in ways that don't fit your assigned gender roles?

2. Where in the Torah do you see characters behaving in ways that **don't** fit their assigned gender roles?

3. Where do characters in the Torah act in ways that **do** fit their assigned gender roles or expectations? What are the consequences of acting this way in terms of their relations to other people? In terms of their relations to God? What other choices might they have made?

4. Where does the Torah portray someone as not fitting or being undetermined by or incomprehensible in terms of human roles and categories? (God is the usual suspect, but human beings such as Moses and Elijah have their moments.) How does the Torah portray interactions and relationships between those who do and those who don't fit human roles and categories?

5. Where and how does the Torah portray “hyper-minorities” – those who are seen as essentially different from other members of the communities to which they belong?

North and South
by Joy Ladin

Don't underestimate your need
to cross the line. Frozen
on the wrong side of your desire

to remake the world
inverted in the mirror
of your otherness,

how can you be true
to the truth of being human,
something that bends

in a universe that doesn't, a messy blend
of guts and spirit, responsibility and shame?
You are only an inch

from the constantly moving
source of life, no matter how passionately
you crush yourself

into the boxes – male or female, north or south, poor or rich, white
or some other social shade – you check
because you are scared

to cross the lines that keep you safe
from more complicated combinations
of love and loneliness,

rocking your soul to sleep
while you stuff your body
into too-tight boxes, knowing no one will mind

you don't have the guts to live
as long as you stay
on your side of the line.

RABBI JAMES GREENE on *Parashat Beha'alotcha*: "A Parade of Welcome" [5/28/10 keshetonline.org]

In this week's Torah portion, *Beha'alotcha*, we read one of the most profound phrases in the entire Bible. Numbers chapter 10 tells us:

They [the Israelites] marched from the mountain of God a distance of three days. The Ark of the Covenant of God traveled in front of them on that three-day journey to seek out a resting place for them; and God's cloud kept above them by day, as they moved on from camp. When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: 'Advance, O God! May Your enemies be scattered and may Your foes flee before you! Return, O God, You who are Israel's myriad of thousands!'

The image of this community marching through the wilderness is enough to get the blood pumping. It is the same mythic story we re-enact each Shabbat morning as the Torah is taken from the Ark and processed around the congregation. What an incredible story!

Sefer Ha'agadah (The Book of Legends) offers a midrash about what this journey must have looked like. It teaches, "A sign would appear in the cloud for Moses when it was about to move. When he saw by this sign that the cloud was about to move, he would say, 'Rise up, O Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered' (Num. 10:35). Then the cloud moved. As the cloud moved, all made preparations for the journey and began loading their utensils. Whoever had an animal would load the utensils on it, and the cloud would take on the rest. After all the utensils were loaded, the trumpets sounded and Judah, led by his standard, set out: first Judah's prince, and then his tribe. The other tribes followed in the same order: 'every man to his own standard, according to the emblems' (Num. 2:2)."

The idea that each tribe within the larger congregation of Israel moved in its own unique way is appealing to me as an advocate for equality and inclusion. If the LGBTQ community is its own tribe (or perhaps more accurately a set of tribes) within the congregation of Israel, it is liberating to know that we each have the freedom to travel the journey of the Jewish people as we see fit. Moreover, the congregation of Israel is required to take everyone along for the ride; everyone fits into the caravan to Israel. I love the idea that the Queer community can set its own destiny and travel its own journey within the story of the Jewish people. It invites us to open up Jewish tradition and turn things on their head as we seek an authentic path.

We do this by reshaping traditional life cycle events or developing creative new rituals to mark unique moments in our lives, subverting the hetero- normative nature of biblical literature in favor of a path which questions the text in new and interesting ways or searching for new meaning. No matter what path we take, each of us is given the opportunity to pick up the Torah and continue the journey of the Israelites. As we remove the Torah from the Ark and call upon God to line up all the different tribes of Israel to continue the journey of the Jewish people, I am continually called to join in and be counted among this community which is as old as time.

