



Parashat Vayikra

Not a Deathly Hallows: A Year of Queer Torah

by Noach Dzmura on Friday March 27, 2009

2 Nisan 5769

Leviticus 1:1 - 5:26

Parashat Vayikra begins the book of Leviticus, which contains a set of processes through which the intrepid desert wanderers hallow themselves to grow close to God and initiate the fulfillment of the Covenant. In our vast repository of lore, we have mystical tales of people who always perform all of the mitzvot, exactly as specified, and who never slip up in any respect. There's a reason they are mystical tales: they could not possibly exist in the world where you and I live. For most present-day Jews, but especially for gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and the gender variant, much of what we find in this *parasha* and the rest of Leviticus contains not a simple hallowing but rather, if I might borrow a title from J. K. Rowling, a deathly hallowing. To enact the kind of hallowing the letter of the Levitical law requires would bring about our spiritual and bodily demise. I think the reason most of us have drawn away from those particular letters is that our death is not what God wants.

Samson Raphael Hirsch uses the word "hallowing" a lot to describe what happens to us as a result of offering the best of our produce and livestock to God, to atone for sins against other humans or against God. Instead of drawing our focus to exterior things, like the difference between offering a goat or a lamb, for example, as other classical commentators might, Hirsch's focus on hallowing draws us within, to demonstrate that the exterior occurrence of making a sacrifice has an internal, spiritual consequence. Hallowing holds for me the connotation of "hollowing;" as a piece of wood produces a fine clear tone after it has been hollowed out, so does the citizenry become harmonious after it has participated in a system that fosters a link between external sacrificial actions and inner spiritual consequences.

Our mystical tales of the Eastern European Hasidim offer the story of a community who prayed with great piety, each member attendant to all the details of observance with precision and sublime accuracy. But the elders of the community recognized that the town's prayers were not being answered. As was the custom in their day, the elders consulted with various holy men, scrupulous in knowledge and adept in the minutiae of the law, hoping that one of them would be able to diagnose and heal the community's spiritual difficulty. One after another, the holy men discretely watched the congregation at its prayers. They reported to the elders that they could find no error. From the youngest child to the eldest grandfather, everyone's prayers were



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as they should be; none of the holy men found a single error. Each of them went away, scratching his long grey beard in consternation.

As it happened, at that time the Ba'al Shem Tov, the Master of the Great Name, the mystical genius who founded Hasidism, was wandering through their town. He diverted his travels for Shabbat, and the elders were happy to consult him about their problem.

The BeShT (an acronym for the Master's Hebrew name) took one look and said, "Your prayers are all trapped in the shul, piling up around your ankles. The wings of your heart's desires are weighted down with piety!"

At the same time, at this very same synagogue, a young mute boy was attending synagogue for the very first time. He was moved by the beauty of the place and the extreme piety of its people, and he began to pray from that place of passion in the only way he was able: he played his flute. The clear, pure tones of his instrument pierced the air, and the congregants reacted in the only way they knew how: they scolded him for playing music during prayers. They chastised him for his lack of piety.

But the BeShT said, "The boy's flute has pierced the veil of Heaven, and has carried all of your prayers aloft."

In April 2008 I picked up the reins for Jewish Mosaic's Torah Queeries. In this Torah Queery, as we gird our loins for the Levitical prohibitions one more time, I am going to take the opportunity to share with you the BeShT's eye view of our offerings for this year of queer Torah. What would the BeShT see, in our Jewish communities, of our heart's desires? Would our prayers pierce Heaven and carry those of the rotely pious along for the ride? In the spirit of supporting our queer interpretative tradition, I offer this detailed accounting.

Like the children of Israel who gave overmuch for the creation of the mishkan in last week's parasha (Vayakhel-Pekudei), we are still a people who give exuberantly: since this time last year, there have been more than 50 new Torah Queeries. Thirteen people who wrote a Torah Queery last year, contributed once again—and sometimes multiple times—this year. Such dedication to this holy task is assuredly a mitzvah. Fifteen of you were inspired to contribute for the first time, and four "newbies" contributed more than once. Some of you quailed at the task, "I am not a Torah scholar! What could I possibly say?" But then you took on the burden and found in yourselves wellsprings of insight. Indeed, the best loved Torah Queeries this year were from first time writers. I received precious emails and FaceBook communications from some of you first time writers who said that the process of thinking through a *parasha* for queer perspectives and inspiration literally changed your lives. Not only did it deepen your engagement with Torah, but in one instance it helped to solidify a budding romantic relationship, and in another it contributed to a decision to pursue Jewish studies more formally.



