

From Sinai to Stonewall

Queer Torah Study for Pride Month 2022

Why Queer Torah Study?

Queer is a term that includes a wide variety of identities around both gender and sexuality. It is a word that defies categorization and limitations. For some people, this term is a way to reflect complexity, describe multiple identities, or critique and resist assumptions about gender and sexuality. Some use it as an umbrella term for everyone who is “not cis and straight.” But this word also has a loaded history: originally this was a hateful slur. For some people this word remains hurtful, for some it’s empowering, and for some people with LGBT or related identities “queer” just isn’t a word they connect with. It is important to respect each person, and use only the words that they choose for their identities.

Torah is both a general term for Jewish texts and wisdom, and our name specifically for our most ancient text, the five books of Moses. An amazing aspect of our tradition is how we use the same word for a specific, foundational text, and for anyone’s unique teachings or thoughts. For example, we say, “I can’t wait to hear the torah we share with one another today.”

Study is a foundational Jewish practice. Our tradition is built on bringing our full selves, and our questions, to our texts and to conversation with each other. Sometimes the lesson to pull from a text is obvious, sometimes not. We invite you to work in pairs or small groups, to read these texts aloud and listen to each other, and to remember that learning is a collaborative relationship. Within each text is a rainbow of “secrets” and interpretations that are also totally unique to the person who is unpacking them.

Opening Questions

- Think about your identities. Do you have a religious/spiritual identity? What does it mean to you? What does your LGBTQ+ identity (or allyship) mean to you?
- What does Jewish LGBTQ+ identity mean to you? (Note how this question is different from the first!)

This **Pride Month** we celebrate LGBTQ+ Jews by exploring Jewish texts that are the foundations of Keshet’s Seven Jewish Values for Inclusive Community.

Read the source text for each of the values below and discuss the questions that follow.



כבוד

Teachings of the Ancestors 2:10

They [each] said three things: Rabbi Eliezer said: Let the **honor** of your friend be as dear to you as your own; And be not easily provoked to anger; And repent one day before your death.

Pirkei Avot 2:10

הם אמרו שלשה דברים. רבי אליעזר
אומר, יהי כבוד חברך חביב עליך כשלה,
ואל תהי נוח לכעס. ושוב יום אחד לפני
מיתתך.

Questions:

1. What are your initial responses to this text?
2. Why are *these* three things grouped together by Rabbi Eliezer?
3. What are this text's implications for LGBTQ+ belonging?

About this text:

Pirkei Avot is found in the Mishnah. The Mishnah is the first major work of rabbinic literature, consisting of teachings transmitted over hundreds of years and compiled around 200 CE. It covers agricultural, ritual, civil, criminal, and Temple-related laws, presenting a multiplicity of legal opinions and incorporating occasional stories. It is a foundation of the Jewish oral tradition, which continues with the Talmud, a work that is structured as commentary on the Mishnah. (Source: sefaria.org)



Shalom Bayit: Peace in the Home

שלום בית

Scroll of Esther and Hanukkah 4:14

If a [poor] person must choose between Shabbat lights and Hanukkah lights, or between Shabbat lights and wine for Kiddush, the lighting of his home takes priority, so as to sustain **peace in the house** ...Great is peace, since the entire Torah has been given to create peace in the world, as it is written: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace" (Proverbs 3:17).

Mishneh Torah, 4:14

הִיא לְפָנָיו נֵר בֵּיתוֹ וְנֵר חֲנֻכָּה אוֹ נֵר בֵּיתוֹ וְקִדּוּשׁ הַיּוֹם נֵר בֵּיתוֹ קוֹדֵם מִשּׁוּם שְׁלוֹם בֵּיתוֹ... גְּדוֹל הַשְּׁלוֹם שְׁכָל הַתּוֹרָה נִתְּנָה לַעֲשׂוֹת שְׁלוֹם בְּעוֹלָם שְׁנֹאֲמַר (מִשְׁלֵי ג יז) : "דַּרְכֶיהָ דַרְכֵי נֵעַם וְכָל נְתִיבֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם"

Questions:

1. What are your initial responses to this text?
2. In the time of this text, the Shabbat lamp was the only light illuminating the house after dark, and there was a real functionality to having the lamp on. However, Kiddush was purely a statement of sanctification. What does this teach us about Shalom Bayit?
3. What are this text's implications for LGBTQ+ belonging?

