The Rainbow Issue

SUMMER 2025

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The Rainbow Issue

SUMMER 2025

Read AJS Perspectives online at associationforjewishstudies.org

AJS Perspectives:
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of the Association
for Jewish Studies

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Front and Back Covers
Riva Lehrer. Details from *Self portrait*, 1998. Gouache on paper, two paintings, 14 in. x 14 in. each. Courtesy of the artist.

Table of Contents Background
Detail from Golan Moskowitz. *A Jewish History of Drag?*, 2025.

Contributors


Rachel Kranson


Anne Parsons


Hadar Aviram


Kerry Wallach


Golan Moskowitz


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Riva Lehrer

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December 14–16, 2025
Marriott Marquis Washington, DC

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- **200+ sessions** devoted to the latest research in Jewish Studies
- New! **Cultural Events**: Extend your conference experience and explore Washington, DC!
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- **Welcome party** for all attendees
- **Meetups** sponsored by Jewish Studies programs and research institutions
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For best rates register before August 31. A room share / rideshare board is also available. See the AJS website at https://bit.ly/ajs2025 for registration information.

For information on exhibiting, advertising, or sponsoring at the 57th Annual Conference, please email aronek@associationforjewishstudies.org.

Learn more about the 2025 AJS Conference

Detail from "Washington Monument and Cherry Blossoms, illuminated night scene, Washington, D. C." Card. Pub. by The Washington News Company, Washington, D. C., [ca. 1930–1945]. Digital Commonwealth, https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/r781wh917 (accessed May 22, 2025).

The AJS is proud to partner with local organizations to bring curated cultural outings to AJS conference attendees.*

JxJ DC Jewish Film Festival

The AJS is partnering with the AJS Film Committee and the staff at the DC Jewish Film Festival to elevate the annual film screening. While this experience is free for conference registrants, guests and the public will be able to purchase additional tickets. The full program, including the selected film and any guest speakers will be announced in the fall.

The Library of Congress

The Library of Congress will host AJS conference registrants for behind-the-scenes tours followed by a reception.

*Cultural events are subject to change.

Capital Jewish Museum

AJS conference attendees will have the opportunity to visit the Lillian and Albert Small Capital Jewish Museum, which explores the Jewish experience in the national capital region and inspires visitors to connect personally and collectively, reflect on the relevance of the past to today, and act on behalf of their communities and values. In particular, museum visitors will get to engage with the LGBT Jews in the Federal City exhibit, which explores DC history, Jewish history, and LGBTQ+ history together, drawing from the Museum's robust LGBTQ+ archive. Immerse yourself in historical and contemporary photography, artifacts, and oral histories.

Can't join us in Washington, DC in December?

The 2026 conference will be held in Philadelphia, PA and future conferences will be in New Orleans, San Diego, and Boston.

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JACOB MORROW-SPITZER
Yale University, Department of History

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Finalists

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"Profit in the Holy Land: American Capital and Development in Mandatory Palestine"

SAMUEL GLAUBER
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Department of Jewish Thought

"Occult Modernities: Hidden Realities in East European Jewish Culture, 1880–1939"

MIRIAM SCHWARTZ
University of Toronto, Department of Germanic Languages & Literatures and the Anne Tanenbaum Centre for Jewish Studies

"Dubbed Jewish Literature: Orality, Multilingualism, and Translation in Twentieth Century Hebrew and Yiddish Writing"

SHARON ZELNICK
University of California Los Angeles, Department of Comparative Literature

"Israeli Migrants' Aesthetic Interventions in Germany"

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Independent Scholar/Angela Roskop Erisman Editorial
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Independent Scholar
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From the Editors

Laura Limonic &
Federica Schoeman

The Summer 2025 "Rainbow Issue" of *AJS Perspectives* has been curated by guest editor Bryan K. Roby, associate professor of Jewish and Middle East History at the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, and 2024–25 Head Fellow at the Frankel Institute. Bryan's expertise in Gender and Sexuality Studies contributed immensely to the composition of this truly special issue. We are thrilled by the results this unique collaboration has produced.

We wish to take this opportunity to thank Olga Gershenson and Jason Schulman for their work as film editor and roundtable editor, respectively. The current issue will be their last in these capacities with us, and we couldn't be sadder to say goodbye. In these pages, Olga created a vital platform to discuss, analyze, take to task, and teach representations of Jews and Jewishness on screen—in film and other media. Jason's roundtables drew together a phenomenal assortment of scholars and intellectuals through the years, whom he capably associated and moderated in many engaging conversations on any topic the magazine put in front of him. Olga's and Jason's contributions have been outstanding for range, quality, and depth. While their tenure as *AJS Perspectives* editors is concluding, their legacy and impact on their readers, contributors, and colleagues will resonate for years to come.

Laura Limonic
SUNY Old Westbury

Federica Schoeman
University of South Carolina

From the Guest Editor

I was delighted to receive an invitation to act as guest editor for the "Rainbow" issue of *Perspectives*, which is devoted to LGBTQ+ Jewish issues. Each year, the Frankel Institute of the University of Michigan invites over a dozen scholars to dive into a specific theme related to Jewish Studies. As Head Fellow, I had the privilege of learning a great deal from fourteen other scholars from Israel, the United States, and Argentina on the intersections of Jewishness, transness, and queerness. In addition to scholars, the year featured a series of artists grappling with questions of the intersections of Jewishness, queerness, and transness, including 2Fik, Yossi Zabari, Rudy Gerson, Elisheva Gavra, and my colleague Rafe Neis. With such an eye-opening institute year, it seemed only natural to share some of the innovative intellectual and artistic productions with the larger community of readers of *Perspectives*.

Non-normative sexual and gendered practices have been on the margins of Jewish historiography, partially due to fears of reinforcing antisemitic notions of Jewish deviancy. A perusal of some Jewish Studies journals shows surprisingly little engagement with Jewish queerness or transness

Bryan K.Roby,
Guest Editor

beyond the citational. This issue acts as a corrective by reflecting upon the complexities and challenges of interrogating the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and trans Jews. Throughout, we celebrate and commemorate the diversity of the queer and trans Jewish experience. The issue includes debates on the sexuality of Jewish women labor activists like Pauline Newman; the Zionist literary giant Yosef Haim Brenner; activist Rabbi Marshall Meyer; and artist Rahel Szalit. Other essays include reflections on the lexical history of the antitrans epithet "coccinelle"; halakhic debates on transness and gender pronouns; queer love and kinship among Holocaust survivors; finding home in the Diaspora within Israeli cinema; and an unexpectedly shared sense of belonging for queer Jews and Muslims. We are especially fortunate to include a delightfully beautiful comic illustration from Golan Moskowitz detailing his book project on Jewish American drag history. The issue concludes with a roundtable discussion on Orthodox Judaism and LGBTQ+ identity and an essay from our art editor on the portraits of "Golem Girl" artist Riva Lehrer.

Many of us are fearful of the direction American society has taken. Whether implicit or explicit, antisemitism, xenophobia, anti-Black racism, and transphobia are now federally mandated directives. As violence against trans people continues throughout this country's dark history, there is also a lightning-fast onslaught of legal policies to further oppress and ostracize the queer and trans community. The scholarship featured in this issue, whether history, literature, or art, does not exist in a vacuum and is in direct conversation with the society around us. This timely special issue of *Perspectives* is a humble response to those seeking to erase the queer and trans aspects of Jewish history and culture.

The national education system and universities have come under attack, including institutional diversity initiatives that have been historically welcoming to Jewish students and faculty. Earlier this year, we learned of a list of nearly two hundred banned words we are to remove from public institutions and federal documents, including research grant proposals. This order was followed by a frenzied censoring of government websites and documents. As of the time of writing, some universities—including my own—have begun to follow suit, dismantling diversity-related programs and instructing employees to bowdlerize "DEI-related" language from websites. As I reviewed the list, I was struck, but not surprised, by the linguistic erasure of the racially marginalized, queer, trans, and femme communities, as it betrays the administration's desire to further subjugate them. From that list, I invite readers to contemplate the following realities:

> Women, females, and trans are banned
> (but not men or males)
> Hispanic minority, Latinx, and Black are banned (but not white)
> Sense of belonging. Banned.
> Allyship. Banned.

The Jewish community, in all of its racial, gender, and cultural diversity, thrives on a sense of belonging and allyship among differences of opinion and ways of being. What does it mean for a society to be without women, trans and queer folks, or the racially marginalized? This special "Rainbow" issue attempts to provide a little light for a nation facing dark times.

Bryan K. Roby
University of Michigan

From the Executive Director

The first thing I thought when President Donald Trump issued an executive order on January 20, 2025, his first day in power, in which he declared that the US government would only recognize two genders, male and female, was "Boy, I guess Trump hasn't read much Talmud recently!" (Ok, maybe that wasn't the *first* thing I thought; I had a number of other choice words running through my head, but it was near the top.) Things didn't get much better when newly deputized Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. reinforced Trump's pronouncement on gender and also declared on February 19 that "this administration is bringing back common sense and restoring biological truth to the federal government." I guess Kennedy hadn't read much Talmud either or, for that matter, listened to the AJS's wonderful *Adventures in Jewish Studies* podcast episode "The Many Genders of Judaism" in which scholars Max Strassfeld and S. J. Crasnow walk listeners through fascinating insights on sex and gender from the Talmud up through today. As Strassfeld and Crasnow explain, Judaism's understanding of sex and gender extends beyond a simple binary, and in fact, the Talmud sets out seven different gender categories. In fairness, these talmudic categories are rooted more in a discussion of sexual biology and anatomy than how we might currently understand gender, but still, the simple fact that the rabbis of hundreds of years ago were grappling with and acknowledging the fact that the world's population consists of more than two sexes/genders discounts the idea that the present moment in which we live is always the most enlightened of times.

Earlier this spring, shortly after Trump announced that he was taking over the Kennedy Center and vowing to cancel all drag performances at the venerable institution, the AJS released another *Adventures in Jewish Studies* episode on the history of Judaism and drag. In the episode, scholars Golan Moskowitz and Naomi Seidman, along with Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie, discuss Judaism's rich engagement with drag and cross-dressing that extends as far back as the Bible and continues into the present day. While not to downplay the fact that some practitioners of Judaism have not always made life easy for LGBTQ folks, discussions of gender, sexuality, and cross-dressing have long been areas of inquiry in the Bible and Talmud, and not surprisingly, for Jewish Studies scholars today. Especially in this moment in which LGBTQ individuals in the United States are coming under renewed fire from the government, where their rights are being imperiled by legislators who think they can simply use "common sense" to understand the world around them, it's important to have the work of scholars who can provide a rich, multifaceted, and ever-evolving understanding of sexual and gender categories.

I'm especially proud that the AJS is doing this issue on LGBTQ topics. For some, it might seem overdue, and yet, for me as a scholar and individual, the AJS has long been a place open to and welcoming of queer Jewish scholarship. In fact, the very first conference paper I ever gave anywhere was at an AJS conference in 2003 where I presented work from my dissertation on queer Jewish culture in America. My work was warmly received, and I'll never forget the positive feedback I especially received from Laura Levitt, who gave me, an inexperienced graduate student, some needed encouragement.

My work was hardly the first (or the last) contribution to queer Jewish scholarship. In Gregg Drinkwater's

Warren Hoffman

November 2024 article "Queer and Trans Studies and the Jewish Question: Looking Back, Looking Ahead" in the journal *QTR*, Drinkwater provides a thorough and in some ways surprising literature review that reveals how just how significant and prolific scholarship on queer Jewish topics has been for nearly a quarter century. Starting in 2002 with *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* and then *Queer Jews* in 2003, Drinkwater identifies more than fifty scholars (the majority of whom are AJS members) who have contributed to this rich body of work. The essays in this issue provided by the fellows at the Frankel Center at the University of Michigan, complemented by the work of other AJS members, are a continuation of this legacy and highlight the next generation of thinkers working in this important and growing field of gender and sexuality studies.

I'm so pleased that the AJS is a place where this scholarship can thrive but also where the organization's members who themselves identify with a variety of colors in the LGBTQ rainbow can find a home and be out and proud.

Warren Hoffman
Association for Jewish Studies

AAJR

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AAJR

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Babylonian Jews and Sasanian Imperialism in Late Antiquity
(Cambridge University Press)

In the brilliant and important book *Babylonian Jews and Sasanian Imperialism in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press), Simcha Gross has completely revised our understanding of the Jews who lived in Sasanian Persia. Earlier generations of scholars, basing their work mostly on the Babylonian Talmud, had argued that the Jews, controlled by their own hierarchical self-governing structure and the exilarch, were isolated from the other populations of the Sasanian Empire and did not absorb any aspects of the larger culture in which they lived. Using Talmudic sources, alongside Syriac Christian sources, incantation bowls, and applying new understandings of the Sasanian empire itself, Gross has made a compelling case for the diverse nature of Jewish society, for its integration in Syriac Christian and Zoroastrian society, and the important interactions among the three communities. Moreover, he shows how the rabbis themselves sought to mitigate conflict with the Sasanian authorities and facilitate Jewish integration. Gross's book is beautifully written, utterly clear, and masterful in its use of a wide array of sources. It draws on the work of other scholars who came before him to present his own reading of this very important Jewish community. Indeed, this magnificent and impressive book will become the standard work in the field for many decades to come.

Honorable Mention is awarded to:
Polly Zavadivker, *A Nation of Refugees: Russia's Jews in World War I*, Oxford University Press.

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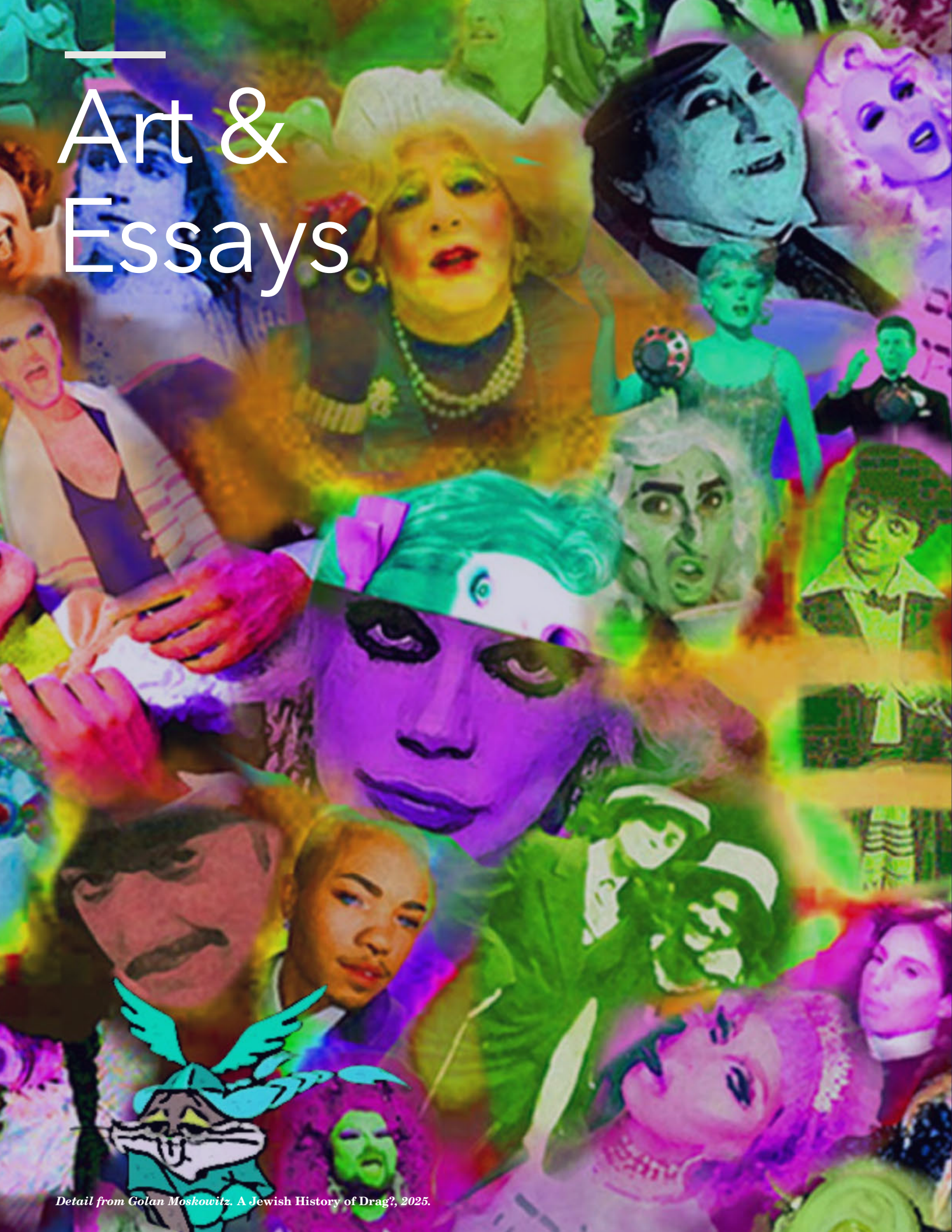
Art & Essays



Detail from Golan Moskowitz. **A Jewish History of Drag?**, *2025.*

From Out of the Archival Closet: Two Historians Reflect on the Censored Letters of Pauline Newman and Rose Schneiderman

Rachel Kranson and Anne Parsons

Imagine my students' discomfiture when they learned that Newman took steps to remove evidence of queer love and intimacy from her archived correspondence with Schneiderman.

What Do We Owe Our Queer Subjects?

Rachel Kranson

For students who took my "Gender and Jewish History" class at the University of Pittsburgh last fall, the queer lives of Jewish labor activists Pauline Newman and Rose Schneiderman sparked excitement about the Jewish past. They delighted in the knowledge that these activists had long-term partnerships with women, that Newman embraced gender nonconforming dress, and that a lesbian social network offered the two immigrants access to the most powerful social changemakers of the early twentieth century. Some of my students, many of whom inhabit LGBTQ identities themselves, found great personal meaning and pride in discovering historical queer Jewish heroes. As some of them explained to me, exploring the personal, affective aspects of Newman's and Schneiderman's lives helped them imagine new possibilities for their own futures.

Imagine my students' discomfiture, then, when they learned that Newman took steps to remove evidence of queer love and intimacy from her archived correspondence with Schneiderman. For students to whom being "out" is a virtue and LGBTQ+ pride their cultural norm, how could they make sense of Newman's desire to deemphasize that part of her and Schneiderman's legacy? Moreover, did our classroom discussion of how sexuality impacted Newman's and Schneiderman's activism—a question with which Newman would likely not have wanted us to engage—represent an ethical breach?

I personally found out about Newman's attempts to censor her archive back in graduate school upon encountering my classmate (now valued colleague) Anne Parsons's research. The ethical questions raised by her discoveries plagued me then as they plague me now. They forced me to wrestle with my power as a historian, and to think about the responsibility I might bear to long-dead subjects when I interpret their stories. I don't know that we can assume that Newman would have felt more comfortable sharing her queer legacy in a (somewhat) more accepting moment. And how much do we weigh this unknown against the need for our readers and students to encounter a fuller, richer past in which the personal is truly integrated with the political?

My students also wrestled with these questions. Some argued that we should not be discussing the queer lives of Pauline Newman and Rose Schneiderman without their consent. Others argued that we needed to know this history, because without their lesbian social networks it would have been rather unlikely for two immigrant Jews to impact national labor policy. Schneiderman's and Newman's queer lives did not just serve as an inspiration, argued my astute students. They also made a difference in terms of what these activists accomplished in their own lifetimes.

Finally, we considered the fact that Pauline Newman and Rose Schneiderman are well known as queer figures, in spite of Newman's attempt to redact that aspect of their legacy. When the *History Is Gay* podcast hosted an episode featuring Newman and Schneiderman and the NYC LGBTQ Historic Sites Project highlighted the building where Newman and her partner Frieda Miller raised their adopted daughter, it would be strange to suppress this discussion in our university classroom. The point seems moot—historians decided that Newman's queerness mattered well before we entered the classroom, and so it does.

But the questions that Anne's research brought up those years ago remain salient for those of us who teach and research LGBTQ history. What do we owe our subjects who never made it out of the closet? Is it possible to know how they would feel about us mentioning their queer lives in a new era? And to what extent would their qualms matter when confronted with the contemporary need to know and understand queer history?

Past Letters in a Queer Future

Anne Parsons

I remember my excitement when I visited Tamiment Library to do research on Pauline Newman's letters to Rose Schneiderman for a "Gender and Jewish Women" class. The collection of letters between Schneiderman and Newman dated to 1910–1912, when the two Jewish immigrants were in their twenties. I thought that I would write about the two women's intimacy and activism, but instead I learned that Newman destroyed parts of the letters. As a young Jewish lesbian, I was both inspired and distressed, as I chafed against the thought of people hiding parts of their identity. That tension prompted me to analyze the collection, comparing photocopies of the originals to the cut-up letters.

