

Turning Back to Teshuvah

By Hannah “Hensch” Henschel

As a queer individual whose work centers around LGBTQ+ inclusion and belonging in Jewish communal life, I find myself uncertain on how I engage in teshuvah, especially when my basic rights are under attack. And, if I’m being honest, I feel this way every year. I often find myself grappling with what it means to “atone” or “repent” and how these terms connect with me individually.

When I first started working in the Jewish communal world, I would often refer to myself as a “Jew for pay” because I had one mission: “to make the Jewish community inclusive for all who want to be a part of it.” Notice how this mission feels barren of spiritual or religious connection? It’s not by accident. I crafted this mission as a 19-year-old when I decided to teach a learning session on my local college campus called, “The 8 Different Genders in Talmud”. This session, meant for 10 college students, ended up being the focal point for LGBTQ+ hate from the surrounding Jewish community. A prominent local rabbi even took out a whole page in the local Jewish newspaper just to smear the event and, unfortunately, others in the community rallied with them.

Luckily, I found great support from those who ran the session with me and the study session went on without a hitch. However, the backlash stuck with me. This religious figurehead’s callout occurred while I was also working on local marriage equality campaigns. I would find myself at state houses helping couples who had been civil partners for decades fight to marry their partner so that they could do things like visit their partner in a nursing home or hospital. During those days at the state houses, I heard from so many religious figures about how marriage equality was against their religious beliefs and values. This essentially sent me a clear message: don’t get involved with Judaism on a religious level; it’s not meant for you.

However, as I’ve continued my work in Jewish communal life, I’ve found myself opening up more to what Judaism can mean to me on a spiritual level. That willingness to open up didn’t happen overnight; I’ve spent what feels like 40 years wandering through the desert trying to understand how to heal. Part of that healing was witnessing Jews go through the process of atonement: making clear apologies for not allowing civil unions for LGBTQ+ members at their synagogues, saying Kaddish for those who died from AIDS who were never acknowledged at the time of their death, developing B’nai mitzvahs that encompass gender-expansive Hebrew and prayer, and more.

As we enter the new year, I feel a hardening once again considering 2022 has been one of the worst years for anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in the United States. I feel exhausted and I can’t help but wonder: now that I’ve opened myself to Judaism on a spiritual level, could that connection just turn on me? Will my community eventually reject me for being queer? Will I feel like I did when I was 19? As I entertain this inner narrative, I’m reminded of [Psalms 27:3](#): “Should an army besiege me, my heart would have no fear; should war beset me, still would I be confident.”

I find that this verse reminds me that Judaism is mine to grapple with, even when I feel weary of putting trust into Jewish institutions. I'm empowered to focus on atonement for my younger self as we enter into 5783 by chipping away at the shell that protected me when I needed it the most. This year, I'm taking teshuvah literally by turning back to acknowledge the hurt that I've spent so long straying away from. Not only does this version of teshuvah give me the strength to show up as my full, authentically queer self, it also helps me make the Jewish community inclusive for all who want to be a part of it. I hope that by doing so, I'm making my 19-year-old self proud.

May you find meaning in teshuvah this new year, no matter what it looks like, and remember that you deserve to show up exactly as you are all year-long.



Hannah "Hensch" Henschel (they/them) brings their background in advancing Jewish life to be more equitable for all to their work as Keshet's Associate Director of Education and Training for Cohort Learning. After graduating from the University of Cincinnati, Hensch worked as a Tzedek Social Justice Fellow at the Asheville JCC where they created the first-ever JCC transgender inclusive locker room policy. Prior to Keshet, Hensch worked for Hillel International as their Manager for Engagement and Wellness where they developed opportunities for professionals and college students that focused on disability inclusion, wellbeing, racial equity, and LGBTQ+ inclusion. While working at Hillel, they designed Hillel's International's first-ever immersive abroad opportunity specifically for LGBTQ+ college students and helped bring mental health training to hundreds of international college campus professionals. Hensch currently resides in Washington, DC with their partner. When not at work, you can find them planning out their next road trip along the east coast.