May this week be one of joining in the journey. Just as our ancestors felt called to create a welcoming community, may we be blessed to be welcomed and to welcome others as we continue in the tradition of our ancestors.

Contemporary Terms for Gender Diversity

From: "Gender Diversity in Jewish Sacred Texts," by Ari Lev Fornari, Rabbi Elliot Kukla, Rabbi Dev Noily; <https://www.keshetonline.org/resources/gender-diversity-in-jewish-sacred-texts>

Transgender or Trans: An umbrella term for anyone who knows themselves to be a gender that is different than the gender they were assigned at birth. Some trans people may have a gender identity that is neither man nor woman, and for some people their gender identity may vary at different points in their lives. Transgender has its origin in the Latin-derived prefix trans, meaning "across" or "beyond."

Gender Identity: A person's inner understanding of the gender(s) to which they belong or with which they identify. This is each person's unique knowing or feeling, and is separate from a person's physical body or appearance (although often related).

Intersex: A general term used to refer to people who have atypical sexual or reproductive anatomy and biology. Intersex is not a single category – many forms of intersex exist and within each form, there may be substantial variation as well. Variations may include the reproductive organs such as the testicles, penis, vulva, clitoris, and ovaries, chromosomes, and hormone levels, all of which can result in additional variations in secondary sexual characteristics such as muscle mass, hair distribution, breast development, hip to waist ratio and stature. The term intersex displaced "hermaphroditism", which is now considered offensive, as knowledge and understanding of sex development has increased. Intersex continues to be widely accepted as an umbrella term referring to biological diversity affecting sexual and reproductive anatomy.

Gender Nonconforming: Used to describe people whose gender expression does not align with societal expectations based on their perceived gender. Just because someone is gender non-conforming does not mean that they are trans.

Queer: 1) An umbrella term used by some to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. 2) A term used to describe a sexual orientation that is not straight, without indicating the genders of the queer person or the people they are attracted to. Some people prefer queer because it doesn't reference the gender binary, and some people prefer queer because it can expansively include attraction to people of a range of genders (used similarly to "pansexual" and "bisexual"). 3) Historically and currently used by some as a slur targeting those perceived to transgress "norms" of sexual orientation and/or gender expression, but for others, a word that has been reclaimed as a positive and affirmative part of their identity.

Genderqueer: A gender identity used by a person that self-defines their gender as queer or non-normative. Someone whose gender identity is neither man nor woman, is between or beyond gender, rejects binary gender, is some combination of genders. *Can sometimes be used interchangeably with nonbinary.*

GENESIS 1:27

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם

בראשית א: כז

God created the *adam* [the first human being] in God's own image; in the image of God He created him – male and female [God] created them.

MIDRASH RABBAH 8:1

אָמַר רַבִּי יִרְמְיָה בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר : בְּשַׁעַה שֶׁבָּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן
אֲנֵדְרוּגִינוֹס בָּרָאוּ

Said Rabbi Jeremiah ben Elazar: "When the Holy One, blessed be the One, created the first *adam* [human being], [God] created him [an] "*androgynos*."

MISHNA BIKKURIM CHAPTER 4

1: *Androgynos* is in some ways like men, and in some ways like women, and some ways like both men and women and in some ways neither like men nor women...

5: ...Rabbi Yose says: *Androgynos* is a creation of its own kind, and the sages could not decide if he was a man or a woman. But this is not the case for the *tumtum* sometimes a *tumtum* is a man, and sometimes a *tumtum* is a woman.

Terms for Gender Diversity in Jewish Sacred Texts:

Zachar: This term is derived from the word for a pointy sword and refers to a phallus. It is usually translated as “male” in English

Nekevah: This term is derived from the word for a crevice and probably refers to a vaginal opening. It is usually translated as “female” in English.

Androgynos: A person who has both “male” and “female” sexual characteristics. In the Talmud, the androgynos is understood as someone who both has a penis as well as some female sex traits. 149 references in Mishna and Talmud (1st – 8th Centuries CE); 350 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes (2nd – 16th Centuries CE)

Tumtum: A person whose sexual characteristics are indeterminate or obscured. In the Talmud the tumtum has indeterminate genitals. 181 references in Mishna and Talmud; 335 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.