I found that in the early 1910s, Schneiderman served as the chief organizer of the New York Women's Trade Union League and Newman served as the first general organizer of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Newman's job took her across the country, as she organized garment strikes. Pauline wrote to Rose, then, with intimacy and longing. In one letter she wrote, "All evening I kept saying if only Rose were here …" She struggled emotionally, saying she tried to "get away from the blues." "I am just thrown like a wave from one city to another. When will it end?" Newman's correspondence with Schneiderman, then, eased the hardship of traveling and navigating the male-dominated labor movement. "Wanted you here last night on my birthday… Oh but how I wanted you," wrote Newman during this challenging and lonely period in her young life. "All evening I kept on saying if only Rose were here.… He said 'it must be Robert instead of Rose.' Rose dear, you will have to come here. I want you too much."

Newman did not deposit Schneiderman's letters to her in an archive, so we do not know the full extent of their relationship. By 1911, however, their romantic connection seemed to have ended: "Our relations of the past (and if there is any on your part now) is sacred to me," Newman wrote. In 1912, Schneiderman met the Irish suffragist Maud O'Farrell Swartz, who became her life partner. Newman forged a relationship with Frieda Miller, which lasted for fifty-six years, and they raised a child together.

Still, even considering the longevity of her relationship with Swartz, Schneiderman considered these letters from Newman valuable enough to keep for five decades. In 1962, she deposited the letters along with a few boxes of other materials at Tamiment, making them part of its archive of the American Left. She made the choice to share these letters from Newman with the public.

Soon after Schneiderman's passing in 1972, at a time of union decline, Pauline Newman went to Tamiment and removed the letters that she had written sixty years earlier. She took them to her apartment and proceeded to cut out multiple parts with scissors. These sections included the feelings of longing toward Rose. She also cut out her critiques of the male union organizers and problems in labor organizing she experienced throughout the country. She then took the letters and deposited them with the Schlesinger Library as part of her own collection. Newman passed away in 1987 and eventually the letters made their way back to Tamiment, which currently has the mutilated letters and photocopies of the originals.

Kopelov's about-face taught me how much historical context changes people's actions.

I too am perturbed by the ethics of sharing these letters. A separate research experience in graduate school gives me a different perspective. In 2004, I conducted an oral history with Connie Kopelov, a Jewish lesbian labor educator. The two of us danced around the question of her sexuality, and ultimately she did not talk about her relationships on the recording. I was astonished, then, when eight years later, the national news covered Kopelov getting married to her wife, the first same-sex couple in New York City to do so.

Kopelov's about-face taught me how much historical context changes people's actions. Pauline Newman had experienced misogyny, homophobia, classism, antisemitism, and anti-unionism in her lifetime and cutting the letters was an act of self-protection. She did not imagine a future with a visible LGBTQ community, legalized same-sex marriage, and gender-affirming classrooms. She would, however, have deeply understood the struggles of people fighting for workers' rights, women's rights, and the right to gender expression today. When we share Newman's letters with our students, we celebrate the young love of Pauline and Rose and the complexities of activist organizing, drawing inspiration from them at a time we need it. I suspect Pauline would very much approve.

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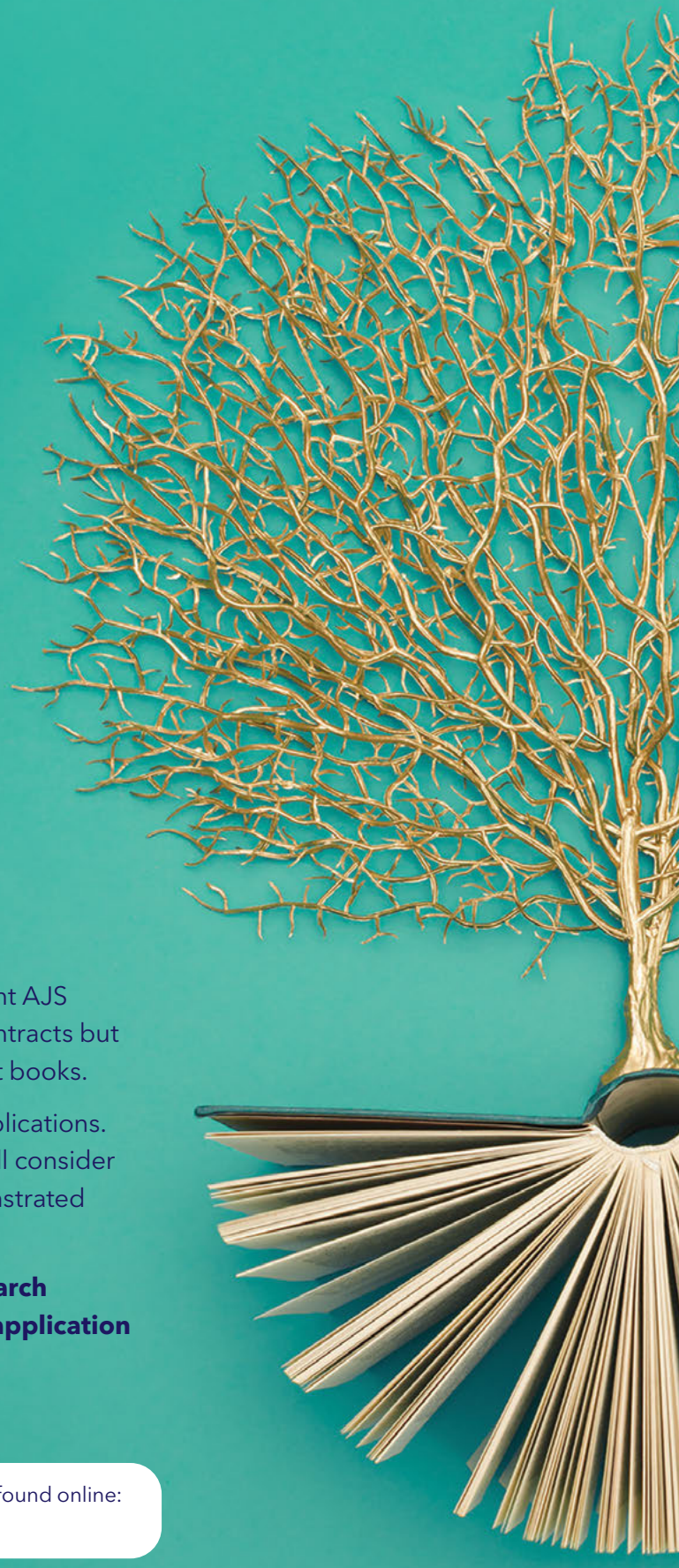

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Rainbow Brenner

Hadar Aviram

Two friends, young, poor, bright, and full of promise, sit together in a shabby room in Warsaw. They are joyous, for not only do they have food and oil to light the furnace, but also a hot-off-the-press poem by Bialik, whom they both admire. They recite the poem to each other, squealing, frolicking, then leap into each other's embrace. One of them would later eulogize the other, writing: "Our bones shook, and in the furnace a fire burned, and on the table the candle."[i]

The writer was Yosef Haim Brenner, a literary giant of the Hebrew revival movement, and his friend was Uri-Nissan Gnessin, a master of the short story in Hebrew and Yiddish. Intimate friends since their yeshiva days in Pochep, Ukraine, the two dropped out and joined a circle of authors committed to the literary revival of Hebrew. Chased by military service, debt, and other poverty-related tribulations, Brenner ended up living in a shabby room in East London, working long hours as a typesetter to fund his passion: his literary journal *Ha-meʿorer* (The awakener), a serial publication of Hebrew fiction, essays, and poetry. Gnessin edited *Nisyonot* (Attempts), a periodic collection of short stories. In 1907, after much deliberation, Gnessin joined Brenner in London, an encounter that Brenner hoped would mirror their harmony in Warsaw, but the friends' attempt at a shared life went sour within a few weeks and the two broke off all contact. In his eulogy for Gnessin, Brenner heart-wrenchingly wrote: "In the few good moments, of which there certainly were some then, hearts were joined and purified from the impurities of resentment. Then we both understood, that I am not at fault, that he is not at fault, that we are not at fault, only disaster lies upon us."

Brenner immigrated to Ottoman Palestine (ʾEreẓ Yisraʾel) in 1909 and, after a short and unsuccessful attempt at agricultural labor, moved to Jaffa and resumed his intellectual and creative career, venerated by members of the Yishuv for his originality and creative genius despite frequent controversies stemming from his critical writing and strident personality. Gnessin returned to Pochep and in 1912 moved to Warsaw, already gravely ill with a congenital heart condition he kept to himself. Gnessin's death in 1913, at the age of thirty-three, left Brenner devastated.

Portrait of Yosef Hayim Brenner., 1910. The David B. Keidan Collection of Digital Images from the Central Zionist Archives via Wikimedia Commons.

Brenner married and fathered a child, whom he named Uri-Nissan and doted on, but divorced while his son was an infant. He then rented a room at a ranch in the outskirts of Jaffa, where he mentored an unknown young author, Yosef Luidor, and invited Luidor to live with him. During the 1921 Jaffa riots, Brenner, Luidor, and others were brutally murdered at their farmhouse lodging. The crime scene was so heinous, and reflected such atrocious slaughter and torture, that details were kept confidential even as the murder filled newspaper headlines, and many of the facts remain unknown to this day.

Brenner's books and essays, regarded as the pinnacle of Hebrew revival literature, are no longer widely read beyond a small circle of literature connoisseurs. But recent years have seen a surge of interest in, and controversy around, Brenner's personal, romantic, and sexual life. One such inquiry is literary critic Menahem Perry's nonfiction work *Sit on Me and Warm Up: The Homoerotic Dialogue of Brenner and Gnessin*.[ii]

Virtually all Brenner biographers consider Gnessin to have been Brenner's first and deepest love interest, but Perry embarks on a microbiographic mission to reconstruct the minutiae of the two friends' relationship and subsequent fallout in London, following clues from their letters and memoirs, as well as a subversive interpretation of the Bialik poem that forged their intimacy. Gnessin, Perry believes, was always conflicted about his relationship with Brenner, fearful of him, and repelled by his exaggerated mannerisms and aggressive pursuit; moreover, Gnessin was already burdened by the secret knowledge of his heart condition and thus shy of deep commitments. Perry documents Brenner's repeated supplications that Gnessin, who was traveling throughout Europe, join him in London. After several evasions, Gnessin finally arrived in London in 1907, and during his stay there, for a few weeks shared close quarters with Brenner. Perry posits that the two shared not only a room, but a bed, and possibly also sexual intimacy. The experience was far from mutual, and it was short-lived. Gnessin fled Brenner, quickly found a female lover and moved in with her, and never spoke to Brenner again. Perry carefully analyzes one of Brenner's letters, in which he recalls walking to a public park and bitterly weeping there, and literally follows in Brenner's footsteps in London, concluding that Brenner walked across the entire city to see Gnessin, who at the time lodged as far away from him as possible.

Sit On Me and Warm Up became a lightning rod in the literary world. Perry was critiqued for inventing a "mystery that does not exist," because, "like any person," Brenner "had an assortment of desires and abhorrences, and like any person, his sexuality was mostly his own business."[iii] Perry was also accused of kowtowing to "an especially aggressive academic fad" he had previously rejected, namely, of scouring an author's "work, or letters, or a note on the fridge of his former neighbor, there is a hint, vague as might be, that he considered flipping the table, or perhaps did not, but would have liked to."[iv] This critique reflected a distaste for exploring the intimate life of canonical figures, but others might critique Perry's work from a postmodern "death of the author" stance.

Novelist Alon Hilu's speculative thriller *Murder at the Red House* also provoked controversy.[v] In the book, Hilu offers a shocking, lurid narrative of the murders of Brenner and Luidor as the fallout of a doomed homoerotic triangle with a Palestinian youth, Abd'ul Wahab, told in Rashomon-like style by four protagonists: Luidor, who is deeply in love with the youth but succumbs to Brenner's pestering; the aging Palestinian gardener, Murad, who sees Abd'ul Wahab's victimization at Luidor's hands as a microcosm of the land's conquest by the Zionist agricultural enterprise; and Raneen, Abd'ul Wahab's sister, who restores the benevolence of Brenner and the true love between Luidor and her brother, and exposes the cynical plot of the village police officer, Ali Arafath, to provoke a conflict between the Arab and Jewish citizens of Jaffa, stoke the pogrom flames, and bury the evidence.

Why this flurry of interest in exposing, as well as in hiding, Brenner's sexuality, and what, beyond prurience, can explain it?

Filmmaker Gal Ohovsky hailed the gentleness with which "Hilu manages to tell a painful historical tale, and also to describe interpersonal sensitivity in an insensitive place,"[vi] but others were not so sanguine. An editorial in the newspaper *Israel ha-yom* problematized the ethics of those who "relate the fictional, or half-fictional, biographies of flesh-and-blood people and write in it whatever they fancy, tie to their characters any qualities, choices, deeds, and words that they wish."[vii] Literary critic Maya Sela characterized the book as "a sexual assault on history—a rather homophobic sexual assault, including completely stripping his characters of any humanity, thought or idea in favor of them being homosexuals and nothing else," and from a literary standpoint, as gratuitously lurid entertainment eschewing obligations "to shaping, to language, to style, to history, to ethics, to good taste, and to the ancient, forgotten art of the storyteller."[viii]

That Brenner was a psychologically complicated man, and that his deeply stigmatized romantic entanglements were complex and contributed to his emotional suffering, is well known;[ix] why, then, this flurry of interest in exposing, as well as in hiding, his sexuality, and what, beyond prurience, can explain it? Does the speculation, investigation, and debate regarding Brenner's queerness contribute to our understanding of his work or his death, and if so, how?

One's experience of being an outsider looking in, perennially feeling out of place in visible and invisible ways

The question of "Brenner the fairy," as literary critic Arik Glassner calls it, is not mere gossip. Erotic distress, he explains, "is at the heart of the Brennerian creation."[x] But the queer gaze, I believe, transcends the sexual quandaries and inadequacies of Brenner's protagonists. One's experience of being an outsider looking in, perennially feeling out of place in visible and invisible ways, code-switching, and sometimes furtively hiding in plain sight, in a heteronormative society where openness could sometimes result in serious life-threatening consequences, has the power of opening one's eyes to many other displays of inequality, injustice, and exclusive assumptions—beyond those directly related to sexual identity or expression. The typical Brenner hero—usually a former yeshiva student turned secular, almost devoid of friendship and intimacy, and unmoored from his cultural-religious context—struggles to survive in an ugly, unjust, alienated world in need of urgent moral and spiritual repair.[xi] He discovers that his new milieu—Odessa, New York, even the yearned-for Zionist model society in the Yishuv—is nothing more than a modern manifestation of the stifling, conformist ghetto he left behind. Brenner was an enthusiastic believer in the Zionist dream, devoted his life to the revival of the Hebrew language, and was even willing to walk away from his meteoric literary career and become a farm laborer—and yet, even upon attaining the dream, bravely and perceptively indicted his new environment for being as constrictive as all the other environments he previously occupied.

Is the Brennerian gaze a "queer gaze?" As a deeply closeted man who experienced profound, unrequited, traumatic love that truly could not say its name, whose devastating psychological effects he could hardly keep from wearing on his sleeve but could openly discuss with no one, Brenner would carry his anguish and emotional suffocation with him wherever he went, for the rest of his life. It would be so central to his human experience that a geographic change, even dramatic and supported by exuberant ideological hope, would not enable him to shed it. Or, perhaps, Brenner was one of those rare people blessed with boundless sensitivity for the universal human condition, whose ability to identify invisible threads of human distress and suffering could transcend his personal experience. Given the artistry with which Brenner shaped his unhappy, stuck heroes, with both ridicule and empathy, I find both possibilities plausible, and perhaps more valuable than those offered by Perry, Hilu, and their critics.

Our desire to engage with this question of a man's century-old personal world is also the product of the changing landscape of bereavement in Israel. The shifts in Holocaust commemoration from monolithic, abstract invocations of "the Six Million" to personal stories; the growing personalization and intimacy in military bereavement; and the flood of personal stories of the victims of the October 7 massacre reflect an interest in mourning the unique qualities of individuals, including attributes and relationships silenced or minimized in previous generations.[xii]

Could it be that the passage of a century, in which the horror of his murder was silenced by the media and left unspoken, has enabled us to finally process and celebrate—in a personal, intimate way—Brenner as a private person, rather than a lionized national hero? It seems to have allowed us to look openheartedly into the lights and shadows of his psyche. But it is also important not to reduce Brenner—or any literary luminary—to a glossary of group identities. Brenner might have wrestled with silenced and unrequited desires, but he was also blessed with a rare, sparkling intellect, and with a heart open to identifying and protesting injustice and cruelty. A century late, we can reexamine these gifts and their bearer, in all his remarkable flaws and beautiful imperfections.

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i Yosef Haim Brenner, "Uri-Nissan: A Few Words" (1913). Project Ben Yehuda.

ii Menahem Perry, *Sit on Me and Warm Up: The Homoerotic Dialogue of Brenner and Gnessin* (Tel Aviv: The New Library, 2020).

iii Orin Morris, "'Sit On Me and Be Warm': Menachem Perry's Abject Failure," *Haaretz*, February 9, 2017.

iv Yehuda Vizan, "The Fall of a Giant," *Ha-shiloaḥ*, 2017.

v Alon Hilu, *Murder at the Red House* (Tel Aviv: Yediot, 2018).

vi Gal Ohovsky, "Literature Eclipses Reality," *Mako*, July 18, 2018.

vii Editorial, "'Murder at the Red House': Imagining the Truth," *Israel ha-yom*, June 28, 2018.

viii Maya Sela, "'Murder at the Red House': Alon Hilu Turns Brenner's Murder into a Crass Oriental Tale," *Ha'aretz*, September 21, 2018.

ix Anita Shapira, Brenner: A Life Story (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2008); *Ha-me'orer: Brenner* (dir. Yair Kedar, 2016).

x Arik Glassner, "'Sit on Me and Be Warm': The Issue of Homosexuality among Hebrew Literary Giants," *Ynet Books*, February 25, 2017.

xi Yosef Haim Brenner, In Winter (1909); Bereavement and Failure (1914). Project Ben Yehuda.

xii Dalia Ofer, " We Israelis Remember, But How? The Memory of the Holocaust and the Israeli Experience," *Israel Studies* 18, no. 2 (2013): 70–85; Liat Granek, "Mourning Sickness: The Politicizations of Grief," *Review of General Psychology* 18, no. 2 (2014): 61–68;Ilanit Hasson-Ohayon and Danny Horesh, "A Unique Combination of Horror and Longing: Traumatic Grief in Post–October 7, 2023, Israel," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 37, no. 2 (2024): 348–51.

Rahel Szalit, Die Fechterin, Selbstbildnis *(The Fencer, Self-Portrait), in* Die Dame*, 1930. Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz.*

Did I Always Know? Bisexual Visibility in Life and in the Archive

It can be particularly challenging to determine if someone was bisexual, especially when this label was not yet widespread.

Kerry Wallach

I first discovered Jewish artist Rahel Szalit in Berlin archives in 2008, but it was not until twelve years later that I stumbled upon the "smoking gun," something I never expected to find. This was a letter from Szalit to a close friend that confirmed she had relationships with both men and women. Until I read that one personal letter, I would not have dared comment on Szalit's sexuality. None of her other letters or writings made any reference to lovers or relationships. We know she was married briefly, to a man, so what else was there to say?

To be sure, I felt called to write Szalit's biography long before I had access to such details. The immediate affinity I felt for the east European–born illustrator and painter Rahel Szalit (1888–1942) is something I cannot explain in words. Her short, dark hair and her self-portrait as a fencer suggested she took part in so-called masculine activities and trends, but this was not uncommon for New Women of the 1920s. Maybe I always guessed there was more to her story. Did I have special insight into someone born nearly a hundred years before me because of my own experiences? Still, it seems absurd to suggest I could somehow sense she was bisexual.

Bisexuality is among the most invisible of the LGBTQIA+ identities. There are few effective ways for people in long-term relationships to come out as attracted to people of multiple genders, especially in professional settings. Even though I am openly queer and married to a woman, I am visible as bisexual only to those familiar with my past. I am accustomed to feeling as if people don't know my full story. Upon first meeting me, most people (conditioned to presume heterosexuality) assume I am straight until I mention my wife. Then they assume I am gay, but I have never considered myself a lesbian. Within the queer community, too, bisexual people are often viewed as insincere. My present doesn't reflect my whole self.

To write the life story of any historical figure, a good researcher keeps an open mind. Whether or not the archive holds evidence of queer relationships, or of other difficult-to-detect qualities, the possibility is always there, below the surface or between the lines. It can be particularly challenging to determine if someone was bisexual, especially when this label was not yet widespread. If we hold space for this, we might stumble onto queer lives in unexpected places.

In the case of Rahel Szalit, there were many people in her social circles who were known to be gay, bisexual, or sexually fluid. The friend to whom Szalit wrote the "smoking gun" letter, Eleonore Kalkowska, notably separated from her husband and lived with a female partner, Milly Steger. Many artists active in the Association of Women Artists in Berlin were known for their radical approaches to sexuality. Further, Szalit's illustrations of Thomas Mann's biblical story "Dina" appeared in the journal *Die Aufklärung* (The Enlightenment), which was coedited by the prominent sexologist and gay rights advocate Magnus Hirschfeld. Szalit's proximity to queer worlds makes it easier to categorize her as someone interested in both men and women.

