

Hasidism and Homoeroticism

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1. Spirit and Sex

Recently, I participated in a summit sponsored by Gay Spirit Culture, a new organization with two complementary missions: first, to bring spiritual practice and awareness into the gay community ("shifting gay culture by supporting inner transformation"), and second, to articulate and share the unique perspectives, if any, which gay people have into spirituality generally. These are noble goals. On the one hand, the GLBT community has been so wounded by the homophobia of traditional religion that it often seems willfully anti-spiritual, despite the historical prominence of queer people among the world's leading mystical and religious personalities. And, of course, there remain conservative elements within the world's religious traditions who, due to their fear and ignorance, are causing great suffering - even death - among the co-religionists whom they drive to despair and self-mutilation.

At GSC, we wanted to create not just a "safe space" for queers to be religious in the ordinary way; we wanted to create a queer space to be religious in a new way. Often, this meant recovering the supposedly lost linkage between spirituality and sexuality. Sometimes, this was experiential, and radical: sacred rites of erotic spirituality, radical-faerie-influenced paganism and art, and so on. Other times were more sedate. But throughout, there was the general understanding that what we were doing was either essentially new, or recovering a spiritual eroticism long suppressed in the mainstream traditions.

By coincidence, I traveled immediately after the GSC summit to Israel. I was worried about moving so rapidly from such a heated, erotic-spiritual space into a place where, I felt, such forms of expression are sadly lacking. I was moving, it seemed, from a place that was experimental, experiential, radical, and queer to a place that, while holy and precious to me, was traditional, mediated by text, and overwhelmingly heteronormative. Sure, I had gay friends who I'd go and visit, but, in general, it seemed like this part of myself was going to have to be turned "off" for a while.

In fact, I found that a rich, queer eroticism is alive and well and living in the haredi community. What I saw amazed me - even despite my long history of participating, as an outsider, in Hasidic rituals. It also caused me to question several fundamental assumptions about the place and effect of homoeroticism in traditional religious communities. If straightness is about identity roles and fixed gender distinctions, and queerness is about questioning all of those things, then what I found - and I'm no ethnographer, these are merely anecdotes -- was very queer indeed.

2. The tomb and the bathhouse

The minor Jewish holiday of Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day after the beginning of Passover, is traditionally observed as the *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, to whom has been ascribed the authorship of the Zohar, masterpiece of Kabbalah. That Bar Yohai did not write the Zohar text we have today, that he probably isn't buried in the place regarded as his tomb, and that he may not have even died on Lag B'Omer, is all beside the point. Up to 30,000 people converge on his tomb and dance through the night and throughout the entire next day. Given that the tomb complex itself is only the size of an average suburban house, the crowding is intense. (The daytime images in Andy Alpern's photo essay, in this month's issue of Zeek, are far less crowded; literally every square foot of the tomb complex was covered at night.)

Of course, the hordes are separated - men on one side, women on the other. And so for the entire time I was there, I was sandwiched between a moving mass of male humanity. There was no personal space whatsoever; every part of my body, except my head, was in full contact with a part of someone else's body. There were rare instances where I stumbled into a gap in the crowd. But most of the time, I had to surrender to its ebbs and flows, pushing through the sea of flesh to get where I wanted to go.

The full body contact in an undulating, dancing, ecstatic, sweaty, loud, and extremely excited crowd of men was only the beginning. Men were dancing with each other, embracing one another, laughing and celebrating, singing at the top of their lungs. Bonfires were burning. And the dancing was erotic, sensual. Two men, captured on video by a friend of mine -- the stills on this page are from that video; [click here to watch and hear it for yourself](#) -- performed sensual *yichudim* (unifications) using each other's bodies as the medium for the Divine. They ran their hands a few inches from one another's bodies - imagine the hand- gestures a sailor might make to show the outline of a curvaceous woman, except the woman is actually there, except the woman is actually a man.

The two men made eye contact, slid around one another like a pair of belly-dancers, with seductive expressions on their faces. Had I not seen it myself, I would not have believed it. This was not the deracinated 'simcha dancing' popular in more moderate Orthodox circles. This was ecstatic, erotic, and as embodied as any of the experiences I had at GSC. Now, these were *haredi* men living in a virtually all-male environment, seeing their wives only a few hours each day and avoiding conversations with all other women. They had been educated in single-sex *yeshivas*. But it still was surprising, to me, that they seemed aware of and untroubled by the eroticism of other male bodies. Of course - and I will return to this point later - all of this eroticism exists within the context of extremely negative attitudes towards homosexuality, and I have no doubt that the dancers I saw did nothing more than dance. But this seems beside the point. Erotic is not about sex; it is about the vital energy in every person, and the experiencing of one's own and other people's life-force in an open, excited way. Lag B'Omer was not mere physicality - it wasn't just a basketball, or even a football game. It was a knowing, deep presence with the dynamic energy of other people. And since in

this case, the other people were of the same sex, the interpersonal eroticism defied the strict gender conventions of heteronormativity. It was as queer as a three shekel coin.