Ay'lonit: A person who is identified as “female” at birth but develops “male” characteristics at puberty and is infertile. 80 references in Mishna and Talmud; 40 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.

Saris: A person who is identified as “male” at birth but develops “female” characteristics at puberty or later. A saris is considered male, but has no penis or a very small penis. A saris can be “naturally” a saris (saris hamah), or become one through human intervention (saris adam). His status is also known as a eunuch. 156 references in mishna and Talmud; 379 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.

Our Genderqueer Ancestors: Abraham & Sarah

BABYLONIAN TALMUD YEVAMOT 64a-b

דף סד: א דף סד: ב

א"ר יצחק: מפני מה היו אבותינו עקורים? מפני שהקב"ה מתאוה לתפלתן של צדיקים
א"ר יצחק: למה נמשלה תפלתן של צדיקים כעתר? מה עתר זה מהפך התבואה ממקום למקום
כך תפלתן של צדיקים מהפכת מדותיו של הקב"ה ממדת רגזנות למדת רחמנות
אמר רבי אמר: אברהם ושרה טומטמין היו, שנאמר: +ישעיהו נ"א+ הביטו אל צור חוצבתם
ואל מקבת בור נוקרתם, וכתוב: +ישעיהו נא+ הביטו אל אברהם אביכם
ואל שרה תחוללכם
אמר רב נחמן אמר רבה בר אבוא: שרה אמנו אילונית היתה, שנאמר: +בראשית י"א+ ותהי
שרי עקרה אין לה ולד, אפי' בית ולד אין לה

R. Isaac said: Why were our ancestors (Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca) infertile?
Because the Holy One, blessed be, longs to hear the prayer of the righteous.

R. Isaac further stated: Why is the prayer of the righteous compared to a pitchfork? As a
pitchfork turns the sheaves of grain from one position to another, so does the prayer of
the righteous turn the heart of the Holy One, blessed be, from the attribute of strict
judgment to the attribute of compassion.

R. Ammi said: Abraham and Sarah were originally *tumtums*, for it is said, "Look to the rock
you were hewn from, and the hollow of the pit from which you were dug." (Isaiah 51:1),
and this is followed by the text, "Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you."

R. Nachman said in the name of Rabbah b. Abbuha: Our mother Sarah was an *aylonit*, for it
is said, "And Sarai was barren, she had no child" (Genesis 11:30). [the verse says both 'was
barren' and 'had no child' to tell us that] she didn't even have a womb!

For LGBTQIQ People

Andrew Ramer

Our people came out of Egypt a mixed multitude, the spray of dividing waters sparkling diamonds all around them. We stood together at Sinai, all of us—future, present, past—amid the rumble of thunder and the crack of bright lightning to enter into covenant with the One who loves us, in whose shining image we are all created, over and over again.