One piece of the puzzle that remains unsolved is Rahel's marriage to actor Julius Szalit. The two separated even

When should we conceal these identities to protect ourselves? And when should we double down and make ourselves even more *visible ...?*

before Julius's suicide at age twenty-seven, in 1919. His death record indicates that the first name of his wife was unknown, implying estrangement. Nevertheless, some blamed Rahel for Julius's suicide. Others claimed he became distraught after receiving a telegram-like notification about someone (possibly a woman) he loved.

But another document may tell a different story about Julius Szalit. Director Moriz Seeler, who was homosexual, composed a deeply laudatory "open letter" to Julius shortly after Julius died. This is Seeler's only such work of this kind. Most of his writings discuss friends and acquaintances using the third person, but this one directly addresses his deceased friend. Seeler concludes, "Dear Julius Szalit! Rest comfortably and finally at ease, and wait with a floating mind and dapper heart for a resurrection day that will not be disturbed by any kind of disharmony or moral objections." Though the letter doesn't explicitly mention sexuality, there is nevertheless a hint of an untold story in these mournful lines.

In my biography of Rahel Szalit, I stop short of drawing definitive conclusions about Julius Szalit's sexuality but point to the possibility that they may have had a lavender marriage or a marriage of convenience. It would not be surprising if Julius's suicide were linked to closeted homosexuality (or bisexuality), given what we know about Rahel and the circles they both moved in. But for Julius, there is no "smoking gun"—only whispers. All we have is speculation.

Many individuals do not come out as queer out of fear for their safety or reputation. Rahel Szalit may have worried she would jeopardize her hard-earned standing in the Jewish community if she had been more open about her bisexuality, which she never wrote about or mentioned publicly. But, in the end, it was not Jews who ostracized her. Szalit saw the writing on the wall and fled Berlin for Paris in 1933, when Jewish artists were cast out of most German organizations. Even the Association of Women Artists in Berlin, formerly supportive of women in the avant-garde, excluded its Jewish members under pressure from the Reich Chamber of Culture. Later, Szalit was arrested by the French police and murdered at Auschwitz because she was Jewish.

Today, queer Jews are experiencing another turbulent and precarious moment, and not only because of current threats to the legal rights of LGBTQ individuals. Jewish and queer identities continue to be shaped by both antisemitism and homophobia. With antisemitism again on the rise worldwide, many Jews no longer feel welcome in groups that previously embraced them. Is it more dangerous to be visibly queer or visibly Jewish? The fear of harm applies to physical safety as well as to psychological and social well-being. When should we conceal these identities to protect ourselves? And when should we double down and make ourselves even *more* visible—either for our own benefit, or to educate those around us?

To understand the world, or the past, we must open our eyes to all possibilities. As I argued in my first book, *Passing Illusions*, some people want to be seen as Jewish or as queer (or bisexual, etc.). For this to be possible, the people they encounter must be willing to fully read for hints of difference, including subtle ones. By keeping an open mind, and by encouraging others to be receptive to the full spectrum of identities, we can ultimately tell a more complete story.

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SONG OF SONGS [Signed]
Abecassis, Raphael. Jerusalem: Safrai Gallery, 1989
Song of Songs portfolio with eight text pages enfolding colorful serigraphs with kabbalistic embellishments and Sephardic motifs by Moroccan-born Israeli artist Raphael Abecassis. Despite centuries of papering over the lyric poem as religious allegory, its content is secular—two lovers, exhilarated by sexual revelry under the night sky, bask in the openhearted warmth of their affection and trade extravagant praise. Sung in ancient times, it was written down in odd vernacular, with prominent Ugaritic and Aramaic influences, new Hebrew words of Persian and Greek origins, plus masculine instead of feminine forms. Portions of the song are in the *waṣf* tradition of describing the body via metaphor and simile: she is a dove, her stature like a palm tree; he is a bundle of myrrh, his legs are as pillars of marble; love is strong as death. The biblical megillah is read every year at Passover.
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Chapter seven (cropped)

A JEWISH HISTORY OF AMERICAN DRAG?

When I tell people that I'm writing a book about Jewish American drag performers, some have scratched their heads or made quick assumptions.

But, in my view, there may actually be too much relevant material for one book to contain it all! A multifaceted Jewish presence in American drag (and drag's precedents) has arguably existed at least since the nineteenth century.

And it's likely no coincidence that many of the leading theorists and cultural documenters of drag (in general) have also been Jews, sometimes drawing upon their own Jewish backgrounds, from **Esther Newton** to **Judith Butler**, **Marjorie Garber**, **Jack Halberstam**, and **Jennie Livingston** (who directed Paris Is Burning, 1990).

A history of Jewish American drag offers a revealing window into the fraught dualities of the American entertainment industry and U.S. popular culture.

It's also a springboard for understanding how Jewish artists have reworked social obstacles into tools of creative expression and political activism, and how Jewish Americans have navigated between assimilation and self-preservation, progressive ideals and tradition

Throughout the history of American entertainment, queerness* and Jewishness have alternatingly intersected and diverged with each other, and with dominant American culture, in a variety of contexts, producing a kaleidoscope of interactions within drag and its theorization.

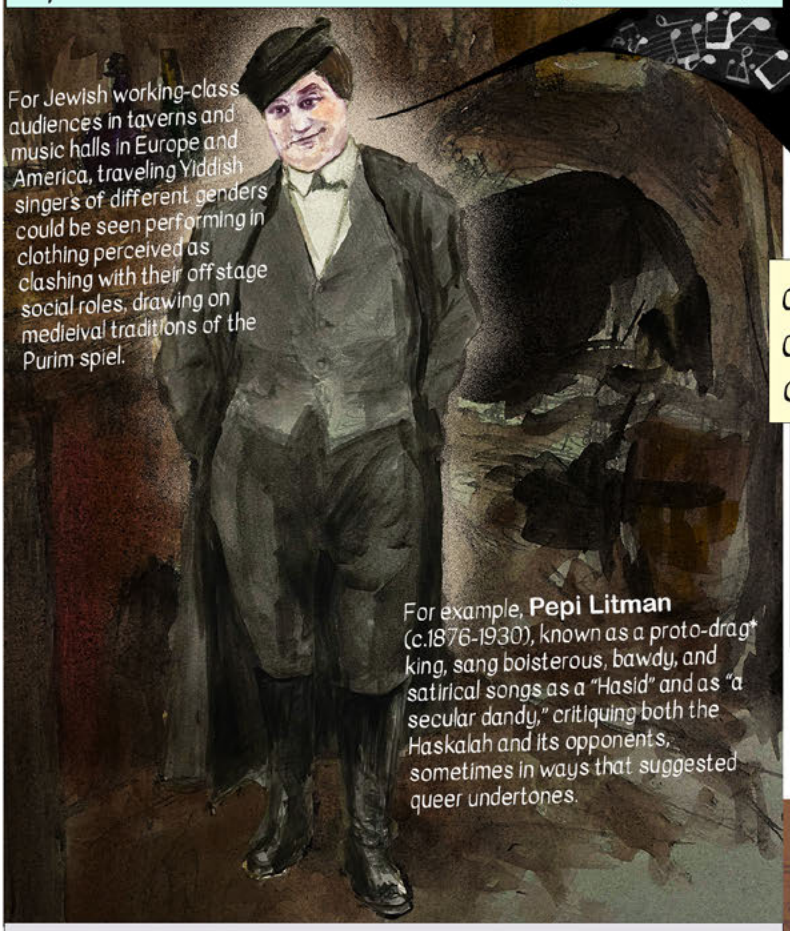
These interactions have propelled Jewish "cross-dressing,"** drag, and theatrical gender-redirections toward a number of divergent aims

*marginalized, non-normnative embodiment, gender experience, or sexual orientation ("normative" varies across time and space, of course).

**While "cross-dress" suggests the outmoded idea of one gender performing its "opposite" (and often doing so comically or "badly," in ways that reinforce the traditional gender order), more subversive forms of theatrical gender performance reject the idea of a strict binary and instead intermix, deconstruct, or reimagine gender signifiers in creative, political, or personally meaningful ways, often in relation to the performer's own queer, fluid, trans, or otherwise expansive relationship to gender.

American Jews (and Jewish-adjacent figures) have related to the art form of drag in a number of different ways over the ages...

...as a prism for social critique within in-group spaces when modernization challenged tradition,



For Jewish working-class audiences in taverns and music halls in Europe and America, traveling Yiddish singers of different genders could be seen performing in clothing perceived as clashing with their offstage social roles, drawing on medieval traditions of the Purim spiel.

For example, **Pepi Litman** (c.1876-1930), known as a proto-drag* king, sang boisterous, bawdy, and satirical songs as a "Hasid" and as "a secular dandy," critiquing both the Haskalah and its opponents, sometimes in ways that suggested queer undertones.

Vayn vet rinen fun di stelyes
af der rebetsin aleyn veln vaksn drelyes,
Mir, heylike kushere khsidim
veln hobn vos tsu lekn.

Wine will flow from the ceilings,
grapevines will even grow on the rebbetzin.
We holy and kosher hasidim
will have what to lick.**

**Source: The An-sky Jewish Folklore Research Project. https://yiddishsong.wordpress.com/tag/pepi-litman/

*exhibiting drag-related impulses (i.e. queer creativity or performative gender-deconstruction) before "drag" was framed as such for the public (which happened mostly in the mid-to-late twentieth century). Some proto-drag existed also in the variety and vaudeville convention of "impersonation" or "illusionism."

as a means for generating empathy across American, Jewish, and queer cultural divides,

After the 1969 Stonewall Riots, as gay and lesbian Americans hotly debated whether to court conditional acceptance through performing "respectable" gender-normativity or advocate for trans and gender-nonconforming people, **Harvey Fierstein** (b. 1954) straddled worlds.

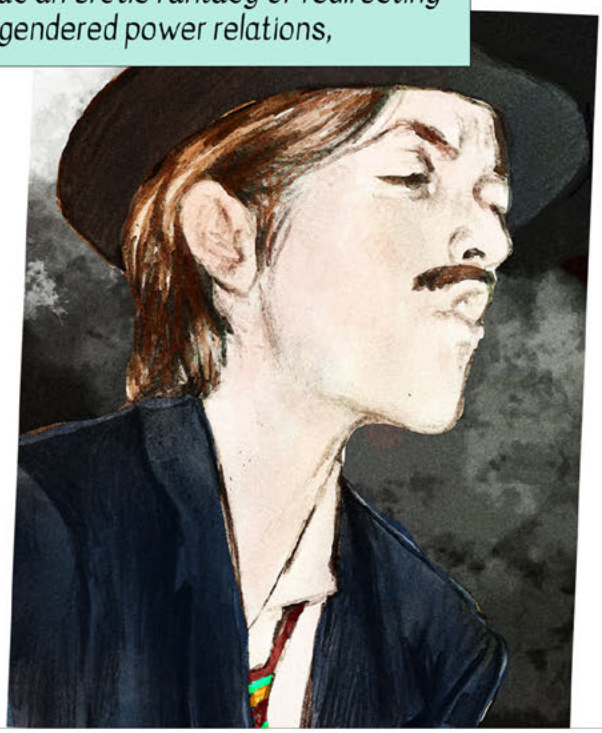
Raised in a middle-class Jewish Brooklyn family, he performed drag roles in New York's underground theater scene and became involved in Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), founded by **Sylvia Rivera** and **Marsha P. Johnson.**

Fierstein's Torch Song Trilogy (which moved to Broadway and then became a feature film) dramatized the experience of a Jewish drag queen who proudly inhabited his queer gender expression and sexual orientation while also seeking traditional romantic love, adopting a son, and recreating his own version of a Jewish family. It compelled spectators to understand that queer and gender-atypical people are human beings with hearts, minds, and families, even if differently constructed. Torch Song's success on Broadway is credited for having made drag commercially viable in mainstream culture thereafter.

as a means through which to claim space and rework exclusionary cultural frameworks,

Vaginal Davis (b. 1969), an intersex queer champion of guerilla-style performance art, drew from punk sensibilities, the iconic activist and philosopher Angela Davis, and from her own family heritage of German, Jewish, Mexican and French-Creole elders.

as an erotic fantasy of redirecting gendered power relations,



Performance artist **Shelly Mars** (b. 1960) was one of America's leading drag kings in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the term "drag king" entered popular discourse. Mars appropriated and reworked chauvinist male stereotypes at New York's Pyramid Club and other venues.

and as a means for breathing expansive new life into Torah learning, Jewish folklore, and communal ritual.

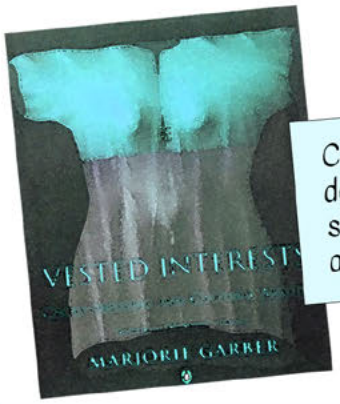
Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross was a beloved drag persona of **Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie** (b. 1969), a queer social activist and community leader, who emerged from a dynasty of 38 Orthodox rabbis to employ gender-transcendent theatrical storytelling in ways expanding what Jewish spiritually and ritual can look like.

(Just to name a few!)

Why has so much drag involved American Jewishness, and why has drag meant so many different things to American Jews? Is there a "story" to be told here?

If so, maybe it's a story about the way Jewishness itself has long stood, through the eyes of nationalist social fictions, as a placeholder for "excess," as Alisa Solomon suggests.

> As modernity strained to define nations, races, genders, cultures, the Jew became a figure of excess, spilling out of categories even as their contours were drawn. For what were these people, after all? An ethnicity, a race, a religion, a nationality? Even they couldn't say. Internally, Bundists, Hasidim, Zionists, and others competed vigorously to determine Jewish identity and meaning. So whether playing for Jewish audiences or for gentiles, when Jews gallivanted across such boundaries in Western theaters or in their own theater of the early twentieth century they performed an overdetermined dance on the fraying demarcation of difference.
>
> ---Alisa Solomon, "Queering the Canon: Azoi Toot a Yid," in Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender (1997), p.98

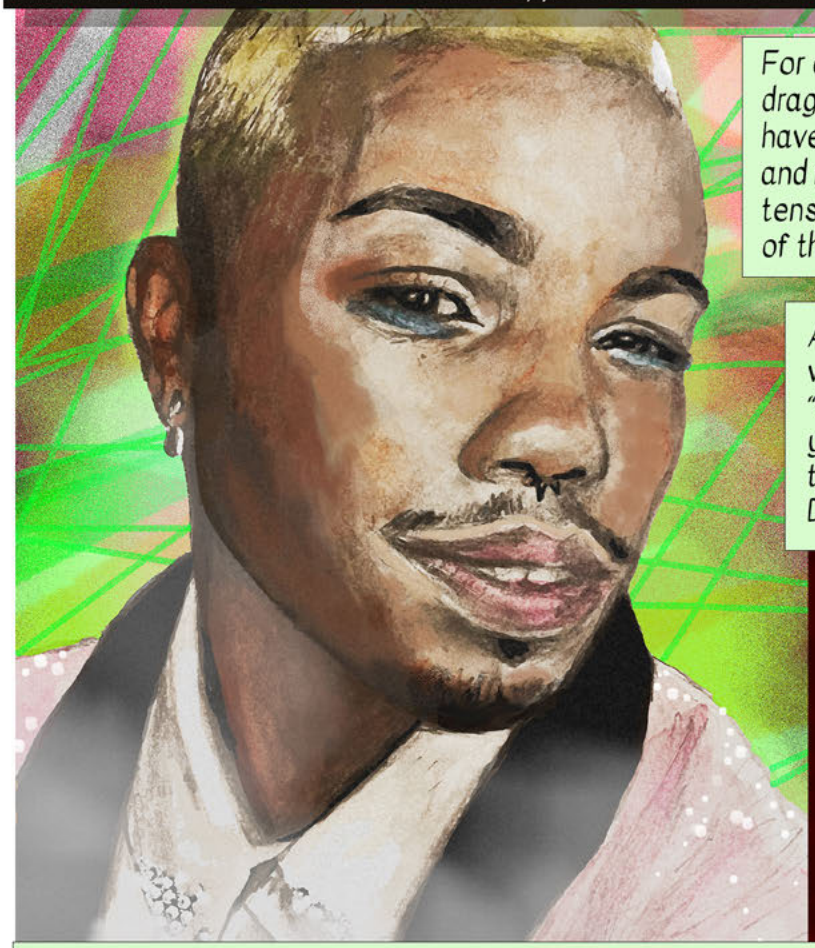


Covering later eras, Marjorie Garber's Vested Interests (1992) somewhat similarly described "cross-dressing" as a symbolic marker for broader cultural uncertainty around shifting social roles (a "category crisis"), and she used Barbra Streisand's Yentl (1983) and a number of other Jewish examples to make this point.

For **Adah Isaacs Menken** (c. 1835-1868), about whose ethnic/racial origins historians continue to disagree, billing herself as a Jewish, shapeshifting performer during an era that associated Jews with dramatic biblical archetypes and the mystique of an Orientalized East, helped her to launch a boundary-crossing career, thwarting social conventions both on and offstage.

Most notoriously, she played the Tartar military hero Ivan Mazeppa, for which she shocked international audiences with her masculine conviction and equestrian feats in states of undress that flouted expectations of Victorian feminine decency. Menken's performative boundary-crossing brought her a mixture of public praise and condemnation, the press both celebrated her and deemed her a dishonest Jewish interloper who bewitched men and women alike.

Despite the problematic, age-old tropes that associate Jews with mimicry or falsity, performative "shapeshifting" is, at its core, not always about imitation; it has also been a crucial strategy for excavating and magnifying unseen or suppressed dimensions of one's personhood.



For example, performers like **King Femme**, the drag king persona of **Sage Cassell-Rosenberg,** have used drag to explore their own embodied trans and nonbinary experience, as well as to navigate tensions between their queerness and restrictions of the Orthodox Judaism in which they were raised.

As genderfluid drag queen **Sasha Velour** (b. 1987) writes, drag (unlike imitative "cross-dressing") is "not really about becoming something opposite to yourself, but rather revealing a heightened and transformed version that was there all along. [...] Drag is the art of bringing queer possibility to life."*

In this regard, drag has also been a sort of reflexive reading of the embodied self, one that transcends "Peshat" surface readings to enable secret and allegorical dimensions to creatively break free beyond the limitations of social constrictions.

Maybe the most important throughline of Jewish American drag history, then, is something closer to what Andrea Most has characterized as the multiplicity of the improvisationally-performed American Jewish self, which underpinned the development of American popular theater and contrasted Puritan models of selfhood as a fixed, interior essence.

This idea of embodying an improvisational multiplicity speaks to the approaches of figures like Velour whose performances attend to their multiple and fluid identities and intentionally reveal the "seams" between their various influences, "quilted" together across time, like Talmudic discourse or oral folklore traditions. Velour's drag has also focused on the constructedness of monstrosity, refashioning figures long-associated with antisemitic projections (i.e. the vampire and the witch) into tragically misunderstood, beautiful heroes with powerful emotions, speaking to many of those labeled "monstrous" in today's world.

*Sasha Velour, The Big Reveal: An Illustrated Manifesto of Drag (New York: HarperCollins, 2023), p. 11

Velour is certainly not the only Jewish drag artist to invest in symbols that walk the line between humanity and monstrosity. It may even be argued that "the Jewish American drag story" is really a story about insider-outsider ambivalence, toggling between self-deprecation and glamorous self-reinvention. Drag regularly intermixes the energies of vaudeville-descended Jewish stand-up comedians (like the bawdy, fast-talking Pearl Williams and Joan Rivers) and classic Hollywood's silver-screen American dream (which was also influenced by many Jewish creatives).

For example, **Jack Doroshow** (1939-2017) merged the glamor of Zsa Zsa Gabor and Rosalind Russell's "Auntie Mame" with the sharp wit of Jewish comedians like Belle Barth when hosting then-illegal drag pageants across the country in the late 1950s and early 1960s as "**Mother Flawless Sabrina**," whom he described as a Bar Mitzvah mother emcee.

And **Charles Busch** (b.1954) has starred in his own plays in drag, often as an elegant "Hollywood starlet" type who eventually reveals a no-nonsense, Brooklyn-inflected persona from under the surface, associated with her "rougher" past. Busch's protagonists symbolically "undo" the effects of assimilation, empowering themselves to triumph over Nazis and other onstage villains. In these iterations, drag itself becomes a sort of metpahor for a layered or hybrid cultural identity.

Or maybe the Jewish American drag story is best told through a history of activism – of using "larger-than-life" forms of visibility to advocate for political change. Jewish drag performers have been committed activists and iconic symbols for social justice causes, fighting against racism, book bans, anti-trans legislation, and other obstacles to the progressive futures they represent.

To offer one example of many: **Sadie, Sadie the Rabbi Lady**, the drag persona of Gilbert Block (1944-2010), was a formative member of San Francisco's Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a street performance movement of "nuns" from different backgrounds who redirected feelings of shame or exclusion from their own religious upbringings by employing spiritual symbolism in staged public rituals to raise funds and awareness for their causes. In the 1980s and '90s, Block used his drag platform as a "rabbinic nun" to (among other things): protest homophobia at the Oscars, conduct a public exorcism for Jerry Falwell's bigotry before thousands of spectators outside the 1984 Democratic National Convention, debate with politicians on television, run for public office in drag, and travel the country to teach safer-sex practices during the AIDS epidemic.