A second bit of evidence, to me even more surprising than the love-dance of the Lag B'Omer hasidim.

There is a longstanding Jewish custom to immerse in the mikva, the ritual bath, before the sabbath and holidays. Some hasidic men do it every morning before prayer or study. According to halacha, only women are required to immerse in the mikva, after menstruation, as a purification rite. But it is a custom which has become widespread. The mikva is seen as purifying one from an array of sins - but most importantly, that of shichvat zera, or spilled seed. Jewish law is very concerned with the discharges of the body, chiefly blood and semen, both of which were believed to contain the life-energy of a person. By returning to the womb of the mikva, the body is returned, symbolically, to a state of integrity and innocence.

Of course, the irony for queer Jews is that the mikva is a place simultaneously of abnegation and eroticism: one must become completely naked to immerse, and generally there are other men there at the same time. But consider how different the world of the hasidic man is from that of the typical American man, who rarely sees other men naked, and who spins paranoid myths about faggots in the locker room. Boys grow up seeing their fathers, friends, and brothers naked every week - some every day. Given the small size of most Hasidic communities, it is safe to assume that, over time, every man gets naked with every other man. And, at least in my experience, there is none of the fear-driven machoism which I have witnessed in locker rooms and school showers.

In Mea Shearim, the oldest haredi neighborhood in Jerusalem, the pre-sabbath mikva has been expanded to a wild extreme. I visited a complex with a traditional schvitz (steam room) combined with three mikvas (warm, hot, and scalding) and group showers. Old men, young men, adolescents, and boys filled the complex, with far more personal body contact than I saw even in the Turkish bathhouses of Europe. In the schvitz, it was not unusual for a man to bend over, hand the man behind him the traditional platza branches, and ask him to whip him with it - or, as an alternative, to hand the man a soapy rag and ask for a massage.

I have no interest in S&M, and so have only seen it practiced a few times - most recently, in fact, at the GSC summit. There was, as far as I could see, little phenomenological difference between what I saw there and what I saw at the Mea Shearim schvitz. Again, no "sex." But the whipping sound, followed by passionate sighs from the man being whipped. The occasional grunts of "harder." The smells, the naked men.

Were any of the men in Mea Shearim aroused? Not that I could see. There were a few obviously gay men there, men whose eyes roved downwards when they

looked at you. One man came into my shower stream (there were plenty of other shower heads available) and started up a conversation with me, frequently and obviously looking down at my crotch several times. Actually, we had a hilarious miscommunication. He asked me, in Hebrew, if I was *nasui*, a word I couldn't quite remember, but *knew* sounded similar to "experienced." I asked him to repeat himself, and he made the universal gesture for sex - a forefinger entering a ring made by the other hand's thumb and forefinger. I was at a loss for words, until I remembered that *nasui* meant married, and the sign he was making was that of a wedding ring going onto a finger.

Presumably, when I answered that I wasn't married, he knew he'd figured me out, since there are few reasons why a thirty-something man wouldn't be married.

As with Lag B'Omer, the eroticism of the Mea Shearim shvitz/mikva was undeniable - these were not just naked men, they were naked men with other naked men, working with the bodies of naked men -- and yet it was so thoroughly embedded into the culture there that there was nothing unusual about it. I didn't see anyone look particularly awkward or embarrassed, and I never saw anyone touching someone else outside of the appropriate ways. There were no erections and only a few leers. But this was among the queerest places I had ever visited.

3. Homoeroticism does not cure homophobia

There's a common, self-satisfied claim in the gay community that everyone is queer to some degree, and that "straight" people (again, not heterosexual, but straight) are just not in touch with their queer sides, and if they were, we wouldn't have so much homophobia in the world. This claim is somewhat absurd, but it also has some merit to it. Clearly, all of us have heterosexual and homosexual attractions. The question is what we do about it.

The dominant American model, wherever it comes from, seems to be to completely deny that these attractions exist, and to flee from places where they might come into play. Where men are in potentially sexual or erotic situations together - i.e., any situation with intimacy, or without clothes - fear predominates. Witness the hysteria around gays in the military - a pathology which seems all the more bizarre in light of the extensive homosexual abuse, by "straight" officers, of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Likewise, the homoeroticism of American sports is simultaneously denied and displayed. To find out more about the 'manly love of comrades,' look into the social dynamics of any baseball team, a phenomenon explored by the recent Broadway show "Take Me Out." In these environments, where locker room nudity is part of the job, homophobia runs extremely deep. The fear seems to be that queers would take something which actually isn't sexual at all (naked men horsing around in the locker room) into some kind of sex play, or that they would look at the straight men as sexual objects. These fears are not entirely without merit - a commonplace in gay erotica is exploiting the physicality of a locker room (or military barracks) for erotic

benefit. But the fears are often so intense that many gay people think the straights doth protest too much.