About this text:

The Mishneh Torah ("Repetition of the Torah"), also referred to as Yad HaChazakah ("The Strong Hand"), is a monumental legal code and one of the most organized, comprehensive, and influential works of Jewish law. Written over a period of ten years, the work systematically categorizes and clearly explains all aspects of Jewish observance, including those applicable only in Temple times. This portion's author was the Rambam (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, also known as Maimonides) and it was composed in Middle-Age Egypt, c.1176 - c.1178 CE. (Source: sefaria.org)

B'tzelem Elohim: In God's Image

בצלם אלוהים

Genesis 1:26-27

And G!d said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth."

And G!d created the human in the divine image, creating it **in the image of G!d**—creating them male and female.

Bereishit 1:26-27

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ
כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם
וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל-הָרֶמֶשׂ
הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

וַיְבָרֵא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְמֵם
אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

Questions:

1. What are your initial responses to this text?
2. This text says of the first human: G!d "created them male and female." What might be some queer readings of this line?
3. What are this text's implications for LGBTQ+ belonging?

About this text:

Genesis is the first of five books of the Torah. The five books are: Genesis (Bereishit), Exodus (Shemot), Leviticus (Vayikra), Numbers, (Be-midbar) and Deuteronomy (Devarim). These five books are the first part of the Tanach: the word "**Tanakh**" is an acronym of its three parts: **T**orah (The Five Books of Moses), **N**evi'im (Prophets), and **K**etuvim (Writings). It contains stories, law, poetry, and teachings about G!d and humanity. (Source: sefaria.org)

Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Bazeh:
Communal Responsibility

כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה

Shevuot 39a

Isn't it written: "And they shall stumble one upon another" (Leviticus 26:37)? This verse is interpreted to mean that they shall stumble spiritually, one due to the iniquity of another, which teaches that **the entire Jewish people are considered guarantors for one another.**

Shevuot 39a

וכל עבירות שבתורה מכל העולם לא
והכתיב (ויקרא כו, לז) וכשלו איש באחיו
איש בעון אחיו מלמד שכל ישראל ערבים
זה בזה.

Questions:

1. What are your initial responses to this text?
2. The word "guarantors" ("arevim" in Hebrew) is used to describe our responsibility towards one another. The root of "arevim" is "ayin-resh-bet" whose basic meaning is "to mix, to interweave." How might "interweaving" and being "guarantors" be connected?
3. What are this text's implications for LGBTQ+ belonging?

About this text:

Shavuot was composed between c.450 - c.550 CE and is found in the Talmud. The Talmud is the textual record of generations of rabbinic debate about law, philosophy, and biblical interpretation, compiled between the 3rd and 8th centuries and structured as commentary on the Mishnah with stories interwoven. The Talmud exists in two versions: the more commonly studied Babylonian Talmud was compiled in present-day Iraq, while the Jerusalem Talmud was compiled in Israel. (Source: sefaria.org)

Sh'mirat Halashon: Guarding One's Use of Language

שמירת הלשון

Human Dispositions 7:1

The person who bears tales against their fellow violates a prohibitive commandment, saying: "Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people" (Lev. 19.16.); and although the punishment of flogging is not inflicted for violating this charge, it is a gross iniquity, and is the cause of the slaughtering of many souls in Israel; it is because thereof, that following this commandment is this Verse: "Neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor" (ibid.).

Mishneh Torah 7:1

הַמְרַגֵּל בְּחֵבְרוֹ עוֹבֵר בְּלֹא תַעֲשֶׂה שְׁנֹאֲמַר (ויקרא יט טז) "לֹא תֵלֵךְ רֹכִיל בְּעַמִּיךָ".
וְאִם עַל פִּי שְׂאִין לֹקִין עַל דְּבַר זֶה עוֹן גְּדוֹל
הוּא וְגוֹרָם לְהַרְגַּם נַפְשׁוֹת רַבּוֹת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל.
לִכְךָ נִסְמָךְ לוֹ (ויקרא יט טז) "וְלֹא תַעֲמֵד
עַל דַּם רֵעֶךָ"

Questions:

1. What are your initial responses to this text?
2. Two *mitzvot* (commandments) appear beside one another: "Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people" and "Neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor." How are these *mitzvot* connected thematically?
3. What are this text's implications for LGBTQ+ belonging?