A Lexical and Personal History of the French-Hebrew Term Coccinelle (קוקסינל)

Iris Rachamimov

The Hebrew term became detached from its French original, developing into something broader, sinister and pejorative ...

In the years 1964 and 1965 the French transgender cabaret company Le Carrousel came to Israel for two extended tours. Le Carrousel and its associated act Madame Arthur were established in Paris by the Algerian Jewish impresario, Marcel Ouizman, in the years after World War II, and evolved in the 1950s into a new type of queer cabaret. Whereas in the later 1940s performers would arrive in male attire and change into drag only for the show, many of the new cohort of entertainers lived as women in their daily lives, undergoing gender-affirming procedures in the Clinique du Parc in Casablanca. It was in this clinic that Dr. Georges Burou pioneered new and advanced surgical techniques and made medical transition more accessible, on condition that the mostly Western patients had the necessary funds.

Le Carrousel prided itself in its cast of beautiful young trans performers. Its main star, Jacqueline Charlotte Dufresnoy, went by the stage name of Coccinelle (ladybug in French), becoming an international transsexual celebrity both in Europe and beyond. When Le Carrousel arrived in Israel in the mid-1960s, the Hebrew-language press covered the tour enthusiastically, and gossip pages mentioned the famous political, business, and military figures who came to watch the show and flirt with the stars. The visit also made a huge impression on a few dozen Israeli trans youth—most of them teenagers—who could now imagine for the first time gender transition as an achievable option in their lives. Israeli trans pioneer, Efrat Tilma, wrote in her memoirs, "The show lasted an hour and I sat there hypnotized by the radiant beauty around me. The star of the show was Coccinelle, a petite woman with an amazing body.… I was stunned and wondered how to achieve it. This is exactly how I wanted to be."

The visit of Le Carrousel was remembered by these trans women as a foundational event, marking their coalescence into a distinct community with a shared sense of direction and future. Yet, it was also a lexical event with a far-reaching impact on the gendered selfhoods of Israeli men—gay and straight alike. Already in 1965, newspapers began employing the French-Hebrew portmanteau *coccinellim* (קוקסינלים) to refer to local iterations of gender transition to womanhood. The press almost always used a mocking tone to refer to Israeli trans youth, but it was at first intermingled with a sense that they were following in the footsteps of a glamourous Parisian troupe.

However, within a few years the Hebrew term became detached from its French original, developing into something broader, sinister and pejorative: a designation for an abject being, whose manly and human worth amounted to nothing. It was first and foremost applied to trans women, linking them with sex work, criminality, and living on the depraved margins of society—nothing of the glamor and pizazz of the original Coccinelle remained. However, the term began to be directed also at boys and men who seemed to deviate from accepted types of normative manhood: whether by the way they moved their bodies, dressed, talked, played, dealt with adversity, or expressed wishes and desires. All boys and men could be theoretically tainted with *coccinelle*-hood (*coccinelliyut*) if they incorporated into their gender presentation or subjectivity something perceived as weak or feminine.

In the first transgender novel in Hebrew, *The Cut* (*Ha-ḥatakh*), published in 1977 by the trans author Sharon Shapira, the heroine Roni explains that a *coccinelle* is the lowest of the low, with no public legitimacy to protest any form of oppression. Seven years later, Israeli trans pioneer Nancy Schneider explained in an interview why she had to leave the country: "People like me can't find any work in Israel and are forced, due

French actress, vedette and singer Coccinelle (Jacqueline Charlotte Dufresnoy), during a press interview in Buenos Aires, Argentina, June 5, 1974. Eduardo Comesaña / Editorial Abril / Alamy.

to social pressures, to make a living as prostitutes on the streets. No one cares about us or takes into account our talents or our knowledge. They only connect us with sex. Nobody wants to rent us apartments.… Everyone points at us on the street and sneers: 'That's a coccinelle,' and that's the only word that exists here to define a person. Sometimes someone adds 'fucker' [*maniac*] And that sums it all up."

Growing up in Jerusalem in the 1970s and early 1980s, the word lacerated my psyche. It was clear to me from an early age that I wanted to cross gender boundaries in certain ways. As a child I was sufficiently aware that my environment clearly distinguished between boys and girls, and ascribed certain clothes, activities, and feelings to one gender or another. I felt I wanted to experience both—at the same time or at different times, choosing one or choosing the other depending on the context and my inner needs. The gender boundary made no sense to me. I did not, of course, have the words to describe these feelings and learned quickly not to share them with other people, not even on Purim, except for one glorious instance in 1975. However, it was not until the late 1970s, when I first heard the word *coccinelle*, that I understood how deeply despised people like me were. For years I could not even utter the word, not even silently to myself. I could not think of myself in those terms, yet I wanted to explore this path, except I knew if I proceeded with transition I would not be able to be anything but a *coccinelle*, the lowest of the low.

In 1986, the Ministry of Health in Israel officially permitted for the first time "sex change surgeries for TRANSEXUALS [*sic*]" to take place in the country on a very restricted and regulated basis. This was part of burgeoning attitude toward gender transition that allowed greater gender movement and would become more prevalent in the

Underneath the new topsoil of lexical acceptance, a "hard" old layer of scornful language remained.

1990s and the first two decades of the twenty-first century. These increasingly visible changes were accompanied by new terms like *transgender*, *trans/transit*, *genderqueer*, *abinary*, which enabled the developing Israeli trans community to employ more neutral self-referential terms. Yet, underneath the new topsoil of lexical acceptance, a "hard" old layer of scornful language remained. The term *coccinelle* is still widely used to express scorn and deviation from accepted forms of masculinity, mainly military masculinity or other adjacent forms of masculinity. In January 2025, *Haaretz* published an article about IDF officers who cautioned combat soldiers fighting in Lebanon not to seek mental health assistance for combat trauma or combat fatigue, deriding them as *coccinellim* and as "worthless wimps" (*smartutim*). Although trans people in Israel have come a long way in terms of obtaining recognition and some rights, we are still perceived symbolically as worthless and antithetical to collective values.

IRIS RACHAMIMOV *teaches modern central European history and queer history at Tel Aviv University. Among her publications in queer history are "From Lesbian Radicalism to Trans-Masculine Innovation: The Queer Place of Jerusalem in Israeli LGBT Geographies (1979-2007),"* Geographic Research Forum *39, vol. 1 (2019): 19–42 and, with Gil Engelstein, "Crossing Borders and Demolishing Boundaries: The Connected History of the Israeli Transgender Community 1953–1986,"* Journal of Modern Jewish Studies *18, vol. 2 (2019): 142–59.*

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"Blessed Is the One Who Turned Me into a Man": Gender and Trans-ness in Sephardic Halakhah

Bryan K. Roby

At the turn of the millennium, an Israeli religious man's sibling decided to transition. Not knowing how to relate to his now brother, the man turned to Sephardic rabbi Idan Ben-Efraim, who consulted rabbinic and medical experts on the matter, sparking a renewed debate within the world of halakhic treatises. Ben-Efraim, in his response, guided the cis-gender man in how to refer to his "new brother and how to relate to him."[i] The rabbi's amount of care and empathy in properly gendering the trans man should not be overlooked. Was this proper gendering of the trans brother "progressive" posturing? Is there precedent in halakhic literature for how to refer to a trans person? Exploring how rabbinic authorities approached the question of gender transitions provides one model for our present day. Without going into the minutiae—and sometimes pathologizing logic—that were used to discuss the matter, I want to focus on how Ben-Efraim and previous rabbis took care in properly gendering trans Jews. If anything, this should be a lesson on the importance of respecting one's fellow human.

In 2003, Rabbi Ben-Efraim published *Dor tahafukhot* (A generation of upturnings), the first theological compendium dedicated solely to the question of how to relate to trans Jews who have undergone gender-affirming care. Cautioning that the responsa are "for married couples only," the work relied on scientific and theological evidence to support various legal positions regarding how to treat Jews who—as part of asserting their gendered identity—take on hormonal, surgical, and sartorial changes to the self. Rabbi Ben-Efraim unequivocally asserts that the Torah expressly forbids gender-affirming surgery as well as other specific forms of gender transitions. While there are several halakhic prohibitions against surgical and sartorial forms of gender-affirming care for those assigned male or female at birth, he later observes that this does not apply universally. Ben-Efraim is not a progressive rabbi. He devotes a few pages to a theological attack on his understanding of "liberalism and pluralism," considering them an assault on Torah principles.[ii] Yet, he still exercises care in asserting that one should relate to trans Jews as their chosen gender, including instructing them to sit in the appropriately gendered space within synagogues.[iii] The title—which comes from *parashat Haʾazinu*—refers to punishments awaiting a rebellious or perverse generation (*dor tahafukhot*).[iv] When taken literally, this could be construed as transphobic. Yet, Rabbi Ben-Efraim interprets the verse to also include a positive tone, pointing out that the word *tahafukh* could also mean that it is a generation of transformations where a community turns *toward*, rather than away from, God.[v] This points to the fact that the book was inspired by a generation of newly religious trans Jews who presented him with halakhic questions, seeking paths to a closer relationship with the divine.

Rabbinic halakhic texts, in delineating gender constructs, draw upon a complex taxonomy, including male (*zakhar*); female (*nekevah*); androgynous, or having indicators of multiple sexes; assigned female (*ʾaylonit*) or male (*saris*) at birth but transitioned to a different sex; and ambiguous (*tumtum*, i.e., "closed" genitalia that are impossible to categorize). Rabbinic exegetical and kabbalistic texts recognize that, while the assigned gender of a person sometimes remains compatible with how they identify, this is not always the case. Sometimes, a man is born with the soul of a woman and vice versa. Kabbalistic texts observe that when this occurs, a transition of genders may happen within the spiritual and physical world. For a *tumtum*, they are born as having neither male nor female spiritual attributes; yet, when their gender is determined in the physical realm, their gender in the spiritual realm

In the case of an androgynous person, they are born with dual-gendered spirits and maintain that duality within both realms, regardless of physical appearance.

transitions to maintain compatibility.[vi] In the case of an androgynous person, they are born with dual-gendered spirits and maintain that duality within both realms, regardless of physical appearance.

While certainly an innovative work, supported by major rabbinic figures of our generation, Rabbi Ben-Efraim's halakhic stance finds inspiration from two major rabbinic figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Rabbis Yosef Pallacci (1815–1896) and Eliezer Waldenberg (1915–2006). This may seem as strange. For many contemporary politicians, rabbis, and community members assert that trans-ness is a new phenomenon or point to the first recorded gender-affirming surgeries that took place in Germany in the 1930s. Yet, rabbinic figures at least since the 1600s have observed those whose internal sense of gender was incompatible with their external presentation and sought out medical interventions.

Rabbi Waldenberg, in his twenty-two-volume work *Ẓiẓ Eliezer*, turned to Rabbi Pallacci to determine the halakhic status of those who undergo gender-affirming care. He also notes, based on the words of Polish Jewish physician Tobias Cohn (1652–1729) and Jerusalem chief rabbi Yom Tov Al-Gazi (1727–1782), that doctors in previous generations observed several cases of androgynous Jews who married as men and fathered children only to later marry as women and give birth to additional children. Based on this, Rabbi Waldenberg concluded that this person has the legal status and obligations of an androgynous or *tumtum*.[vii]

To understand the halakhic status of trans Jews, many authorities turn to a nineteenth-century case in Izmir, Turkey. Hakham Yosef Pallacci, son of the chief rabbi of Izmir, Avraham Pallacci (1788–1866), mentions a question from a young man who consummated a marriage to a young woman and, after several years, "something happened to her and she transitioned from a female to a male in every way."[viii] The main concern of the responsum was whether the husband was required to provide a *get* (bill of divorce) to the person who transitioned. Basing his ruling on a similar case in 1804 from Thessaloniki, in which a young woman transitioned into a man just upon arriving at the *huppah*, Pallacci ruled that a *get* was not required as the *ketubah* had been retroactively deemed invalid as the "married woman" (*ʾeshet ʾish*) is now a "true man" (*gever ʾish*).[ix] For all intents and purposes, the person is halakhically their newly chosen gender and therefore their marriage is invalidated. Yet, the question of how this person should operate with regard to gendered halakhic practice remained. Should he be circumcised, as required by all Jewish men? Would he be required to fulfill all time-bound mitzvot, an obligation that women are exempt from? Although now a Jewish man, neither a *brit milah* nor the intervention of surgeons (*ḥakhmei nituaḥ*) was required to confirm his new Jewish manhood.[x] Instead, he should be considered as born circumcised, since rabbinic authorities viewed the vagina as an inverted penis. Every morning, he would be expected, as part of morning prayers, to recite gratitude for being born a man or a woman. In Pallacci's ruling, he should neither recite *she-lo ʿasani ʾishah* (that I was not created as a woman) nor give thanks for being born "according to God's will." This is because the trans man was "already made into a woman within his mother's womb and emerged into the world in the form of a woman." Instead, he is instructed to say "Blessed is the One who turned me into a man [*she-hefkhani le-ʾish*]" during the morning blessings. They have become anew and it is important to recognize their transformation into a new gender. Or, to borrow from Simone de Beauvoir, one is not born a man

Pallacci takes care not to misgender the person, using masculine pronouns throughout.

or woman, but "becomes one."[xi] In a refreshingly respectful rhetorical move, Pallacci takes care not to misgender the person, using masculine pronouns throughout for their current state. However, when referring to the person in legal documents, Pallacci notes that, although he "is not a woman, it would be a lie to call him by the name Ploni ben [son of] Ploni, since he is not a son." One may think this is a refusal to recognize their gender, but it is an assertion that kinship, as it relates to familial descent, is tied to the act of birth. This, for Pallacci, is supported by the exegetical story of Dinah and Joseph in Targum Yonatan, who, after conception, were switched in the wombs: "and Joseph was given to the womb of Rachel, and Dinah to the womb of Leah."[xii] The man who has transitioned from womanhood is still a man, yet it would be inappropriate to reference their birth and familial relationship to their parents as that of a son. A man assigned female at birth remains a daughter to their parent in rabbinic law because *ben/bat* specifically references the moment of birth and not their current status. Yet, Pallacci still maintains that "*he* is not a son," rather than saying "he is a daughter," leaving it open for interpretation as to how to refer to the person in legal documents.

We live in a moment in time where parts of our society imagine that trans folks are a new phenomenon—or do not exist at all—and that properly gendering a person with their preferred pronouns is part of a "woke" agenda. However, centuries of Sephardic and Ashkenazic rabbis provide a refreshing reminder that there's nothing new under the sun and that the value of respect for fellow human beings is an eternal mitzvah.

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i Idan Ben-Efraim, *Dor tahapukhot: Be-sugiyat nituḥim ʾaktualiyim be-halakhah* [A Generation of Upturnings: On the Subject of Contemporary Surgeries in Halakhah] (Jerusalem, 2004).

ii Ibid., 17–19.

iii Ibid., 140.

iv Deuteronomy 32:20.

v Ronit Irshai and Ilay Avidan, "Dor Tahapukhot: An Against-the-Grain Reading of Orthodox Jewish Law (Halakhah) on Gender Affirmation Surgeries," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 44, no. 1 (2024): 153.

vi Yosef Ḥaim [Ben Ish Ḥai], *Sefer Torah Lishmah* [1975 edition] (Jerusalem, late 19th century), 357.

vii Eliezer Waldenberg, *Ziẓ Eliezer: Sefer sheʾelot u-teshuvot*, vol. 10, 1970, siman 25.

viii Yosef Pallacci, *Yosef ʾet ʾaḥiv* (Izmir, 1895), 30 fol. a.

ix Ibid..

x It should be noted that the interpretation of this blessing, according to Tosefta Berakhot, is to express gratitude, rather than dismay, for having more obligations. A cis-gendered woman would recite gratitude for "making me according to God's will," acknowledging the value of womanhood as a gendered human separate from manhood.

xi Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949). In the original, she states "on ne naît pas femme, on le devient." (One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one.) I interpret this to point to the importance of distinguishing between biological sex and gender and that one is not simply a man or woman based on genitalia. Instead, a person throughout adulthood develops and makes an agential choice to adhere to, oppose, or play with a given society's gendered constructs.

xii Targum Yonatan, Genesis 30:21. The story can be used to support the fact that an IVF recipient is the biological mother despite the fetus being conceived out of the body.

Queer Kinship: (Re)discovering Histories of the First LGBTQ+ Synagogue

Sarah Ernst

When I applied to write for the Rainbow Issue, I did not expect to write a reflection during this political moment. As a PhD candidate in uncertainty—yet living an unapologetically queer life—I am grateful to share a glimpse into the work I have done (re)discovering histories of the first LGBTQ+ synagogue, Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC), and finding a moment of queer love for Holocaust survivors.

• • •

I am a PhD candidate at the University of Southern California (USC), where I research queer histories of the Holocaust. Many of you familiar with USC may also know the Shoah Foundation, a video archive that holds over 57,000 video testimonies from Holocaust survivors.[i] When beginning my research, I felt confident I could find *something* in the vast archives … but I knew that because of my positionality, it would be best if these testimonies didn't stand on their own.

My next stop at USC was the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archive, which holds the largest repository of LGBTQ+ materials in the world.[ii] I was not sure if there was anything connected to the Holocaust in the BCC holdings, but in taking the chance to search these documents more thoroughly, I found the seeds of a deeper part of my dissertation.

Looking into files related to the Holocaust, it became clear rather early on that when it came to memorials and education on the Holocaust, BCC did a lot. This was not only in educational programming, but trips to the local Museum of Tolerance and donation efforts for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. And while this piqued my interest, their involvement remained broad in its scope and not as directly connected to individuals as I hoped. Until one day, I stumbled across a newspaper clipping highlighting the work of "Harold" (pseudonym): "Harold, a Holocaust survivor in his late 50's, spends much of his time visiting the sick, especially those with AIDS. He is a member of the gay congregation Beth Chayim Chadashim, and the driving force behind its Bikur Cholim Committee—an informal group of 10 or so that volunteers to visit the sick."[iii]

I was so excited at that moment—here was a Holocaust survivor who was a part of BCC! But then the uncertainty set in: would I be able to find "Harold" again? With this, a new part of my journey began. I embraced the archive and set out to go through the piles of boxes that ONE had collected throughout the decades.

After weeks of flipping through financial records, conference programs, and newsletters, I came across an article celebrating the seniors of the synagogue, including an Ison Rovell. Ison—in his lifespan—moved from Germany to the British Mandate of Palestine and, finally, the United States. "Ok," I thought, "so that is not the exact trajectory of Harold. But it may be someone else, right?" Eventually, I discovered his relationship with Gary Wolf, whom he met after arriving in the United States.

I now had two names to look for, which for those of us researching marginalized histories is in and of itself quite amazing. But the question remained: Who was Harold? My search continued, and as I rubbed my dry eyes, I felt a sudden chill come over me. There, in the obituary in front of me, was the mention of creating "bikur cholim" and visiting the sick, the experience of fleeing from Germany with the family. The name … *Gary Wolf*. What started as a chance archival encounter grew to connections I couldn't have possibly expected: not only was Gary Ison's partner but he was *Harold*, the one who organized and started the committee to help others during the height of a ravaging pandemic.

How did one's own experiences in the Holocaust inform future activism work and how could I use Gary's story to tell this?

Immediately my mind started racing through the many twists and turns that Gary's life took, and how I as a historian could try to tell his story. What did it mean for Holocaust survivors to take part in care efforts at a time when stigmatization led to a lack of support for victims of an—at the time—untreatable disease? How did one's own experiences in the Holocaust inform future activism work and how could I use Gary's story to tell this? These are only some of the questions that came to mind while learning more and more about Gary's life, questions that I intend to pursue in the future. These questions for sure have not gone away, but that is not where I want to end.

• • •

Researching the Holocaust and the multiplicity of intersecting identities effected by its horrors is laborious, depressing work. Even when focusing on survivors, there is the overbearing reality of *what* they had to survive that informs their relationships with other survivors and future generations. Yet, when I looked for more mentions of Gary and Ison, what came up was not their identities as Holocaust survivors, but the love they shared for each other and the community of BCC:

"Gary and Ison met over 32 years ago … they loved the company they found at synagogue. Loved the days of stuffing envelopes after services for the newsletter mailing, loved the joy at BCC, and the good humor (much of which Gary added)."[iv]

"Gary looked at Ison with an impish smile and said 'Where is mine?' Ison said 'Your what?' Gary chuckled and said, 'Where is my ring?' There was a very tender moment when lovers of 32 years looked at each other and knew what they had in each other, knew that the world was a better place than it had been in their youth, a freer place than they had known most of their lives."[v]

It can be so easy to languish in desperation, looking forward and backward in queer history to see nothing but doom either way. That is why stories like Gary's matter: present in his life are queer joy and sadness, a demonstration of the complexity of his own identities. When fostering community, we can build relationships that make the world a better place. So, when things get tough, maybe go to your local archives, and spend some time reading through things you wouldn't normally think to look through: who knows, you might just find your own Ison and Gary.