Each of the hasidic environments I entered, however, defied this model. There were heterosexual men, they were being erotic with one another, and yet, they were not "gay." In a way, they were validating the queer claim that if we all just acknowledged our queerness, it wouldn't be such a big deal.

And yet, at the same time, they seemed to undermine the second part of the gay claim: that, if we all just got in better touch with our homosexual sides, homophobia would disappear, or at least lessen in intensity. This doesn't seem to be the case in the haredi community. The open homoeroticism of the Mea Shearim shvitz does not in any way seem to have lessened homophobia. On the contrary; the haredi community remains much more homophobic, at least on an official level, than other sectors of society.

Unofficially, however, haredi homophobia is a complex phenomenon. The haredi world seems to be mainly one of "don't ask, don't tell, get married." There have long been well-known homosexuals within the haredi world, often leading lives that are best described as open secrets. People know, and they may whisper, but then again, everyone has their sins, as long as they don't make a parade out of it. There are also traditional Jewish heroes who never married, or who married only at a late age, notwithstanding the Jewish norm to marry and have children. And, perhaps most importantly, there is the longstanding Jewish valorization of the effeminate scholar and the denigration of the muscular athlete. Before Zionism, the ideal Jewish type was that of Jacob: a wimpy scholar who didn't hunt.

Outside of haredi society, in Israel generally, one sees much more healthy intimacy between men than in America. Arab men, and Jewish men from Arab countries, regularly hold hands on the street. Like Europeans, they often kiss. Such cultural practices, combined with the Jewish ideology favoring the effeminate man over the masculine one, and combined in the haredi case with the near-total single-sex society, change the rules.

Is it precisely because of all this homoeroticism that Israeli men are often so macho, and that official homophobia persists with such vigor? Does haredi homophobia exist because the haredim, on some deep level, know that what they are doing is erotic? It seems to me that, once again, the phenomenon is a subtle one. On the one hand, private homosexuality is known about and expressed, and the homosexual tendencies of heterosexual men are expressed much more than in mainstream America. On the other hand, perhaps precisely because of the private expression of desire, public acceptance is not forthcoming. Homophobia exists not only where homosexual impulses are repressed. It exists where they are expressed also.

So is it better or worse for heterosexuals to explore their same-sex desires? It's great that they're queering it up, but if it has no social effect, if it in fact leads to more institutional homophobia - does it matter?

The answer for me came at the schvitz-mikva, as I went about my own ritual in the midst of all the nakedness, whipping, massaging, and panting. I love going to the mikva. In the past, I saw it as a confrontation with my own personal demon, and a negation of it. Now, I recognize the charge that comes from being around naked men as part of the ritual. I don't "get off" on the bodies that I see there, and when I do find myself especially attracted to one, I try to guide my attention back to what I'm doing. But I do get a charge from being in an erotic environment, and being aware of it, and being able to hold it together with the return to the One that takes place in the living waters themselves.

On this occasion, there were several men around me as I performed my usual seven 'dunks' into the mikva. One of them was a beautiful boy, who looked around 17 or 18, standing directly in front of me and talking to a friend. Above the water, I looked at him, heard the sounds of the whole complex, was in the world of what the Hindus call lila, the cosmic play of energies in the world of manifestation (yesh in the Hebrew). I didn't avert my eyes or deny his beauty. But then, below the water, I was back into ayin, into the primordial nothingness from which all things come and to which they all return. Above the water, energy, beauty, eroticism, noise, life. Back in the water, silence, stillness, unity, the 'death in life' sought by mystics. I had never so quickly moved from the desert to the city, the One to the many. It was as if the dual nature of our life experience - Quality and lila, shamayim and aretz, God-as-one and God-as-manifest - was actually visible. Radiant manifestation, and radiant emptiness.

Erotic ritual completes us. It expresses some of our most basic, powerful urges, and orients them around the true Reality. In unifying with the Other (heterosexual) or embodying the Other (homosexual), we enact the yichudim that return us to our source. For me, contemplation, not ecstasy, is still my primary path; there are fewer addictive attachments, and fewer opportunities to mistake the energy for the One. But eroticism, in its multiple manifestations, is both a spiritual practice and a part of the flowering of human potential itself. To embody both yang and yin, action and reception; to see the world as alive, not just from one perspective, but from many - this is part of why we are here. Whether or not we are made better people as a result of our engagement with our own queer sexuality, we seem more complete as a result.

Certainly, there are many limits that the haredim place upon themselves; they are not exploring the boundaries of erotic possibility. But I wonder if, within those limits, the homoerotic culture of hasidism "gets it" in a way that more moderate religious cultures do not. Jewish mysticism was invented by men who left their families for extended periods and lived in intimate circles of male mystical comrades. What insights did they glimpse in such communion, which we today have just begun to rediscover?