About this text:

The Mishneh Torah ("Repetition of the Torah"), also referred to as Yad HaChazakah ("The Strong Hand"), is a monumental legal code and one of the most organized, comprehensive, and influential works of Jewish law. Written over a period of ten years, the work systematically categorizes and clearly explains all aspects of Jewish observance, including those applicable only in Temple times. This portion's author was the Rambam (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, also known as Maimonides) and it was composed in Middle-Age Egypt, c.1176 - c.1178 CE. (Source: sefaria.org)

V'ahavta L'reiacha Kamocho:
Love your neighbor as yourself

ואהבת לרעך כמוך

Leviticus 19:17-18

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprimand your kin but incur no guilt on their account.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of your people.
Love your neighbor as yourself: I am G!d.

Vayikra 19:17-18

לֹא־תִשְׁנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹלִיחַ
אֶת־עֲמִיתֶךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֲטָא:

לֹא־תִקֹּם וְלֹא־תִטַּר אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמְּךָ וְאָהַבְתָּ
לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

Questions:

1. What are your initial responses to this text?
2. Leviticus chapters 17-26 are known as the Holiness Code. They contain mainly commandments whose goals are to infuse holiness into the People of Israel, just as G!d is holy. These commandments, particularly in chapter 19, for the first time make it clear that holiness is not just a property of the relationship between humans and G!d, but also between human beings and other human beings. How is holiness between human beings part of relationship?
3. What are this text's implications for LGBTQ+ belonging?

About this text:

Leviticus is the third of five books of the Torah. The five books are: Genesis (Bereishit), Exodus (Shemot), Leviticus (Vayikra), Numbers, (Be-midbar) and Deuteronomy (Devarim). These five books are the first part of the Tanach: the word "Tanakh" is an acronym of its three parts: Torah (The Five Books of Moses), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings). It contains stories, law, poetry, and teachings about G!d and humanity. (Source: sefaria.org)

Al Tifrosh Min Hatsibur: Solidarity

אל תפרוש מן הציבור

Teachings of the Ancestors 2:4

[The Rabbi] used to say: do G!d's will as though it were your will, so that G!d will do your will as though it were Theirs. Set aside your will in the face of Their will, so that they may set aside the will of others for the sake of your will. Hillel said: **do not separate yourself from the community**, Do not trust in yourself until the day of your death, Do not judge your fellow person until you have reached their place. Do not say something that cannot be understood [trusting] that in the end it will be understood. Say not: 'when I shall have leisure I shall study;' perhaps you will not have leisure.

Pirkei Avot 2:4

הוא הִיה אומר, עֲשֵׂה רְצוֹנוֹ כְּרְצוֹנִי, כְּדֵי שְׂיַעֲשֶׂה רְצוֹנִי כְּרְצוֹנוֹ. בְּטֵל רְצוֹנִי מִפְּנֵי רְצוֹנוֹ, כְּדֵי שְׂיִבְטֵל רְצוֹן אֲחֵרִים מִפְּנֵי רְצוֹנִי. הִלֵּל אָמַר, אֵל תִּפְרֹשׁ מִן הַצִּיבּוֹר, וְאֵל תִּדְּוִן אֶת חֲבֵרְךָ עַד שֶׁתִּגִּיעַ לְמִקוֹמוֹ, וְאֵל תֹּאמַר דְּבַר שְׂאִי אֶפְשֶׁר לְשַׁמַּע, שְׂסוּפוֹ לְהַשְׁמַע. וְאֵל תֹּאמַר לְכַשְׂאִפְנֵה אֶשְׁנֶה, שְׂמֵא לֹא תִפְנֶה:

Questions:

1. What are your initial responses to this text?
2. Different contexts call for different responses: when might it be important to remain within community, and when might it be important to separate oneself?
3. What are this text's implications for LGBTQ+ belonging?

About this text:

Pirkei Avot is found in the Mishnah. The Mishnah is the first major work of rabbinic literature, consisting of teachings transmitted over hundreds of years and compiled around 200 CE. It covers agricultural, ritual, civil, criminal, and Temple-related laws, presenting a multiplicity of legal opinions and incorporating occasional stories. It is a foundation of the Jewish oral tradition, which continues with the Talmud, a work that is structured as commentary on the Mishnah. (Source: sefaria.org)