

Coming Out into the Light

By Aaron Weininger

The origin of the eternal light, the *ner tamid* that hangs in front of every synagogue ark, is derived from this morning's Torah reading.

We read that in preparing for their ordination and responsibilities as priests for the Tabernacle, Aaron and his sons are commanded to establish a continually burning lamp in front of the Ark of the Covenant.

You can walk into any synagogue today and see such an eternal light, the *ner tamid*, hanging in front of the ark.

The *aron kodesh*—the holy ark where the Torah is kept can also be translated in modern Hebrew as the holy closet. The ark is like a closet, a place of confinement and darkness. What is inside? The Torah; the recordings of our spiritual narrative: that which is most integral to our collective identity. The Torah is the embodiment of our ancestors' most sacred strivings, making sense of and responding to the Divine will. The Torah is the culmination of our ancestors' journeys and the beginning of our own.

But the Torah cannot forever stay inside the ark in isolation, the spiritual quests of our people must come out to instruct us, and we must engage them with the intuitions, experience, and insights from the truths of our real-lived experience. So the Torah comes out: the Jewish people take the Torah out, into the light of the world where it can radiate with Divine sparks. As my rabbi Gordon Tucker writes, "The law is given cogency and support by the ongoing story of the community that seeks to live by the law."

And just as the Torah has come out of the ark in every generation—to be wrestled with by Jews who pour over its words—so too Jews have always come out and shared the entirety of their identities. The narratives of human experience encapsulate the aspirations of Jews who seek to draw near to God and actualize a vision of divine mercy.

By honoring the totality of ourselves, by bringing our stories to light, we honor God's creation.

We read in our liturgy from Psalm 145: *karov Adonai l'chol korav, l'chol asher yikrauhu v'emet.*

God is close to all who call upon God, to all who call upon God in truth.



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While I do not seek priestly ordination like my namesake Aaron in the Torah, my journey has led me to want to serve my people as a rabbi. As I draw close to God with the truth of my experience, I share one part of my identity, as a gay man—like Queen Esther revealed her identity as a Jew or Vashti—who comes out for her values, by essentially not coming out.

When we call to God with the integrity of our entire selves, God draws close to us. As a rabbi, I want to teach Torah and create an integrated practice of Judaism with the entirety of my mind, heart, and soul. In doing so, I will empower others to express and share the totality of their beings as they shape lives in the light of Torah. We approach and engage the world with many different identities, reflecting the diversity and sanctity of God’s creation. As I prepare to enter rabbinical school and serve my people as a Conservative rabbi, I look forward to sharing my narrative and encouraging others to honor the entirety of their sacred identities.

In Chapter Eight of the Book of Esther, as the city of Shushan rang with joyous cries, we read the verse that we chant every week at the conclusion of Shabbat: “The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor.”

When the Jews of Shushan were able to come out and be themselves, light abounded.

The *aron kodesh* can truly be an *aron kodesh*—a holy closet—if we recognize the time for privacy, but also come out, and be ourselves with community. The trick is incorporating both into our spiritual practice. The *ner tamid*, the eternal lamp in front of the ark, can be our guide, as we stand on the brink of darkness and light.

May Purim, the time of Esther’s coming out as a Jew and the Jewish People’s coming out from darkness into the light of redemption, inspire us to share those parts of our concealed identities which inhibit us from approaching God and community with the totality of ourselves. May we look into the eyes of every Jew with the same love and depth with which we engage Torah, and recognize the sacred spark of Divine light that comes out in all of God’s creation.

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