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i https://vha.usc.edu/home. The work done here has been supported through the Beth and Arthur Lev Student Research Fellowship through the Center for Advanced Genocide Research.

ii https://one.usc.edu/about.

iii Box 12, Folder 6, Beth Chayim Chadashim Records, Coll2012-133, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

iv Box 11, Folder 15, Beth Chayim Chadashim Records, Coll2012-133, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

v Box 8, Folder 18, Beth Chayim Chadashim Records, Coll2012-133, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

Red Rabbi Turns Pink: Marshall Meyer's Influence on the Debate over Four Hundred Disappeared LGBT People in Argentina

Marce Joan Butierrez

Short Story of One Disciple

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1930, Marshall Meyer grew up in Norwich, Connecticut, in a nonreligious family, but became involved in Jewish life at an early age and actively participated in Camp Ramah. During his undergraduate career at Dartmouth College, he met a philosophy professor who constantly challenged him to debate about Judaism. Obsessed with the idea of winning the debate, Meyer improved his Jewish knowledge, deepening his desire to become a rabbi. During this time, Meyer was impressed by the thought of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) of America, the main

Sol Avena (2023). "400 LGBT detainees and disappeared people, they're here! That the sidewalks they walked on would speak of them. Neighborhoods for Memory and Justice."

During the last Argentine dictatorship, Rabbi Meyer also prayed with his legs, even by missing the Shabbat.

seminary of Conservative Judaism. After graduating, he enrolled at JTS under Heschel's tutelage. The experience changed Meyer's entire perspective on Judaism and the defense of human rights. Rabbi Heschel was a prominent civil rights activist, a close friend of Martin Luther King Jr., and a dedicated fighter against racial and religious segregation. Heschel's books were an inspiration to a generation of young rabbis who understood the centrality of participating in the defense of human rights as an aspect of performing mitzvot. Marshall Meyer was ordained a rabbi in 1958, a year before he arrived in Buenos Aires. His admiration for Rabbi Heschel carried him through the worst days in Argentina, when Rabbi Meyer always remembered Rabbi Heschel's words: "For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying." During the last Argentine dictatorship, Rabbi Meyer also prayed with his legs, even by missing the Shabbat.

Red Rabbi

Rabbi Marshall Meyer and his wife Naomi arrived in Buenos Aires in 1959 to serve at Liberty Synagogue, one of the most important non-Orthodox congregations in Argentina. At the time, the Argentine Jewish community numbered about 300,000 people, the largest outside the United States and Israel. However, most Argentine Jews were secularized and had no theological training. Rabbi Meyer's main goal was to increase the participation of the Conservative Jewish community in religious services and to promote Judaism among young people. Although the Jewish community was intrigued by this new American couple living in Argentina, on many occasions they were perceived as too liberal because of their colorful and fashionable attire, their irreverent and informal attitude, and their overfamiliar treatment of young Jewish people.

In 1962, Rabbi Meyer ended his contract with Liberty Synagogue and established a new congregation, Bet El, in the Belgrano neighborhood, a suburb associated with young Jewish families. One of the most important projects developed by Rabbi Meyer was Camp Ramah, based on his own childhood experience. In Argentina, Camp Ramah taught hundreds of Jewish teens Torah, the Hebrew language, and sports. The success of Camp Ramah motivated Bet El to purchase land to build permanent classrooms and sports facilities in a rural area far from Buenos Aires. Beyond the success, Rabbi Meyer was criticized for some of the activities at Camp Ramah: for some youth members, he was too permissive and liberal and refused to follow leaders' instructions, resulting in an open letter referring to "favoritism" in the Ramah Association elections; an interfaith wedding held in one of the camps offended some members; and finally, in 1969, Rabbi Meyer was publicly accused of sexual misconduct with some *madrichim*. Nissim Elnecave, editor-in-chief of *La Luz Magazine*, a publication associated with the Orthodox community, wrote a curious and salacious column indirectly referring to some sexual scandals that occurred with a male *madrich* in Bet El, allegedly by the "beautiful and young rabbi." In the 70s and 80's, Elnecave published many articles criticizing Rabbi Meyer, accusing him of being a Marxist, a reformist, a foreigner with too liberal ideas, and a homosexual. A deeper analysis of the debate between Marshall Meyer and Nissim Elnecave reveals the controversial role of Rabbi Meyer in the Argentine Jewish community, and his strained relations with the Delegation of Argentine Israeli Associations (DAIA) and the Kehila of Buenos Aires (AMIA).

In *La Luz Magazine* of November 19, 1962, an article recounts the debates within the Liberty Synagogue and describes Rabbi Marshall Meyer as a "too young, handsome, beautiful, but above all, greedy and ambitious to a superlative degree, unscrupulous of the respect due to others and of the decency and dignity of our local institutions, norms and established customs." In this sentence it is clear that Meyer was considered a disruptive rabbi from the beginning of his career. Other articles refer to him as a "Red rabbi" for his Marxist ideas, even though Rabbi Meyer always declared himself to be a liberal and democratic person and never expressed sympathy for socialism.

"But You're a Jew"

The political conflict in Argentina grew in the 70s, especially between the conservative sectors (embodied by the military forces) and the leftist organizations integrated into some sectors of Peronism, the Communist and Socialist Party. The return of Juan Domingo Perón after a long period of exile did not resolve the political violence. Perón rejected the participation of leftist organizations in the Peronist Party, rejected leftist rhetoric, and appealed to the military for support to pacify the country. A few years after the military took over the government, Perón signed documents proposing the creation of a military force committed to controlling the leftist organizations, also known as the Triple A, the Spanish acronym for Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (Argentine anticommunist alliance). During these years, and especially after the beginning of the last dictatorship, Rabbi Marshall Meyer worked hard to defend Jewish youth persecuted for their leftist ideology. While the central Jewish organizations refused to support the families of the disappeared, accusing them of raising their children in the wrong way, alienated from Jewish doctrine and oriented in leftist ideas, Rabbi Meyer was engaged in the defense of Jewish people in danger under the military government. The archives contain many documents in which mothers and fathers acknowledge the work of Rabbi Meyer, who accompanied Jewish young prisoners, found out the whereabouts of Jewish disappeared people, and spiritually supported people who were tortured, raped, and mistreated by the military government, like the famous journalist Jacobo Timerman. The latter wrote a letter to the rabbi highlighting the spiritual role of Meyer's support during his imprisonment: "All the days they let me know that I am a Jew, but your presence here, in this prison, lets them know—maybe understand—that being a Jew is my strength and my pride."

Rabbi Meyer also experienced this differential treatment during his visits to the prisons. He was stripped naked and humiliated on several occasions, and when he demanded his right to be treated like other Catholic chaplains who visited the prisons, the prison guards said to him, "But you're a Jew," referring to the undervalued condition in which the Jewish prisoners lived. Rabbi Meyer registered all these mistreatments received during the dictatorship and denounced how the Jewish people were especially tortured and violated because of their different religion and culture.

Pink Rabbi

In 1983, just a few months after the return to democracy, Rabbi Marshall Meyer was appointed to the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), created by President Raúl Alfonsin to investigate the role of the army forces in the repression, disappearances, and annihilation of leftist organizations. CONADEP collected testimonies and denunciations of the violence suffered under the last dictatorship. Rabbi Meyer was instrumental in collecting denunciations in New York, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, Paris, and London, where he met many Argentine refugees and victims. Based on these testimonies and others collected in Argentina, CONADEP declared the total number of disappeared persons to be 8,961, although they declared that this number was only a small fraction of the great challenge that still remained in the search for justice.

Rabbi Meyer was the member who drew attention to the number of Jewish people who were particularly mistreated during the last dictatorship, and also spoke out about the violence against gays and lesbians in the illegal detention centers. In an interview with Robert Spero in 1988, Rabbi Meyer stated: "At the National Commission for the Disappeared Persons in Argentina, we found that over five hundred gays had been murdered and tossed into the river, but first they were anally abused by the military." When Rabbi Meyer moved to New York in 1985 to officiate at B'nai Jeshurun, the city's oldest Ashkenazic synagogue, he encouraged the

Young LGBT people hold signs demanding the recognition of the 30,400 disappeared people ...

congregation to support gay people affected by the AIDS crisis and created a friendly environment for LGBT people.

Current Demands for Reparations in Argentina

The demand for the recognition of these LGBT victims in Argentina mentioned by Rabbi Meyer has become one of the central issues of LGBT activism in the country today. Due to the scarcity of documentation about Rabbi Meyer's statements on gay disappeared people, only the rumor of four hundred people, spread by the preeminent Argentine gay activist Carlos Jauregui, survived. This short article is the first attempt to bring documentary evidence related to the role of Rabbi Marshall Meyer in the struggle for LGBT rights in Argentina. Perhaps because he was often treated as a homosexual, but certainly because he always acted in defense of marginalized people, Rabbi Marshall Meyer bequeathed to the present a central piece of information that feeds the current demands of justice for trans, *travesti*,[i] lesbian, and gay people in Argentina. A compelling argument to continue fighting for recognition are the words of one of the members of the CONADEP, which are now recovered in this paper.

The role of Rabbi Marshall Meyer and other Jewish organizations, such as the Jewish Movement for Human Rights, is currently underrepresented, largely due to the actions of the mainstream Jewish institutions, which have refused to participate in the human rights debate because of their alignment with the Right in Argentina. In general, Argentine society ignores the long tradition of left-wing Judaism and Jewish leadership in the defense of human, civil, and workers' rights. Despite multiple attempts to hide the disruptive voices and actions of a sector of the Jewish community, the legacy of Marshall Meyer survived in the LGBT demand for recognition of the four hundred prisoners and disappeared. Rabbi Meyer's intense work in defense of the disappeared, his perspective on the particular violence against Jewish and LGBT people, and his disruptive voice challenging the conformism of the Jewish community remain present as LGBT people are claimed by Memory, Truth, and Justice.

In several demonstrations, the LGBT community has demanded the recognition of four hundred LGBT disappeared, adding this number to the 30,000 cis-heterosexual disappeared now recognized by the government. Thus, the number of 30,400 disappeared people is used to make visible the existence of LGBT people murdered under the military dictatorship. Every year on March 24, when Argentina commemorates the National Day of Memory for Truth and Justice, human rights organizations protest in front of Congress and the Pink House, the two central government buildings in Argentina. During these demonstrations young LGBT people hold signs demanding the recognition of the 30,400 disappeared people, an unexpected and marvelous legacy of the liberal, controversial, democratic, and empathetic work of an American rabbi who prayed with his legs.

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i *Travesti* is a term used in Argentina and some countries of the Southern Cone of Latin America to refer to transgender people who are generally engaged in sex work. It is a complex term with multiple meanings across time. In the 1970s, it usually referred to "men dressed up as women" in theater and cabaret shows, while in the 1980s and 1990s, it was more related to sex work and the use of rudimentary embodiment techniques. Currently, it is seen as a political identity that rejects gender binarism and vindicates the racial, ethnic, and class condition of trans people in connection with sex work.

Complicit Visits in the Space of Jewish-Muslim-Queer

Adi Saleem and Scott Spector

I

Ilch bin Prinz Jussuf, und ziehe durch die Lande,-
Mein Herz ist eine goldene Moschee,
Und meine Sehnsucht betet immerzu.

I am Prince Yūsuf and I pass through the land,
My heart is a golden mosque
And my longing prays without end.

– Else Lasker-Schüler (1911)

Je ne suis pas juif … mais je suis là parce que le sujet m'intéresse et il n'y a pas un espace pareil pour discuter de l'homosexualité en Islam à Paris.

I am not Jewish … but I am here because the topic is of interest to me and there isn't a similar space to discuss homosexuality in Islam in Paris.

– "Salim," a gay Muslim attending a talk on Orthodoxy and homosexuality in a gay Jewish space (2019)

These two statements by subjects a century and worlds apart are not in dialogue with one another. How could they be? Beyond occupying such different spaces, the texts are different genres—one a formal poem by a published German Jewish author, the other an interview with a gay North African migrant in Paris. If we are to find a space in which to discuss these two compositions and their authors together, it is not the space of "dialogue." Yet, both subjects were innovative in their gestures to traverse Muslim-Jewish identities and spaces in unfamiliar ways, which the authors of this essay would like to argue are *queer*. This is not because they both belonged to minority populations that defied sexual and gender (or even racial) roles. The key to their respective innovations, in fact, was a resistance to the assumption that they occupied a role or space shared by a minority of Others, in potential conflict with other groups with which they can and should engage in constructive dialogue. Instead, we see both of these examples as instances of complex subjectivity that entail not just complexity, but paradox and contradiction, or, in the richly suggestive French term, *complicité*. What we would like to suggest is that these respective "complicit visits" (along with others we are examining) entail encounter and fantasy that open a space to do the work that the flawed project of "dialogue" promised.

The tension between being read and reading oneself is key …

The search after these questions, like the searching of our subjects, comes out of personal experience and encounter. Adi, a cultural critic in French and Jewish studies, has just published a volume he edited entitled *Queer Jews, Queer Muslims: Race, Religion, and Representation*, in which contributors explored how Muslim and Jewish sexualities are so often represented as racially alien, deviant, or dangerous within the context of Western modernity. The "Jews" and the "Muslims" that emerge out of the fantasy universes of Islamophobia, antisemitism, racism, coloniality, misogyny, and homophobia, the anthology posits, belie the complexity of actual queer Muslim and Jewish subjects, even as they imagine the figures of the Muslim and the Jew as essentially opposed and irreconcilable identities. Meanwhile, Scott, a historian of German and European culture as well as sexuality, has long argued against identity models of Jewish belonging and self-understanding within majority gentile societies. Both of us think of subjectivity, with its emphasis on simultaneous and contradictory multiplicity of experiences of self in relation to the world, as a better model of experience. Similarly, we agree that the image of dialogue between Jews and Muslims and Christians, or between Muslim or Jewish queers with other or with nonqueer Jews or Muslims, performs a nailing down of collective identities that reenacts the ideological operations that both Adi's and Scott's work has pushed against.

Else Lasker Schüler dressed as her persona "Prince Jussuf," from the frontspiece of her novel Mein Herz, *1912. Via WIkimedia Commons.*

So, Scott and Adi can be read, but cannot honestly read ourselves, as a Jew and a Muslim in dialogue with one another. The tension between being read and reading oneself is key in the two cases that follow.

Prince Yūsuf, narrating him/herself in this three-line strophe, crosses borders of race, faith, and gender, passes through the land (*durchziehen*). Is this simply a violation of a boundary that has too violently contained the author as a subject? Our translation as "passing through" also invokes the problematic gesture of *passing*, with its antisemitic and racist connotations, suggesting inauthenticity, disguise, masquerade, deception. German poet Else Lasker-Schüler depicted herself as a creative Islamic noble in the frontispiece to her 1912 novel *My Heart*, and appeared in that persona on the streets of Palestine in the mid-1930s. Passing through the land (*das Land durchziehen*) suggests wandering, but also penetration. The passing through/into the land she called *Hebräerland* was also, in its way, a conquest.

"My heart a golden mosque" does not identify sentiment as Muslim devotion, it *incorporates* it—the poem's Islam is the Jewess's heart. Our larger study assembles other such crossings, cross-dressings, and identifications of putative radical Other as the essence of the self: there is, for instance, the celebrated case of Lev Nussimbaum / Essad Bey / Kurban Said, whose Arab and Muslim personae carried him through Weimar and Nazi Germany and the status of a popular German writer; the similarly popular Jewish-Algerian-French novelist Elissa Rhaïs, confecting the fictitious persona of an Algerian Muslim woman who became a novelist of the North African folk landscape after having escaped from a harem; as well as one of the world's leading Orientalist scholars, the Habsburg Hungarian Ignác Goldziher, who never formally converted and who advocated the transformation of modern Judaism into Muslim form and spirit. The erotic content of Orientalism has been dwelt upon in much scholarship, but is Orientalism, by definition, "queer"? Certainly that is not our implication any more than it was Edward Said's, and yet, in these particular formations by apparently nonhomosexual subjects, as these short descriptions indicate, queer *readings* are readily available. In Lasker-Schüler/Yūsuf, the subject of prayer itself is not the Muslim Yūsuf or Hebrew Else, but their sexuality itself: "my longing prays," and this desire qua devotion passes through the bounds of time.

The speakers and audience made several comparisons between the Islamic and Jewish traditions on the topic of sexuality.

II

"Je ne suis pas juif," Salim announced to the fourteen or so other individuals in a small meeting room on the premises of the Parisian LGBT Jewish association Beit Haverim. Salim was there that evening attending a talk on "[Jewish] Orthodoxies and homosexualities" organized by Beit Haverim.

Salim explained that, while he was not Jewish, he was there because he felt that he could not find similar spaces in Paris for the discussion of homosexuality in Islam.

Like North African Muslims in early twentieth-century France, who turned to kosher butchers due to the long-established understanding that kosher meat conforms to Islamic dietary laws, Salim's decision to take part in a discussion on sexuality in (Orthodox) Judaism in a queer Jewish space underlines, on the one hand, the religious and theological similarities between Judaism and Islam and, on the other hand, the sociocultural similarities between Jewishness and Muslimness in France. Indeed, as the evening progressed, the speakers and audience made several comparisons between the Islamic and Jewish traditions on the topic of sexuality. Was this Jewish-Muslim dialogue taking place in a space that was not explicitly about nor tailored toward Jewish-Muslim dialogue? Unlike in some other spaces where Jewish-Muslim dialogue is explicitly performed, was this implicit Jewish-Muslim dialogue?

There is a danger in characterizing Salim's participation in Beit Haverim's event as an example of Jewish-Muslim dialogue, or even of "good" Jewish-Muslim relations. It is tempting to see instances of interactions between Jews and Muslims as examples of positive organic interfaith/intercultural dialogue or relations. However, such a tendency reduces individuals to one single facet of their identity. Salim is Muslim, but he is not only Muslim. Similarly, the Jews at the event were, presumably, Jewish, but they were not only Jewish. For one, Salim and the others are also, broadly speaking, gay. They are also French, mostly middle-class professionals, and mostly male. To only see Salim as Muslim and the others as Jewish and to conceive of their interactions as Jewish-Muslim is to already impose an interpretation of Muslimness and Jewishness within a particular narrative. Interestingly, in the twenty-first century, were Salim Christian, it would not be as tempting to read his presence in a Jewish space as a form of Jewish-Christian dialogue. While one might see the participation of a Muslim man in a Jewish event as an example of Jewish-Muslim dialogue or relations, it could just as easily, and more convincingly, be understood in purely pragmatic terms, that is, Salim, a gay Muslim, cannot locate LGBT-affirming Muslim spaces and so seeks out a prominent LGBT-affirming religious space that happens to cater to Jews. Additionally, human encounters resist simple binaries such as "good" relations or "bad" relations, but, rather, are often fraught with contradiction, complication, but also *complicité* or connection. Indeed, Salim later revealed that the reason he immediately disclosed his Muslimness was that, in the past, when assumed to be Jewish or otherwise not Muslim, he had been witness to Islamophobic comments that made him feel uncomfortable. Yet not only did he keep coming back because he still found something of value there, he did not seek out LGBT Christian spaces. The framework of Jewish-Muslim relations, good or bad, is wholly unhelpful to make sense of Salim and Beit Haverim and, by extension, relationships and interactions between Jews and Muslims.

It is so tempting to read any form of nonhostile interaction between individuals who happen to be Jewish and Muslim as a positive example of Jewish-Muslim relations not only because interfaith dialogue initiatives by definition take the existence and salience of religious and identity categories for granted, but also because Jewish-Muslim relations tend to already be framed as inherently tense and oppositional in contemporary media and politics. But to reduce everything to "good" or "bad" relations or to "relations" at all overly simplifies a far more chaotic and complex reality and, more problematically, reinscribes real-life Jews and Muslims and their messy encounters and interactions into preexisting identity categories, with their attendant stereotypes and expectations. A particular narrative that one may imagine goes something like this: "In the beginning, there were Jews and Muslims. Despite their similarities and occasional camaraderie, their relations have always been tense, right from the beginning of Islam in Arabia to contemporary Muslim terrorism." Bad Jewish-Muslim relations confirm this narrative, but so do good Jewish-Muslim relations, as yet another promising exception that proves the rule. The trouble with interfaith dialogue, which often seeks to present itself as apolitical, is that it so often neglects to confront the fact that the very terms of engagement are already ideological and political.

Despite even the best of intentions, interfaith dialogue initiatives can only reproduce the dominant discourse of Jewish-Muslim polarization that they seek to mediate and challenge. If there is anything to be learned from subjectivity, it is that Jewish-Muslim solidarity movements must go beyond simply acknowledging shared religious and cultural history and neatly confined identity categories. What happens when, instead of dialogue, we turn to *complicité*?

III

Beyond the question of sexuality, there is something queer about the way Else Lasker-Schüler and Salim passed through. Unlike dialogue, which is often directed toward specific ends, Lasker-Schüler and Salim had no specific goal. Instead, both of them developed, in very different contexts, a form of *complicité* anchored in the present, fluid, reciprocal, messy, and in motion, filled with contradictions, but without any one contradiction posing a barrier to knowing oneself and others.