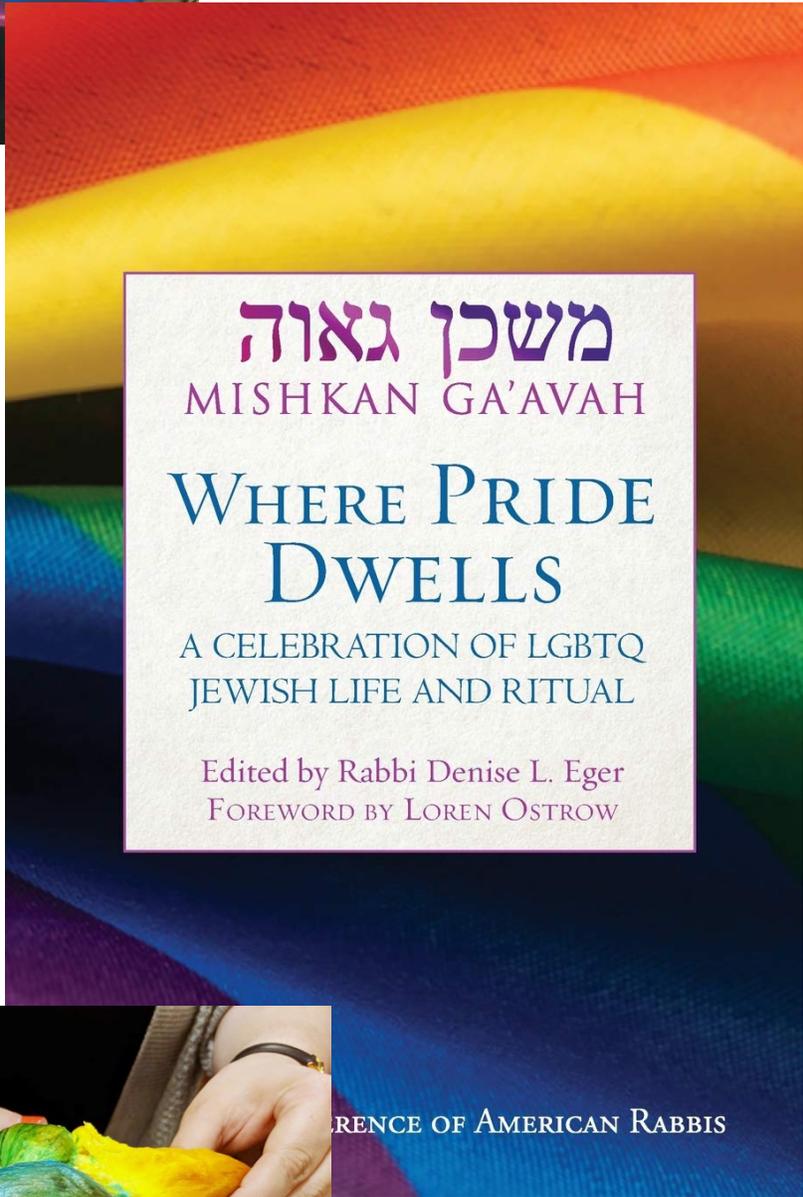
We have wandered bleak landscapes, built flimsy tents of skin and then houses of stone. We have planted orchards and vineyards, seen two Temples rise and then go down in the surging flames, forcing us into exile.

We have loved and lost, grieved and danced, transgressed and celebrated. Hidden, suffered, thrived.

And we gather here this day, in the community of our people, a mixed multitude, and we sign out: Hear O Israel, we stand together, all of us, descendants of the single first human created on the sixth day, and of our myriad parents down through the generations, too numerous to name. We stand together, link arms, and pray.

Blessed are You, God of the universe, who sanctifies us with the commandment to love ourselves and one another—in all our varied ways—and blesses us with a diamond-bright radiance that still ripples out from Your first spoken words of creation.





משכן גאווה
MISHKAN GA'AVAH

WHERE PRIDE
DWELLS

A CELEBRATION OF LGBTQ
JEWISH LIFE AND RITUAL

Edited by Rabbi Denise L. Eger
FOREWORD BY LOREN OSTROW

CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS



Mi Shebeirach for an LGBTQ Community

May the One who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses, Aaron, and David; Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel, Miriam, and Ruth, bless this community. May we know love and friendship, joy and blessing.

We are a rainbow people. As You placed the rainbow in the sky as a promise of hope for all time, make our lives into a promise of hope as well. Help us to feel Your Divine Presence when others may question the righteousness of our lives. Let us come to know that all things are possible: love and hope, caring friendships and family. May those of us who are deep within the closet find courage and comfort through You.

We give thanks for our allies and friends. Help them to stand with us in our work to bring about equality. Give them the courage to speak out when others try to attack our LGBTQ community. Give them and us strength to overcome the stereotypes that too often cause our rainbow people pain.

Bless our community and its leaders, and keep us from all harm. Grant us, O God, health and prosperity. Keep us strong as we pursue justice and civil rights. Ease the pain of those who are ill, and inspire each of us to perform acts of loving-kindness each and every day.

וְנֹאמַר: אָמֵן.

V'nomar: amein.

And let us say: Amen.

—by Rabbi Denise L. Eger, 2007