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We are an emerging nation of blessings. Let this essay encourage many more of you to offer us your wisdom –and your struggles- in the coming weeks.

So what did we find in Torah this year? We struggled with Torah to heal and celebrate our lives. An oppressed community, it is not surprising that we wrote most often for one another (21 out of 45 *drashot* were concerned with issues of queer community). We wrote about caring for and celebrating our families (6 times), ourselves (5 times) and our intimate relationships (twice). Our voices claimed Pharaoh and G-d as a single unit of measure, the two halves of which contain the entire potential for human loving relationships. We proclaimed the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant, whose loving embrace encloses the Divine Presence, as queer role models. Joseph provided a model for coming out to family under difficult circumstances. We explored the root of the Hebrew word for “honor” to find the way to honor the father and mother who offered us rejection instead of honoring us in return. For those of us who choose not to have children, we recognized that the cultural products we create in the world (our writing, our poetry, our song, our food, our celebrations and lamentations, our business endeavors and relationships ...) transmit cultural genetics just as children transmit biological genetics. Our families are our strength, our primary support, and our future.

We had cause for celebration: we rejoiced in our children and our weddings, we kicked off two new queer *siddurim*, and we cheered the election of a democratic African-American president. We remembered our tragedies, lamenting the assassinations of Harvey Milk and Martin Luther King, and the certainly temporary revocation of our right to marry.

Expressing our empathy, we recognized the traditionally unrecognized and listened for silenced voices: we include Bilha and Zilpah along with Rachel and Leah as the foremothers of our tribe. We celebrated our matriarchs: as Rachel struggled to carry warring siblings in her womb, we sometimes struggled with conflicting desires. As we stood with Rebecca at the well watering camels, we recognized that achieving the virtue of hospitality and the historical position of matriarch requires colossal effort and profound transformation in addition to God’s will. We recognized Hagar’s discovery of a well in the desert as a source of inspiration. We encouraged ourselves and shored up our resolve for *tikkun olam*, repairing the injustice of the world: We reminded ourselves that it’s important to be the squeaky wheel, that dissent is a *mitzvah* with a long Biblical tradition, and that the good soldier who simply follows orders is not the one who gets remembered. We encouraged ourselves to come out to family, and to continue to come out as a community with inherent rights and responsibilities among the larger community. To remind ourselves of the perspective that comes with pride, we recalled the cowardly spies who saw themselves as grasshoppers in the eyes of giants.

We warned ourselves to avoid superficial relationships and materialism and to rid ourselves of “spiritual *chametz* (leavening).” We resolved Leviticus 18:22 in countless traditional and non-traditional ways, and gnashed our teeth at its appearance twice a year in our sacred texts. At



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times those traditional verses wounded too deeply and we cut them off from the vitality of our Torah. At other times we held “abomination” in our gloved hands like an endangered, venomous beast. We railed against traditional notions of purity that exclude transgender embodiment and differences in ability. We remembered that the original notion of purity had to do with washing bodies and ritual items with soap (the ingredients of which are produced by burning flesh to produce ash and mixing the ash with olive oil) to prevent infection.

We queered the desert. Instead of finding barrenness, we recognized the desert ecosystem and the gifts offered by wild-erness. We queered the *mishkan* – a sacred space in which the holy of holies is entered by one pure man only once a year –and recognized in the story of the naming of Yisrael that the closet is a sacred space we all must enter from time to time. And we recognized the *yichud*, the union that takes place in the holy of holies, as sex between God and the people. We queered the scapegoat and the ‘demon’ Azazel: instead of facing death laced with the sins of the community, the liberated goat now faced the loving embrace of an older god of craftsmen, Azazel.

We cautioned ourselves that “to queer” might turn into a kind of idolatry if we perform that act thoughtlessly, reflexively, normatively (if I may use that unfortunate word). One author showed us that, “In doing so [reflexively ‘queering’], however, we are replacing one norm (obey the Torah’s commandments, and attack other religious systems) with another norm (behave justly and attack economic, political, and religious injustice). The queer perspective, however, questions all norms. In other words, it is a perspective that subverts any and every assumption that some values are timelessly and immutably true. From this perspective, every value, every norm, is historically conditioned and socially constructed. And therefore, it is always changing as perceptions of reality continue to change.” (Rabbi Jacob Staub, on Parashat Re’eh)

From this queer wisdom we may conclude that the ultimate point of “queering” is to open the mind to the possibility of transformation, rather than to calcify an aesthetic of dissent.