Is lasting solidarity a potential outcome of intersecting experiences of exclusion and marginalization? It would in any case be important to open the door for a politically

conscious and socially engaged approach, without, as happens far too often in bourgeois interfaith dialogue initiatives, sidelining important issues of capital and empire, including the very coloniality of the category of religion and religious conflict. We offer *complicité* as a queer notion that may contain the rapport putatively oppositional subjects may create for themselves, even as they traffic in complicity with dominant ideologies that they cannot escape. Complicité is in this sense more of a space than a relation. It is a domain that subjects visit in order to pass through the hardened boundaries between identities constructed out of compulsory antagonism in the interests of power and subjection.

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Strange Beauty

Stav Meishar

Selected photos from Strange Beauty *by Stav Meishar. Courtesy of the artist.*

Photos from Strange Beauty *by Stav Meishar. Courtesy of the artist.*

Artist Statement

Strange Beauty was inspired by photos of Barbette, a legendary gender-bending trapeze artist, captured by Jewish photographers Man Ray and Madame d'Ora. I created collages of Barbette's historic pictures with photos of my own disabled, queer body. Reducing myself to disembodied bits, I contrast Barbette's perfect, demure femininity—as captured through the lenses of Jewish artists—with my own hairy, veiny, fat, cellulite-ridden body parts, captured through the lens of my Jewish gaze. Layering surrealism, body dysmorphia, patriarchal expectations, and phenomenology, my collages seek to challenge viewers' ideas of Western beauty standards.

When asked why he created his stage act, Barbette replied: "I wanted an act that would be a thing of beauty—of course, it would have to be a strange beauty"; and what is surrealism if not Strange Beauty? Are queer, disabled and neurodivergent bodies an expression of a strange beauty, not quite matching up to society's rigid boxes of what beauty is? Barbette, in her act of undermining gender, fluctuating between masculinity and femininity, wanted to be Strange Beauty incarnate—could I be, too?

STAV MEISHAR *(she/they) is a performance maker, interdisciplinary stage artist, researcher, and educator. Stav's most recent major work,* The Escape Act: A Holocaust Memoir, *is a one-person show blending puppetry, theater, and circus, rooted in a decade of historic research, and based on the true story of Irene Danner, a Jewish acrobat who survived the Holocaust hiding at a German circus.*

Home Is An/Other? Desire, Ethnicity, and Queer Documentary Cinema in *Please Love* and *Home Is You*

Shirly Bahar and Yasmin Sason

1. "Now I know what love is" says Yaelle, smiling to the camera. "What is love?"[i] Aya asks, her face unseen on the screen. "It can't be explained," the answer immediately arrives. At the opening scene of the documentary *Home Is You*, appearing in the earlier *Please Love*, too, Aya and Yaelle pronounce: "We are going to change the definition of 'coming out':[ii] everyone who has a secret is in the closet," Aya asserts. "We will use the term 'revelation': when you decide to not lie to yourself anymore, to know yourself, and to get people to know you," Yaelle completes the sentence. This exchange is echoed in the films' identical closing scene. There, Yaelle faces Aya and announces: "You taught me not be afraid of the truth, you gave me strength to be who I am."

The documentaries *Please Love* (Israel, 2011) and *Home Is You* (Israel, 2012), written by and starring Aya Shwed and Yaelle David, complementarily portray their shared everyday life as a lesbian couple in love and living in Israel. Aya is Ashkenazi and white, Yaelle is brown and Mizrahi.[iii] Yaelle wrestles with familial homophobia, whereas Aya's family are a supportive presence in the film. Framing the film, the scenes noted above seem to simply foreground Aya and Yaelle's love for each other, and their mutual desire to experience the power of the revelatory. In their quests for love and to find home, *Please Love* and *Home Is You* outline Aya and Yaelle's journey to personal and relational revelation through cinematic documentation—indeed, through the women's drive to film their lives. Yet while ardently seeking answers, the films also pose two open-ended fundamental questions hinted in their titles: What is Love? And: Where is Home? Accordingly, we too, ask: What do the women reveal, what do they conceal, and what comes through unconsciously, in sharing their revelatory performances of both sexual and ethnic identifications through the films?

In the following pages, we argue that *Please Love* and *Home Is You* differentiate between two genres of documentary identification performances: the first, which Aya takes on, demonstrates verbal competence and visual coherence attesting to her stable location in a place she can call, and the Jewish Israeli viewer can clearly recognize as, home. The second, enacted by Yaelle, embodies intricate and subversive, dramatic and performative, tactics, which speak to her placement as a Mizrahi immigrant within the predominant ethnonational Zionist and Ashkenazic discursive settings and conditions appearing in, and employed by, the films. To that end, a series of close-ups on Yaelle's subversive struggles are at the heart of *Home Is You* and *Please Love*, and respectively, of this essay. In these close-ups, the filmic lens centers cinematic events of miscommunications between Yaelle, who appears on the screen, and her parents, who are removed from it, as Yaelle intensely negotiates the crisis of familial homophobia with them over the phone. It is, finally, this cluster of abundantly mediated audio-visual accounts of homophobia in the family that serve as the litmus test for tracing, and decoding, the films' constructions of, and differentiations between, the women's diverse Jewish ethnic belongings and power dynamics. It is thus Yaelle's close-ups that pave the path to challenging the hegemonic and homogenizing Zionist and Eurocentric ethnonational culture of Modern Hebrew that the films foreground and reiterate.

2. Typically, as Alisa Lebow has shown in her writings on Jewish queer first-person documentaries, one's Jewish and/or queer identification always either appears as additional to that person's other identities, or, at other times, remains completely hidden.[iv] In the films she studies, "ambivalence may be internal or personal, reflecting the individual blind spots or discomfort … toward a forthright identification with her sexuality or culture."[v] Indeed, "ambivalence is a running subtext … a result of mutual, if at time competing, historical survival strategies.… The films … straddle a zone of unintelligibility."[vi]

Please Love and *Home Is You* are first-person films that similarly center ambivalence. Aya's and Yaelle's lesbian and Jewish identifications are assumed and explored, yet in different ways: whereas Aya and Yaelle explicitly verbalize their lesbian identifications, they make no direct reference to their Jewish affiliations. At the same time, the films subtly insinuate that familial homophobic prejudices stem from, and are associated with, a particular ethnic background that rejects the women's relationship—a rejection exclusively acted out by Yaelle's father. Aya and Yaelle live in Israel, a place often globally advertised and pinkwashed as a gay haven, presumably contrasting the rest of the Middle East.[vii] Dwelling within the discursive realm of Modern Hebrew, the women avoid any overt statements regarding the diverse charged approaches and accents with which they arrive to it. The films thus naturalize the speaking protagonists' migrations to, and positions in, Zionist culture's nativized tongue, by framing their linguistic rapports as an intimate exchange of personal feelings. And yet, other scenes center rupture, pain, and ambivalence.

The opening scenes discussed above position us as viewers of the film and its embedded performances: Aya and Yaelle's wedding ceremony, codirected as a theater show, where Yaelle commits herself to Aya. In the absence of a rabbi, it is the will to discover and display personal truths that weds Aya and Yaelle. But whereas Yaelle divulges the innermost layers of her ambivalence, Aya coherently narrates their story and sings her own written music. Aya thus pieces the messy materials that Yaelle stutters, as if casting Yaelle's expressions into intelligibility.

Writing their lives on the screen, Aya and Yaelle get a second chance to rewrite their stories complexly. The fact that one—or two, or three perspectives—can tell stories differently, by selective filming and editing, makes all the difference. Like the third woman in the relationship, the witnessing camera documents and shapes their images. This is a woman that, sometimes, Yaelle asks to turn off: "I have nothing to say to the camera anymore."

Please Love and *Home Is You* end with the same wedding scene, but begin differently. Unlike the harmoniously codirected theater show, *Please Love* alludes to a conflict right as it starts: there, Aya is discontent about the relationship's stagnation: she wants to get married. Yaelle is ambivalent, reluctant to wed without her parents present. Seeking immediate resolution, Aya then suggests that Yaelle confront her parents' homophobia outright. Aya's demands move the film forward to its pivotal, challenging scenes: the close-up shots showing Yaelle sobbing over the telephone when talking to her parents who live in France. "I want to talk to dad," "You never defend me," "I need my parents but they're not there because I'm not what they want me to be," Yaelle repeatedly cries to her mother from the other side of the line. Screaming and screeching in French, Yaelle throws partial, broken sentences that blend with the deluge of her countless touching tears, all creating an intricate and at times incoherent visual, verbal, and vocal vernacular of pain. With Yaelle's dad unavailable, she only talks and cries to her mom.

Like the third woman in the relationship, the witnessing camera documents and shapes their images.

The close-up scenes unfold private moments of vulnerable disclosure in front of our eyes: here, the production of authentic intimacy inevitably relies on the extensive labors of mediation. While the telephone connects Yaelle with her mother, her mother speaks in the name of her disconnected father, who refuses to communicate with Yaelle. As in Avital Ronell's theorization, "The telephone holds together what it separates. It creates a space of asignifying and is tuned by the emergency feminine on the maternal core reissued … the telephone was borne up by the invaginated structures of a mother's deaf ear." The telephonic negotiations between mother and daughter also resonate with the workings of the lens filming Yaelle's face. Delivering the very minute details of the live

The films leave us with questions about home and love that perhaps cannot be retrieved all in one central, or even particular, place.

drama and Yaelle's facial expressions, the camera often cuts and fragments Yaelle's head from various angles, thus composing incomplete and discrepant portraits that constitute her presumable real self. The performances of truthful revelations in the film underlie and demonstrate the denouncing avoidance of a father, whose hurtful silences are transmitted by several deafened channels, marking a persistently present absence in a daughter's life.

Dispersed utterances entangled with dense wailings in French, Yaelle's expressive outbursts punctuate the flow of the film: emanating from Yaelle's dis/connections to an elsewhere, they interrupt the dialogues and duets spoken and sang in the home of Modern Hebrew. Yaelle's previous homes and familial migrations, absent, abandoned locations, remain mostly outside of the frame. The ethnic, religious, and cultural heritages that Yaelle arrives from are nowhere. As her father stops talking to her, any knowledge about Yaelle's roots is rendered unattainable. The more Yaelle comes out, the less we learn about her possible pre-immigration ethnic identifications.

Wanderings and ponderings between two places shape the story between the two women. Ella Shohat demonstrated how Eurocentric Zionist discourse constructed Mizrahi Jews as "extremely conservative, even reactionary, and religiously fanatic, in contrast to the liberal, secular, and educated European Jews"; this Orientalist view fueled state institutions' strategies to assimilate Oriental Jews into the ways of "a civilized, modern society."[viii] Later, Shohat also showed how Israeli film and representation today both center more Mizrahi people while, at the same time, often avoid naming them as such.[ix] Recently, the global Orientalist perspective has expanded to incorporate homophobic behavior as an additional presumable innate flaw characterizing the Orient. As Jasbir Puar showed, Euro-American discourses portray the Oriental as "simultaneously pathologically excessive yet repressive, perverse yet homophobic,"[x] promoting homonormativity primarily by permitting same-sex couples to marry. And yet "benevolence toward sexual others" is often "contingent upon ever-narrowing parameters of white racial privilege."[xi]

In Aya and Yaelle's relationship and films, the marriage ceremony is an ultimate aim and endpoint. Under this canopy, Aya and Yaelle stand together, surrounded by Aya's family and friends in Israel; Aya's father, moreover, delivers his wishes and thus declares his acceptance of their relationship with his special dedicated speech. To that end, Aya's efforts to sway Yaelle into the institution of marriage may be seen as attempts to dissipate the Mizrahi immigrant's homophobic heritage and precipitate her assimilation to the presumably liberal Euro-American-oriented Jewish society in Israel. These attempts, finally, require Yaelle's full disclosure of her truthful self. And yet, if we reckon that the revelation and assimilation of Yaelle's presumable inner self inevitably rely on a reflexively mediating camera, and on a feminized telephone device that facilitates diasporic disconnects, we may consequently discern the films' potential points of internal contestation.[xii] Indeed, as our concluding note will now demonstrate, *Please Love* and *Home Is You* not only reiterate a Zionist and Eurocentric master narrative, they also facilitate a critical reading against its—and its own—grain.

3. Today, the women are no longer together. Home is everywhere—says Aya in the end. Yet the films leave us with questions about home and love that perhaps cannot be retrieved all in one central, or even particular, place. Perhaps it is neither the here, nor the there, but rather, if to borrow from Orly Lubin, only "the margins are the site where ethnicity may find itself, and create itself, a home, where it won't be marked as 'an ethnic otherness.'" Perhaps we should return to our own mothers' tongue, Turkish, where *ev* means "home," and convey that home is, or could be, everywhere. This will certainly require a future film (and/or a future paper).

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i We shall further discuss their wedding ceremony where Aya recalls that answer as a significant moment in their relationship momentarily.

ii "Coming out" is also the name of the production company the filmmakers created, and their personal website is named the same as well. See: http://comingout.co.il/blog/.

iii Based on a conversation the writers had with Yaelle David in June 2014.

iv "The declarative and affirmative statement of identification, coming out, is central to both gay and Jewish visibility in ways that many other identificatory regimes navigate only marginally … queers and diasporic Jews have to negotiate the terms of their visibility. Wherever the question of passing exists, so too the problem of the closet. Yet the paths toward or away from visibility of various Jewish communities are historically distinct from those taken by gays and lesbians … there are competing strategies at work … and the result is a contradictory ambivalence, evidenced in an ambiguity of representation of one or other of these identificatory positionalities. Alisa S. Lebow, *First Person Jewish* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 115.

v Ibid.

vi Ibid., 113.

vii Aeyal Gross, "Israeli GLBT Politics between Queerness and Homonationalism," in: http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2010/07/03/israeli-glbt-politics-between-queerness-and-homonationalism/.

viii Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Perspective of Its Jewish Victims," *Social Text* 19/20 (Autumn 1988): 3.

ix Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*, 2nd edition.

x Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), xxv.

xi Ibid., xii.

xii "When you're on the telephone, there is always an electronic flow, even if this flow is unmarked", contends Ronell: the telephone "sheds the purity of an identity as a tool, however, through its engagement with immateriality." Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 5.

Teaching with **Film and Media**

Curated by Olga Gershenson

Dar walking through kibbutz fields. Image courtesy of Dani Rosenberg.

Of Dogs and Men **(narrative, 2024, dir. Dani Rosenberg, Israel, 1 hour 22 min.)**

Olga Gershenson

Of Dogs and Men is in many ways an unusual film. It occupies a delicate space between fiction and documentary, created mere weeks after the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks on Israeli communities. The film follows sixteen-year-old Dar (Ori Avinoam), a fictional character searching for her missing dog in the devastated kibbutz Nir Oz, one of the communities most severely impacted by the attacks. While Dar's quest provides the narrative frame, the film's power lies in its documentary elements—real survivors playing themselves, authentic locations, and the raw immediacy of trauma still unfolding.

Rosenberg makes bold formal choices, blending scripted scenes with improvised encounters between Dar and real kibbutz residents. We meet eighty-year-old Natan Bahat, who chose to remain in his home, and a kindergarten

teacher organizing the remnants of a classroom where children once played. Through these interactions, the film creates a restrained yet devastatingly intimate portrait of a community in shock. But the film also includes representation of Gaza's suffering—through distant bombing scenes, animated sequences, and a journalist's phone call naming Palestinian casualties.

Screening *Of Dogs and Men* can open a conversation about the recent traumas of war and the mutual recriminations in Israel/Palestine. Additionally, the film is a chance to speak to ethical representation in film and media and the responsibilities filmmakers face when documenting ongoing conflicts. The film prompts vital discussions about whether certain events are "too soon" to represent cinematically and how art can bear witness without exploitation.

Of Dogs and Men is distributed by Menemsha Films, see https://www.menemshafilms.com/of-dogs-and-men.

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Opening title card in rainbow colors. Screenshot from Holy Closet.

The Holy Closet (documentary, 2023, dir. Moran Nakar, Israel, 58 min.)

Orit Avishai

Recent cinematic portrayals of queer Orthodox Jews challenge assumptions about Orthodox Judaism's incompatibility with gender and sexual diversity. *The Holy Closet*, an Israeli documentary adapted from a seven-episode web docuseries, weaves together Jewish lifecycle experiences—dating, family, pregnancy, weddings, birth, mixed relationships, and remarriage—through a queer lens. *The Holy Closet* subverts traditional narratives by featuring a trans man's pregnancy, a relationship between religious and secular gay couples, and Jewish celebrations with same-sex partners. Each episode traces characters navigating life milestones while wrestling with religious tensions and personal transformations.

The "Dating" episode features two Orthodox gay teenagers holding hands publicly—defying both Orthodox prohibi-

tions against homosexuality and broader norms discouraging public intimacy. In another episode, a pregnant trans man learns to don tefillin, simultaneously claiming and challenging gendered religious practice. Through these stories, the documentary offers a nuanced yet celebratory portrayal of Orthodox queer lives.

The Holy Closet serves as a valuable teaching resource for courses on Jewish gender and sexuality, either in full or as individual episodes. It prompts fundamental questions: Who counts as an Orthodox Jew? What are the boundaries of Orthodoxy? How do these boundaries shift when challenged? Through these explorations, students can critically examine the evolving nature of Jewish identity and tradition.

The Holy Closet is available for purchase with English subtitles from go2films.com, and streams in open access in Hebrew without subtitles at www.theholycloset.com..

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Sabbath Queen **(documentary, 2024, dir. Sandi DuBowski, USA, 1 hour 45 min.)**

Golan Moskowitz

Through Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie's transformative journey as a queer Jewish leader, *Sabbath Queen* reveals the varied perspectives and ongoing dialogues shaping modern Judaism. Born to a distinguished dynasty of Orthodox rabbis, Lau-Lavie births the comedic drag persona Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross, a Hungarian widow spouting kabbalistic wisdom. Following theatricality toward self-discovery, Lau-Lavie stages drag rituals and Torah-based storytelling, protests for social justice from Wall Street to Israel/Palestine, leads worship in a "God-optional" New York–based congregation celebrating artists and diversity, and officially challenges halakhic authorities after obtaining a Conservative rabbinic ordination.

Sabbath Queen probes competing meanings of Jewish spiritual leadership—from upholding traditional integrities to empowering new possibilities. Lau-Lavie emphasizes the value of *loyalty*, of not abandoning one's congregation; he recalls his grandfather: a Polish rabbi who recited Kaddish with congregants while forced into Nazi gas chambers. Officiating his own community members' interfaith marriages despite Conservative prohibitions, Lau-Lavie loses his membership in that denomination's rabbinic assembly. That these actions apparently strengthen his congregation, where he remains an ordained rabbi, is instructive of American Judaism's multiplicity.

Amichai Lau-Lavie in makeup and tefillin. Image courtesy of Sandi DuBowski.

Still, the film boldly asks: Can halakhic Judaism ever truly function when constituents embrace other competing identities? Conflicting truths emerge: halakhic boundaries have enabled crucial forms of communal trust, strength, and clarity but have also perpetuated inequalities, violence, and isolation. Empathy is shown to facilitate boundary negotiations. For example, Lau-Lavie's brother, an Orthodox rabbi, eventually deems Amichai his "teacher" on the inhumanity of coerced "closets" and comes to welcome women into roles of spiritual authority. Students will be enlightened by how Lau-Lavie's rebellious queer grappling has creatively straddled worlds while remaining steadfastly invested in Jewish tradition.

For further information about the film, see www.sabbathqueen.com. For screenings, email hello@sabbathqueen.com.

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Roundtable
Orthodoxy and LGBTQ+ Identity

Roundtable Editor:
Jason Schulman

Contributors:
Orit Avishai, Shlomo Gleibman, Miryam Kabakov, Mie Astrup Jensen, Cathy S. Gelbin

Introduction
Jason Schulman

More than twenty years ago, Rabbi Steven Greenberg's *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* and films like *Trembling before G-d* and *Keep Not Silent*, about a lesbian group called OrthoDykes, paved the way for a more open conversation within Orthodox Judaism about gay identity. In recent years, the controversy (and subsequent lawsuit) at Yeshiva University over its Pride Alliance student group brought the topic to a broader public. For this roundtable, we asked five scholars to reflect on the evolving relationship between Orthodoxy and LGBTQ+ identity.

On Tolerance, Acceptance, and Affirmation
Orit Avishai

For over a decade, LGBTQ+ students at Yeshiva University had sought official recognition for their Pride Alliance, facing persistent resistance from university leadership, which argued that the club contradicts Jewish traditions. After years of negotiations and public disputes, the students sued, citing violations of New York City's anti-discrimination law. In June 2022, a New York state court ruled in their favor, though appeals had continued. In an attempted compromise, the university launched Kol Yisrael Areivim, a school-sanctioned alternative meant to support LGBTQ+ students while adhering to Halakhah and undefined "Torah values."[i] The YU Pride Alliance rejected the initiative, arguing that it failed to provide a truly inclusive space. Still, this was a significant moment—a flagship Orthodox institution openly acknowledging LGBTQ+ persons.

This incident underscores both the progress and limitations of Jewish Orthodoxy on LGBTQ+ issues. It reveals how far the community has evolved, how much further it has to go, and why full inclusivity and affirmation—beyond tolerance or even acceptance—remain unlikely. Ultimately, the primary barriers to change in Jewish Orthodoxy are not Halakhah, but culture and politics.

Yeshiva University's stance marks a departure from traditional Orthodox views, which regarded LGBTQ+ individuals as deviant and transgressive and often sought to exclude them from the community. In 1976, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, a revered Orthodox leader, described homosexual desire as a "deviation from the path of nature"—a perspective still echoed in conservative Modern Orthodox and Haredi circles.[ii] Yet, some leading Orthodox figures advocate for greater acceptance, grounding their positions in Halakhah. In 2020, Israeli Orthodox Rabbi Benny Lau outlined a halakhic framework for monogamous same-sex relationships, while in 2023, Rabbi Jeffrey Fox of Yeshivat Maharat, a progressive Modern Orthodox yeshiva in New York City that ordains women clergy, issued a responsum addressing intimate relationships between women.[iii]

Though not affirming like the latter interventions, Yeshiva University's stance of proposing Kol Yisrael Areivim

reflects the significant shifts Jewish Orthodoxy has undergone regarding LGBTQ+ issues in recent decades. Not long ago, openly embracing an LGBTQ+ identity while remaining within Orthodox Judaism was nearly unthinkable. In my recent book, *Queer Judaism*, I documented how, in just over a decade between the late 2000s and the late 2010s, Orthodox LGBTQ+ persons in Israel emerged from the shadows. Once silenced and uniformly vilified, they built social supports, activist organizations, and communities; established a network of allies; gained visibility; and advocated first for tolerance and acceptance and now for full inclusion and affirmation.

Several factors converged to explain these remarkable shifts within a relatively short time. The broader LGBTQ+ movement has influenced Jewish Orthodoxy and other conservative religious traditions. The Internet, particularly social media, has allowed previously isolated persons to connect, build community, and find support. Additionally, Orthodox feminists, who have long challenged traditional frameworks of gender and family, helped lay the groundwork for greater LGBTQ+ inclusion.[iv]

The most significant driver of change has been the activism of Orthodox LGBTQ+ persons themselves. In Israel, their advocacy, outreach, and education efforts have coalesced into a movement that has gained Orthodox allies, from family members to rabbis and educators. In the United States, while less visible, similar efforts have taken root, with the Orthodox LGBTQ+ organization Eshel leading initiatives to promote inclusion through education, advocacy, and support. Eshel's founder, Rabbi Steve Greenberg, was among the first to use traditional rabbinic sources to argue that homosexuality is not only biblically permissible but also no less sacred than heterosexuality.[v]

Orthodox LGBTQ+ activists have persuaded their communities by working within the framework of Jewish Orthodoxy rather than opposing it. Unlike broader LGBTQ+ movements often associated with radicalism and secularism, they have adopted what I call a *politics of moderation*—seeking to build rather than dismantle—and a *politics of authenticity*, emphasizing their belonging within Orthodox life. As one LGBTQ+ activist put it in a 2018 talk at the Orthodox-affiliated Bar-Ilan University in Israel, "We're not seeking to destroy the institution of the straight family.... All we want is a room of our own within the Jewish home."

This work is far from complete. Tolerance and even acceptance often rest on disapproval, regulation, and hierarchy. To tolerate is not to affirm—it is to conditionally allow what is seen as marginal or deviant, as Yeshiva University did with its university-sanctioned alternative to the Pride Alliance. Yet, even such imperfect acknowledgments can have a profound impact. Many people I encountered in my research described these shifts as life-saving, allowing them to remain within their communities, be embraced by their families, and cultivate a positive sense of identity.

Orthodox LGBTQ+ persons, including members of the YU Pride Alliance, will continue advocating for full affirmation. However, even if Jewish sources and Halakhah can be interpreted to support evolving interpretations of gender and sexual diversity—an approach shared by Orthodox LGBTQ+ activists, scholars, and Jewish leaders such as Rabbis Greenberg, Fox, and Lau—the broader framework of Jewish Orthodoxy and the world in which it operates impose constraints on such progress. Some of these limitations are internal. As an intra-Jewish conflict, the fight for LGBTQ+ acceptance—like other debates over gender and sexual norms—faces skepticism and resistance from established authorities who fear its destabilizing impact on traditional structures.

But Orthodox Judaism's approach to LGBTQ+ rights is not merely an intra-Jewish or intra-Orthodox affair. In both Israel and the United States, religious conservatives have framed LGBTQ+ persons as a threat to national character, portraying them as dangerous outsiders. In Israel, the Nationalist Orthodox political party Noam, whose main goal is to advance policies against LGBTQ+ rights out of concern about "the destruction of the family," is part of the governing coalition. In the United

States, where religious and political identities are increasingly intertwined, many conservative religious groups regard opposition to LGBTQ+ rights as a core to their beliefs. This movement, too, has gained significant influence in legislative, administrative, and judicial spheres in recent decades.[vi]

From this perspective, Yeshiva University—serving as a proxy for mainstream Orthodoxy—is walking a fine line between purportedly authentic Jewish traditions and aligning with the expectations of its conservative Christian political allies.[vii] Jewish tradition, culture, and scripture may allow for greater LGBTQ+ inclusion—indeed, they might demand it. As Rabbi Lau put it in an impromptu public speech in Jerusalem in 2015, following a deadly attack at that year's Pride Parade by an ultra-Orthodox extremist: "It is not permissible for anyone to live in a closet. A closet is death! . . . and you should choose life."

Yet broader political dynamics had led Yeshiva University down a different path—one shaped more by the influence of Christian conservatives than by internal Orthodox Jewish discourse. Rather than engaging with Jewish legal and ethical traditions to navigate LGBTQ+ inclusion, the university has adopted a strategy favored by the Christian Right: invoking religious liberty arguments to oppose LGBTQ+ rights. In seeking to shield itself from government intervention on anti-discrimination grounds, Yeshiva University positioned itself within a broader conservative Christian legal and political framework rather than a distinctly Orthodox Jewish one. Notably, the university has been represented by the Becket Fund, a law firm closely tied to conservative Christian advocacy.

Pride Alliance students must have understood this complex political and legal landscape. In late March 2025, the two sides reached a settlement: Yeshiva University would recognize an LGBTQ student club on campus, and in return, the students would end litigation. The settlement stipulated that the club, named Hareni ("I Hereby"—a religious Jewish term instead of the secular "Pride"), would operate in accordance with university-sanctioned guidelines. The decision to compromise likely reflects the students' astute reading of the political climate: legal observers believed the students would likely prevail in New York State courts but face defeat if the case reached the United States Supreme Court. The students presumably wished to avoid having their names and cause associated with a precedent that could strengthen the broader movement seeking to prioritize religious rights over LGBTQ+ protections. Ultimately, the decisive forces at play are not scripture and Halakhah, but culture and politics.

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i "Yeshiva University Approves a New Student Club Grounded in Halacha to Enhance Support for Its LGBTQ Undergraduates," *YU News*, October 24, 2022.

ii Moshe Feinstein, *Iggerot Moshe, ʾoraḥ ḥayim* 4:115.

iii Jeffrey Fox, *Nashim Mesolelot: Lesbian Women and Halakha—A Teshuva with Responses* (Teaneck, NJ: Ben Yehuda Press, 2024).

iv Orit Avishai, *Queer Judaism: LGBT Activism and the Remaking of Jewish Orthodoxy in Israel* (New York: New York University Press, 2023).

v Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

vi Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

vii Joshua Shanes, "The Evangelicalization of Orthodoxy," *Tablet Magazine*, October 12, 2020.

"Foreseen by the Sages": Gay Desire in Orthodox Jewish Discourses

Shlomo Gleibman

The title of this essay points to a paradox. Modern categorization of sexuality is primarily defined by attractions, yet Jewish law is silent on the topic of same-sex desire. Confronted with this cognitive dissonance, Orthodox Jewish leaders in the twentieth century, presumably heterosexual, had to be creative in their efforts to conceive of Jewish homosexual desire. The examples discussed in this essay show the struggles of Orthodox rabbis to conceptualize this desire within traditional Jewish categories. These examples demonstrate that (a) biblical, talmudic, and medieval Jewish sources lacked conceptual tools to address the notion of same-sex desire, and (b) the responses of Orthodox leaders shifted throughout the twentieth century due to the changes in the larger social contexts. This essay is not a chronological survey but rather a meditation on the Orthodox Jewish cultural imaginary in relation to same-sex desire.

Traditional Jewish sexual categories, just as those in surrounding cultures, focused on specific practices rather than feelings. Two verses in Leviticus, 18:22 and 20:13, prohibit "intercourse of a woman," *mishkevei ʾishah*, between males, understood in talmudic sources as anal penetration.[i] Ancient Israel, like its neighbors, viewed this act as gender inversion: perceived emasculation of men through a sex role associated with women, often in the context of violence. The Levitical passages do not address other sexual acts between men or same-sex desires, attachments, and relationships. Jewish biblical commentaries and halakhic traditions clearly defined the forbidden sexual act (graphically described by Rashi as "entering like a brush into a tube") but rarely mentioned sexual feelings and never categorized them.[ii] In contrast, modernity attributed social significance to sexual feelings rather than acts. Therefore, when the concept of same-sex desire entered Jewish Orthodox discourse in the twentieth century, rabbis framed it within existing halakhic categories—as desire for anal penetration.

The modern category of sexuality emerged in psychiatric and psychoanalytic works of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that were interested in feelings and personality types and that developed the concept of homosexuality based on object-choice.[iii] In the 1920s, Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Mandatory Palestine, acknowledged "the new science concerning the natural inclinations that some men have from their conception."[iv] Kook, however, claimed that this inborn desire "was foreseen by the sages" who permitted anal sex between a man and a woman even though anal intercourse between males was prohibited.[v] According to Kook, the sages accommodated men with homosexual desires, making heterosexual anal intercourse a form of kosher gay sex. Kook thus reinterpreted talmudic law in psychological terms, suggesting sublimation of homosexual desire through heterosexual marriage. Kook's interpretation, which replaced attraction to same sex with craving for anal penetration, can be seen as a failed attempt to synthesize the traditional Jewish categories of sexual acts with modern theories of sexual orientation.

Orthodox Jewish discourses on sexuality in the 1970s, while mostly adopting Kook's reframing of gay desire in traditional halakhic terms, as strictly the desire for anal intercourse, also understood it in a broader sense, as homosexual culture, which they perceived as incompatible with Judaism. This was, to a significant extent, a response to the emergence of the gay and lesbian liberation movement, as Orthodox Jewish leaders of the time often adopted the moralistic and theological rhetoric of the New Right and New Christian Right.[vi] The Levitical prohibition, previously understood as a ban on a specific sexual act, was now reinterpreted as a condemnation of "homosexuality"—defined as same-sex desire and identity based on this desire. The conversation shifted from halakhic nuances of transgressive behavior to a broader opposition between "Judaism" and "homosexuality" as conflicting worldviews. Norman Lamm, a leader of American Modern Orthodoxy,

emphasized the perceived moral and social dangers of same-sex desire.[vii] Moshe Feinstein, a leading halakhic authority, focused on desire, too. Feinstein equated same-sex desire with a craving for anal penetration, "the lust for male sex," but framed it in theological terms, as desire to rebel against God: "A person has such a craving because it is a prohibited thing."[viii] He insisted that same-sex desire per se did not exist, claiming that "even the wicked do not lust for this in particular," because it is "against the essential desire"[ix] (apparently, for vaginal penetration). Feinstein thus conceptualized same-sex desire not as sexual attraction but as religious heresy. In the 1980s, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, still understood the pleasure derived from "the act" to be the basis for same-sex attraction. He argued that this act was inherently less pleasurable than heterosexual intercourse.[x]

Whereas Orthodox Jewish thinkers in the 1970s and 1980s, just as Kook in the 1920s, still defined gay desire as essentially desire for a specific sexual act and built their arguments on this presumption, in subsequent decades, Orthodox rhetoric came to distinguish between sexual desire and sexual acts. In the 1990s, resolutions of the Modern Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) emphasized that the prohibition only applied to "homosexual behavior" and not to "homosexual inclinations."[xi] In 2010, the Open Orthodox movement—a liberal group that split from mainstream Modern Orthodoxy in the early twenty-first century—issued a statement that advocated for the acceptance of "Jews of homosexual orientation" while maintaining the halakhic ban on same-sex sexual practices.[xii] This statement recognized same-sex desire as a legitimate part of human experience and discouraged pressuring homosexuals into heterosexual marriages. Having given up efforts to define others' desires for them, this statement recognized the diversity of personal experience. More recently, in 2020, Benny Lau, an influential Israeli rabbi from the family of two former chief rabbis of Israel, acknowledged the fundamental incompatibility of "the world of the Torah and the world as it is in reality" and proposed that Orthodox Jewish communities accept the diversity of human sexuality as a matter of fact, without necessarily attempting to understand it in traditional terms: "As with all human needs, sexual needs are not uniform."[xiii]

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i E.g., tractate Yevamot 83b. Cf. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, negative commandment 350. In the androcentric and patriarchal culture of Jewish antiquity, sex between women was outside the discourse.

ii Rashi, commentary on Leviticus 20:13. Arguably, Maimonides expands the prohibition from anal penetration to sexual desire: "Both partners liable to stoning as soon as one arouses the other" (*Mishneh Torah*, laws of forbidden intercourse 1:14).

iii "Contrary sexual feeling" or "sexual psychopathy," as German psychiatrists Karl Friedrich Otto Westphal and Richard von Krafft-Ebing named it in the 1870s and 1880s. The medicalized theories of homosexuality were adopted by many Orthodox Jewish leaders, who treated same-sex desire as mental illness. This includes Norman Lamm, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and the Rabbinical Council of America (the RCA withdrew their endorsement of "reparative therapy" in 2011-2012).

iv A. I. Kook, *ʾOrot ha-kodesh,* vol. III (Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1985), 297.

v Ibid.; tractate Nedarim 20b; Moses Isserles's commentary on *Shulḥan ʿarukh, ʾeven ha-ʿezer* 25:2.

vi Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (London: Routledge, 2012), 115–116, 138–141.

vii Norman Lamm, "Judaism and the Modern Attitude to Homosexuality" (1974), in *Contemporary Jewish Ethics*, ed. Menachem Marc Kellner and Norman Lamm (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1978), 375–399.

viii Moshe Feinstein, *ʾIggeret Moshe, ʾoraḥ ḥayim* 4:115 (1976).

ix Ibid.

x Menachem Mendel Schneerson, "'Rights' or Ills" (1986), in *Sichos in English*, vol. 30 (New York: Sichos In English, 1988), 120–130.

xi *RCA Resolution: Homosexuality* (June 1, 1993).

xii *Statement of Principles on the Place of Jews with a Homosexual Orientation in Our Community* (2010).

xiii Benjamin Lau, "On Same-Sex Couples in the Orthodox Jewish Community," *The Times of Israel*, December 11, 2020.

Keeping the Long View: Eshel's Fight for Queer Orthodox Belonging

Miryam Kabakov

The Orthodox parents of LGBTQ+ children, whom my organization serves, coined a saying: "Life is short and life is long." They mean: there are two paces to life. In one, it feels like time is flying by with rapid-fire change. In the other, time moves slowly and it can take a long time for a process to unfold. When thinking about queer Orthodox children, it behooves us to take the long view. Whenever a new Orthodox parent calls our warmline in a panic about their LGBTQ+ child, and we've been busy on the line supporting the trans community, I repeat that mantra to them. The story of their lives—and of their children's lives—has not yet unfolded.

Eshel, founded in 2010, is an organization that knows this duality in our work. We create spaces where LGBTQ+ Orthodox Jews and their families can find community, support, and networks. Equally important, we work to make the mainstream Orthodox Jewish community a place where LGBTQ+ Jews and their families can fully belong. The project of creating community among LGBTQ+ Orthodox people testifies to the sense that the world can change quickly. The parallel project of making a place for LGBTQ+ Orthodox Jews in the larger Orthodox community goes much slower. We cannot know how long it will take to bring these two projects together.

The work toward mainstream Orthodoxy fully embracing LGBTQ+ Jews and their families moves at what often feels like a glacial pace. The slowness of change surprised us. Initially, we were sure that sharing our stories would open people's hearts and change their minds. In 2012, Eshel established a speakers bureau of parents, allies, and LGBTQ+ people ready to be deployed to any Orthodox community. Then we stood by, waiting to be summoned to deliver our message.

But no one summoned us. We began to see that as queer Orthodox Jews, we had no credibility in Orthodox spaces. Rabbis who engaged with us got into trouble with their peers and rabbinical associations. One New York rabbi was excommunicated for hosting an Eshel Shabbaton in his shul. Rabbinic authorities in Cleveland threatened to take away kosher certification from a rabbi who invited us in. In Baltimore, the local rabbinical board told a rabbi he was not allowed to build the *eruv* that his community needed after he engaged with us. Orthodox institutions had built a fortress around them, and Eshel was on the outside.

We needed to change our expectations. Once we readjusted our expectations about how long change would take, we could better identify the work that could only be accomplished slowly and carefully. For example, we realized that we needed to tend to the spiritual needs of queer Orthodox folks and their families. Some Orthodox rabbis were solely focused on why Halakhah cannot allow them to fully incorporate queer people into communal religious life. In turn, LGBTQ+ Orthodox Jews could and would no longer turn to them for pastoral care. So Eshel helps people design halakhic ceremonies to celebrate and mourn. We help people figure out how to have babies and how to navigate Jewish day schools. We see this part of our work as not letting Orthodoxy be taken away from us, even though many Orthodox communities won't recognize our presence. The quicker and easier project of building and supporting Orthodox queer communities empowers individuals to tackle the long, slow, harder project of communal change and acceptance. Recognizing that there are queer Jews who experience ourselves as *frum*, and who are entitled to their Orthodoxy like anyone else, is the first step in giving ourselves *chizzuk*, or strength, to create the open, proud lives we deserve to have.

Sometimes it is hard to believe that the community around us really will ever fully welcome us in. But I have seen that change does happen, as long as we are still invested in it happening. I know this not only as an organizational leader, but also from personal experience. If I had taken the long view with my own family, instead of

believing that the story had ended before it really began, I would have avoided a lot of pain. When my wife and I became engaged, I shared the news with all my siblings. I was the last of six to marry, I was sure my siblings would celebrate with me. But one of them did the opposite. They wrote to me and my parents and said it was shameful to claim that a gay Jewish wedding was legitimate, that it made a mockery of Judaism. My parents, who—after their own years of struggle, saw that I was determined to live a *frum* queer life—wrote back and asked my sibling to apologize to me. My partner and I were going to be living a religious life, we planned to raise religious children, and we deserved the same respect each of my other siblings had received upon announcing their engagements. My sibling never replied. I wondered if my sibling had missed the email or simply ignored it. I was devastated.

Twenty years later, as I was pulling on my black dress on the morning of my father's funeral, I saw a phone call coming in from Israel. It was from the same sibling who had written that letter to me, whose home was my father's last residence. My father's belongings had trimmed down significantly since my mother's passing, to one suitcase containing few material objects and his most precious papers. That morning, my sibling had opened the briefcase and discovered that one of my father's few possessions was a frayed copy of the email my father had sent, defending me and asking them to apologize. Knowing I was in a rush to get to the funeral, my sibling blurted out "I read the email, and, I'm sorry." After twenty years, I had finally gotten the response I had craved for so many years.

What has been the case in my own life has been true for the landscape of building LGBTQ+ Orthodox belonging. *Frum* queer Jews who have stayed within Orthodoxy have taken the long view, and have seen that relationships of love and care can power great change. It will take a long time. But just as I had change happen in my own family, I see it happening in the larger community, with over 280 Orthodox synagogue rabbis across North America helping match LGBTQ+ people with communities that have begun to open their doors to them. But if we create Orthodox environments that can make space for difference right now, in the long run, they may stay. There is much to show for our years of work, and as we hold onto that long-range vision, we are continuing to make progress, in surprising ways. Slow does not mean infinite or never. And eventually, we will receive apologies from Orthodox leaders, like my sibling gave to me.

In the meantime, Eshel's slogan has proved true: *We're here, We're queer, We're machmir* (stringent observance of Jewish law) … and we are not going to disappear..

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To Be Queer or to Be Orthodox? Why Not Both?

Mie Astrup Jensen

Within Orthodox communities, there has historically been a view that it is impossible to be Orthodox and LGBTQ+. In the early 2000s, Rabbi Steven Greenberg expressed that he, like many LGBTQ+ Orthodox people, had been confronted with a difficult choice: either be openly LGBTQ+ and leave Orthodoxy, or be Orthodox and closeted. However, more recently, conversations within numerous Orthodox communities have increasingly developed from asking *if* one can be Orthodox and LGBTQ+ to *how* one can be Orthodox and LGBTQ+.

In July 2024, I defended my PhD on being queer and Jewish in England and Israel—a thesis that aimed to understand how queer Jewish women understand, navigate, and express their lived experiences and practices. The thesis was built on biographic-narrative

interpretive method (BNIM) interviews with forty queer Jewish women, whose life stories grappled with what it means to be a queer Jew in often complex and multi-layered contexts.