We cannot be accused of narcissism: we are a community aware and awake to many levels of self and society. The next largest category of writings –11 out of 45—we wrote as queer voices from the margins of a heterosexual majority culture, and our concerns were related to social justice for all creatures. By no means do we limit our compassion to our own community. We take to heart the Torah’s injunction to ‘treat fairly the strangers among you’. We wrote about the beneficial role of allies to the cause of queer liberation; we recognized the silent and the silenced in Torah and gave them voice. We wrote concerning the themes of classism and of equality for all beings. We are a tender loving people, for we are strangers brimming over with chesed. Like Balak’s donkey, we see an angel where other people may not, and we speak our truths. We are proud of the healing our voices bring to the world’s broken places.



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Sometimes we took the long view, the time-honored, intertextual midrashic view that mixes different textual sources to support a radically new reading. In all of our readings of Torah, we wrestled with the competing forces of tradition and innovation, sometimes accepting the words literally, sometimes plumbing the traditional commentaries for support of a new interpretation, sometimes rejecting a passage that we could resolve no other way. In a way that many of us can recognize, one writer said that the tension between the two forces defined his experience:

In many ways this tension between tradition and so-called progress summarizes much of my experience as a queer Jew in diaspora. I exist on multiple margins. On the one hand, I am fighting for the preservation of a spiritual tradition in a secular US context that tends to see any kind of spirituality, and any kind of multi-millennial tradition, as inherently reactionary and old-fashioned. On another hand, I belong to a lineage of Eastern-European Jews with a complicated relationship to assimilation—tendrils of fierce pride and fear of cultural loss mix in with a sneaking suspicion that the Jewish identity that wreaks havoc in the West Bank is the same Jewish identity that can be blamed for “having brought the pogroms upon ourselves”—which is to say that I am the progeny of a generation who hold onto the “old” as the “only valid” at the same time as they still really just want to be able to be “real Americans.” On still a third hand (or maybe a foot), within an already-ambivalent American Jewry, I am participating in the ever-evolving creation of a new kind of Jewish practice, a queer practice, a feminist practice, an embodied practice, an interfaith practice, which requires its own complex dances with both tradition and “progress.” And in some ways my ambivalent Luddite older generation say, “Why do you bother with Judaism at all if you’re going to go about it in a way that has nothing to do with tradition?” But then again sometimes they say, “Wow. You know how I feel about Judaism, but what you’re doing with this, this I could really get into.” (Ri Rima Turner, on Parashat Ekev)

Even as our struggles continue to shape us, we recognized profoundly that this is a passing moment in the long stretch of Jewish existence, that queer ways and queer lives will find their natural center in Jewish tradition some day along the journey to the Promised Land. For our tradition tells us that “justice wells up as water, and righteousness as a mighty stream.” (Amos, 5:24).

I have been astounded and deeply moved by the transformative experiences readers shared with us because of their engagement with Torah Queeries. Many of you who read every week were moved to comment online, sharing with us how crucial these essays are to your spiritual lives. Your comments are vital to the authors whose labor of love produced these essays. Thank you so much!

What did you comment on over the past year? In many cases, we provoked you to think further when our Queeries raised questions for you. Such a blessing! Eight of you were inspired to add your praise and support for the Torah Query on parashat Vayeshev, in which the author employed the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife to think through the painful process of



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coming out after departure from an obligatory heterosexual marriage. One man wrote that a Queery that explained the priestly hierarchy in terms of an economy of sacrifice directly helped him resolve a problem in his life. Who knew such a thing could happen? A woman commented that, because of the lack of welcome for her and her partner in Jewish spaces, she considered Jewish Mosaic to be her shul. Surely, this is a mitzvah. You contributed your own supportive insights to the Queer readings our authors devised: one reader provided a helpful translation to support the idea that the cherubim are in fact a same-sex role model: ""uphneihem iesh el-achiv""= literally translated: "and their faces, one man's face to the one of his brother." Even non-Jewish readers found helpful insight in our digital pages. Can you count the mitzvot? Is this community amazing?

Being Jewish for me—and for many other queer Jews—means finding balance in a nexus of oppositions: the dance between (on the one hand) support or imprisonment by the rigid structure of the law, and (on the other hand) liberation or rejection by interpretive traditions. Often I find myself having to hold contradictions and ambiguity in the same hand. As we build a tradition of queer torah commentary, may these Torah Queeries continue to help us each navigate, and celebrate, our queer Jewish lives.

As members of the GLBTIQ community our piety often looks like that mute boy's passionate flute playing to the more traditional Jewish world, and our prayers are scolded, our passions viewed simply as forbidden. Our prayers serve a purpose. Queer Torah adds to the magnificence of Torah. And I know that our prayers have pierced the fabric of Heaven, and that without queer prayers, the prayers of many pious others would be fluttering helpless on the ground.



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