Six of the forty participants in my research identified as Orthodox. Additionally, a handful of women had been raised Orthodox but no longer identified as such. While all the Orthodox women in my research had, at times, felt an identity conflict related to their queer and Jewish identities (something with which a couple of them still struggle), my research found that queer Orthodox women have gradually found ways to live their lives meaningfully and authentically.

In what follows, I give a few glimpses into some of the ways that the women in my study—who had been raised in Orthodox communities, had lacked representation and visibility, and had often spent years repressing their identities—eventually forged a way to more meaningfully express their multiple identities.

For the Orthodox women in my study, religious practices, especially key ones like keeping kosher and observing Shabbat, remained significant to their lives, not only for religious reasons, but also for spiritual, cultural, and familial ones. For example, the women I interviewed kept kosher in their homes because it was important to them for cultural, religious, and/or communal reasons. For example, Rivka (*queer*) explained, "Judaism to me is really about family and community life….We have Shabbat together, we have meals together on holidays, and we get together with family for Yahrzeit." Those who were fully or partially Shabbat observant underlined the spiritual significance of Shabbat by noting, for example, that the day of rest was made for a reason and that it was important to follow the rules of Shabbat to be spiritually satisfied and connected to the tradition. For example, Leah (*lesbian*) and her wife, who were expecting a baby at the time of the interview, strictly observed Shabbat. Leah explained, "For me, Shabbat is Shabbat. You don't have a phone on Shabbat. I have a lot of opinions about that." On the other hand, another participant, Abigail (*queer*), expressed that she used her phone on Shabbat because she did not believe she could completely remove herself from society for a day and it was important for her to be able to contact her family. Instead, she paused for a bit, reflected on her life, recited some blessings, and had a special meal on Shabbat. This shows how queer Orthodox women navigated and engaged with religious practices through negotiating personal and communal beliefs and norms.

Similarly, prayers and blessings offered a chance for these women to uphold Orthodox practices, either through traditional recitations or with a twist that acknowledged their queer identities. Some recited prayers in a traditional manner every day. The women explained that it was important to them to recite prayers because prayers such as the Amidah and the Shema give them a connection to God and their spiritual selves. Prayers were a way for them to affirm their beliefs and identities, and the morning prayers gave them a good and comforting start to the day. Some participants, such as Ella (*lesbian*), recited non-traditional prayers due to a desire to engage in more inclusive and affirming practices. Ella had been raised in an ultra-Orthodox community and now identified as Conservative. For most of her life, she had deeply struggled with the line in the morning *brakhot*, "Thank you God for not making me a woman," because she was assigned male at birth. Years ago, Ella, inspired by queer readings of the scriptures, revised the prayer to "Thank you for making me a Jew, making me for every person, and making me in your image." In addition to the morning *brakhot*, she often recited other prayers and blessings that aligned with and affirmed her identity and values.

All the Orthodox women in the study expressed that there was a lack of representation of queer identities within their respective Orthodox communities. They all explained that they were raised in exclusively heteronor-

mative environments, where queer identities were taboo. For example, Abigail (*queer*) and Avital (*queer*) both expressed that it was difficult for them to imagine getting married to a same-sex partner and having a family because they had, in the words of Abigail, "never seen an observant Jewish family that was queer, so it was difficult for me to imagine it was possible."

The stigmatization of queer identities within Orthodox communities meant, in part, that several of the women had previously repressed their sexuality or queer identity. This was especially the case when they had attended Orthodox seminary—although two of my participants noted that they had had secret same-sex relationships at seminary. These relationships were discovered, and one participant was made to attend conversion therapy and the other was expelled from the seminary. Nevertheless, most of the participants, including those who had faced disciplinary action for having same-sex relationships, continued to engage with Jewish learning.

The study of Jewish material was something that participants found valuable because Orthodox Judaism values education and learning and because the study of Jewish sources enhanced their meaning-making processes and self-understanding. Talia (*asexual*), for example, read the weekly *parashah* individually and spent approximately seven hours per week studying midrash, the Talmud, and Maimonides's code of Jewish law. She expressed that she viewed herself as being in a relationship with the Torah. She was committed and devoted to the Torah, which she linked to the talmudic text in which Shimon ben Azzai discussed marriages, declaring, in Talia's paraphrase, that he was not interested in marriage because his "soul is in love with the Torah."

In conclusion, while the Orthodox participants in my research had, to varying degrees, experienced conflicts due to being queer and Orthodox, my research found that the participants gradually found ways to overcome those conflicts. To a great extent, they slowly started to find ways to integrate their identities and consequently felt more able to live meaningfully and authentically.

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Queer and Orthodox Jewish Lives on Screen

Cathy S. Gelbin

Film treatments of queer Jewish lives stage the preconceived tensions and elective affinities in intersectional queer and Jewish sensibilities from the 1980s to the present, a period in which postmodern paradigms came to the fore in popular culture, academic theory, and alternative community politics. Traditional Jewish settings in these films highlight the core themes within queer Jewishness on screen, with their proposed push and pull between Jewish religious tradition and cultural innovation; between older essentialisms and more recent postmodern fluidities of ethnicized, gendered, and sexualized constellations; between Israel and the Diaspora; and between cosmopolitanist and nationalistic discourses. These tensions are mediated through critical explorations of the place of women and gay men in Jewish religious and communal life and, coupled with this, a search beyond traditional milieus to actualize queer Jewish subjectivities. Although the resulting patchwork of new Jewish gender and sexual subjectivities can be seen as a postmodern undoing of received notions of Jewishness, the films' character constellations ultimately do not move beyond normative conceptions of cisgender and halakhic Jewishness, and their reconciliation of tradition and queerness remain incomplete.

Released on the cusp of the feminist Jewish movement, Barbra Streisand's *Yentl* (1983) has been rightfully read as the commercial Big Bang of queer Jewish film.[i] *Yentl* conveyed the contemporaneous seismic gender revolution within Judaism, where women, who traditionally were to be seen but not heard, were asserting their voices and rising into ritual leadership roles. *Yentl*

proposes a woman's essential fitness to fully partake in all aspects of Jewish communal life while abstaining from a radical critique of the patriarchal foundations of Jewish tradition itself, which the film's inspiring images of Jewish people and Jewish rituals paint as a thing of beauty. Vivid close-ups, luminous lighting, and sweeping camera movements convey the profound beauty and emotional properties of traditional Jewish life in prewar eastern Europe in order to integrate the (forbidden) female figure into this already eroticized realm.

The Israeli drama *The Secrets* (2007), which sees queer love blossoming in a girls' yeshiva in Safed, the centuries-old center of Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), takes its central cues from the mother of all lesbian films, *Girls in Uniform* (1931), as well as *Yentl*.[ii] Its opening shot at a *shivah*, in which a higher-angled camera captures a Haredi man looking at a group of male mourners below him before panning to the women at the back, establishes the theme of male dominance within Haredi Judaism, from which the main character Naomi must free herself religiously, intellectually, and sexually. Her enrollment at the yeshiva, whose headmistress dreams of a "silent revolution" to change the subordination of women in traditional Judaism, is but one step in this development. This sees her falling in love with another female student with whom she creates a secret *tikkun* (ritual repair) for a troubled non-Jewish French woman; the girls are ultimately expelled from the yeshiva. Yet the film stages the *tikkun* as a ritual cleansing of the girls' overlapping gender, sexual, ethical, and ethnic-religious transgressions to suggest the symbolic repair of the shared outsider status of the woman, lesbian, and stranger in Judaism.

Albeit visually more radical in its open portrayals of lustful lesbian sex, *Disobedience* (2017) rests on a similar construction of the implicit permissibility of the lesbian within normative Judaism. Led by major stars Rachel Weisz and Rachel McAdams, both with strong public heterosexual profiles, the film confidently aims for mainstream appeal, which seems to indicate the growing social acceptability of queer Jewish themes. While giving some credence to secular lifestyles outside of traditional Judaism, the film's ending narratively punishes Weisz's rebel character by once again expelling her from her Jewish fold, while revalorizing normative Judaism as the only space where true heterosexual love blossoms and where the lesbian can be accommodated as long as she subsumes herself under heterosexual patriarchy.

Such attempts to repair Jewish religion are altogether thrown overboard in the Israeli independent film *Red Cow* (2018), whose shaky hand-held camera explores the emotional upheavals of teenage girl Benny's coming out in the Jewish national-religious community in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.[iii] Benny's queer path, which brings about a growing distance from her religious father's world, allows the film to critique the national-religious project, with its ideology of excluding and expelling its perceived Others. Benny's statement that she sometimes feels "like a complete gentile" signposts the film's construction of a shared outsider status of the lesbian and stranger which cannot be resolved within Jewish tradition. In the end, Benny breaks free from the divisive world of her father and elopes to Tel Aviv, where we see her blending into a poetic performance scene.

Most likely due to the prohibition of male-on-male sex in the Torah, portrayals of queer Jewish masculinity have been far more limited and pained. Among these films, *Eyes Wide Open* (2009) stands out in its treatment of a claustrophobic Haredi milieu in Jerusalem, where a butcher and married father of four drowns himself in a mikveh after having forcibly disavowed his male lover.[iv] The dystopian location of the butcher shop, with its associations of death, sex, and violence, foreshadows the film's contention that Haredi Judaism requires the gay individual to give up his true self for tradition and thereby self-destruct. Given the film's iconic setting of Jerusalem, which in the drabness shown here rejects its usual touristic promotion as a picture-postcard pilgrimage site, the film may also suggest the Haredi community as a dystopian symbol for the dwindling cosmopolitanism

and growing insularity of Israeli society more broadly. The queer theme has enabled a series of Israeli filmmakers to critically interrogate the egalitarian state of their country, and to explore alternative national and political narratives beyond both traditional Judaism and Zionism.

Finally, on the small screen, a site of current global Jewish migration, Berlin, the former epicenter of the Holocaust, has, of all places, played a key role in reimagining the contemporary queer Jewish subject with regard to ethnic, cultural, gendered, and sexual intersectionalities. The Netflix miniseries *Unorthodox* (2020) depicts a young woman following her mother's flight from their Haredi community in New York to a new life in Berlin, where she bonds with an international group of friends and discovers her mother living in a lesbian relationship with a German.[v] Although *Unorthodox* is at pains to point out the lasting presence of Germany's more recent totalitarian pasts, its queered and Jewish predicaments ultimately serve to once again shore up a vision of cleansed national legacies in the future.

While such portrayals suggest that the rebelliousness of queer Jewish figures is itself dependent on their contexts, they simultaneously stress the as-yet unactualized nature of these experimental subjectivities.

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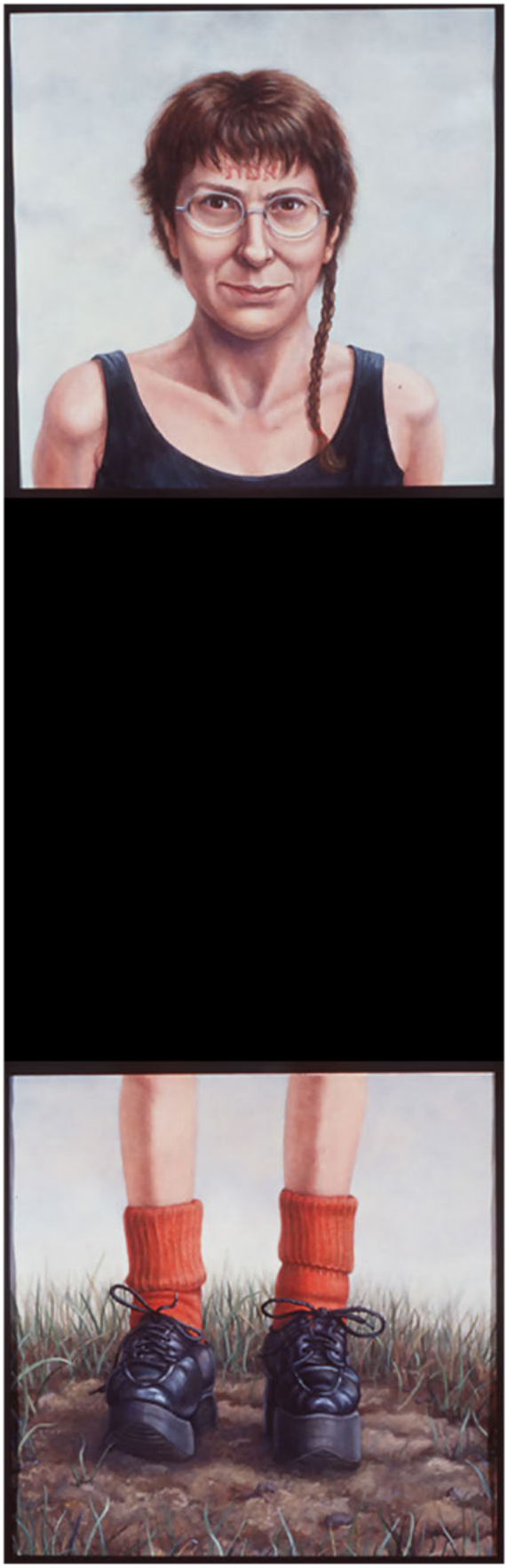
i *Yentl* (dir. Barbra Streisand, 1983).

ii *The Secrets* (dir. Avi Nesher, 2007); *Girls in Uniform* (dir. Leontine Sagan, 1931).

iii *Red Cow* (dir. Tsivia Barkai Yacov, 2018).

iv *Eyes Wide Open* (dir. Haim Tabakman, 2009).

v *Unorthodox* (dir. Maria Schrader, 2020).



Riva Lehrer. Self portrait, 1998. Gouache on paper, two paintings, 14 in. x 14 in. each. Courtesy of the artist.

From the Art Editor

Riva Lehrer, Golem Girl, and Warhol's Jews

Douglas Rosenberg

Andy Warhol. Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century, *1980. Portfolio of ten screenprints on Lenox Museum board. 40 x 32 inches each. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York © 2025 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York*

In 1980, the artist Andy Warhol created a series of silk-screened canvases, called *Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century*.

It is hard to imagine that, in the current era, an artist of Warhol's stature would make any group, ethnic, religious or cultural, not of his own community, the subject of a similar sort of objectification.

However, Warhol, the pop artist whose body of work, more or less, reduced all of popular culture to spectacle, and who had no particular relationship to Jewishness per se (other than, perhaps most pertinently, his relationship with the art dealer Ronald Feldman, who assisted Warhol in choosing the Jewish subjects), encased his Jews within the same hyperreal, bombastic color palette and style with which he wrapped most all of his work during that era. Warhol nicknamed the series "Jewish Geniuses," and in doing so, made his Jews first and foremost, "Warhols," thus ameliorating any trace of the lived experience of Sarah Bernhardt, Louis Brandeis, Martin Buber, Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, the Marx Brothers, Golda Meir, George Gershwin, Franz Kafka, and Gertrude Stein. I have often wondered whether the number ten was a chosen number or an accidental one, an ersatz minyan, or an inconsequential accident that gives the viewer something that points to a deeper understanding of Jewish life on

Warhol's part. In the current era, we teach our students to be mindful of such trespass; to be aware of whose stories we may be appropriating and how that may fog the lens of the telling of such stories, the narratives of the individuals whose lived, embodied experience we may be, in a very real way, claiming for ourselves.

Whatever the truth of his equation, it is a bit ironic that at the end of Warhol's career he made a return to his own Christian upbringing in the form of his *Sixty Last Suppers* (1986). Created near the end of his life, the series takes up the explicit themes of religion that were so seemingly absent from his previous work. He rarely spoke explicitly about his Catholic upbringing, nor did he explicitly reveal much about his own queer identity. So, in a way, Warhol remained a kind of cypher throughout his career, a kind of cultural tourist, freely able to appropriate the images of popular culture even before such appropriation came under scrutiny.

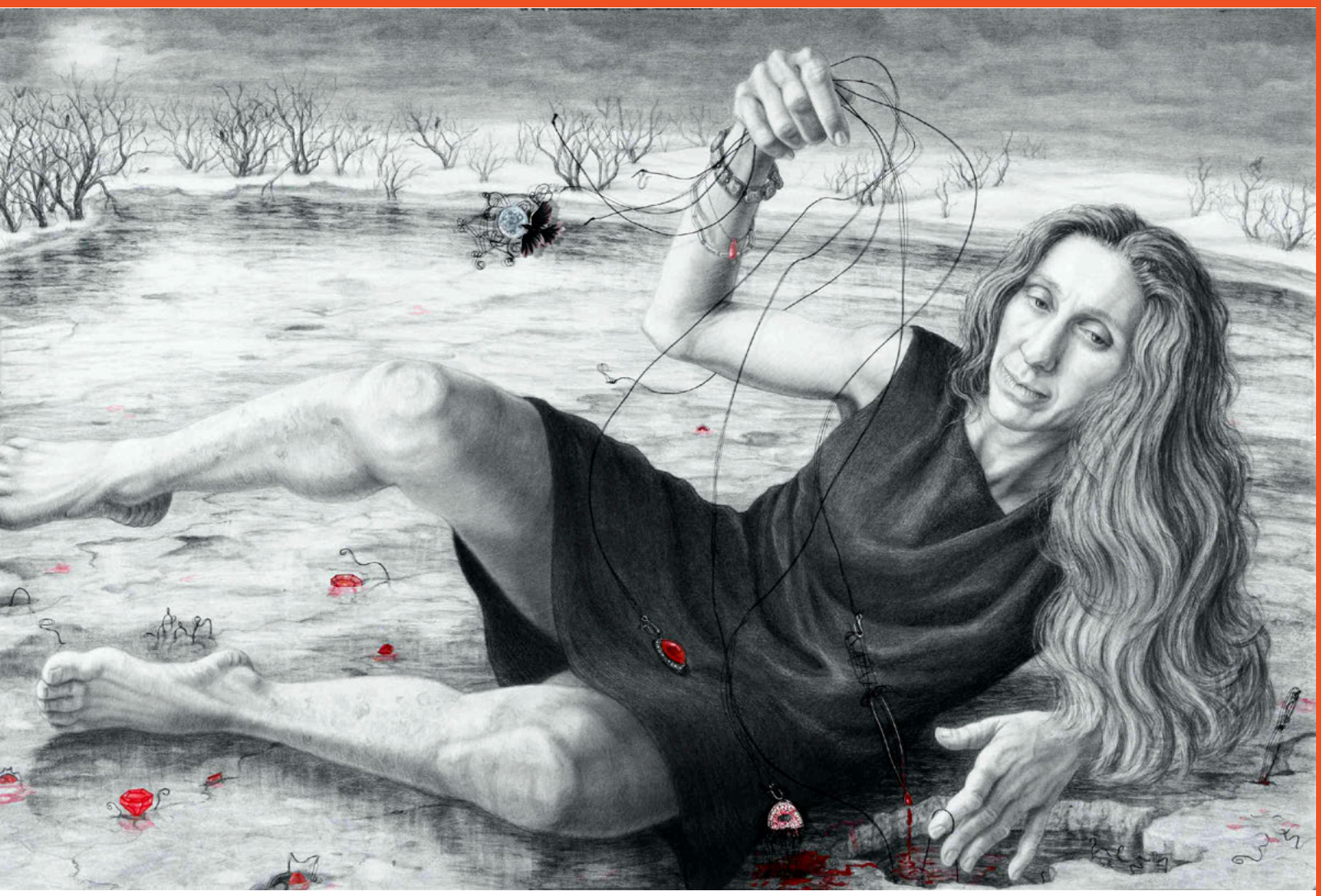
In 2020, *Andy Warhol: Revelation* opened at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, organized by the museum's chief curator, José Carlos Diaz. In acknowledging Warhol's complicated relationship with his faith and sexuality, curator and writer Andrew Julo noted, "In many ways, Warhol's work also reflects a negotiated relationship between the traditional Catholicism of his childhood and his queer identity. Rather than remaining mutually exclusive, the two informed one another in an ongoing dialectic. Despite church leaders' condemnation of homosexuality, Warhol remained devout."

Artists working in the twenty-first century think deeply about belonging, about community, and about the politics of speaking for others, which often leads to a kind of muting of the very subjects that the artist may be aiming to elevate. In other words, what begins as a gesture of allyhood may in the end silence or tamp down the very agency of the individuals that the artist endeavors to lift up.

Not so with the work of Riva Lehrer. I can't help but think of Lehrer's deeply affecting series of portraits of those in her own Jewish community as a reparative to Warhol's scattershot roundup of his "Jewish Geniuses." Lehrer is a Chicago-based artist who is also the author of a memoir called *Golem Girl*, which tracks her experience as a disabled, queer Jew. In a 2024 review of *Golem Girl*, Sarita Sidhu describes Lehrer's memoir: "*Golem Girl* is a sweeping, stunning work of visual and literary art. It is the groundbreaking memoir of an artist who has refused to be erased by a society with a rigid, very short set of rules on who deserves to live and who can and cannot be human." The golem is often framed as a liberatory and iconic image for Jewish folks who do not fall into binary gender roles or who navigate disability. In *Golem Girl*, Lehrer writes, "The day I was born I was a mass, a body with irregular border. The shape of my body was pared away according to normal outlines, but this normalcy didn't last very long. My body insisted on aberrance. I was denied the autonomy that is the birthright or normality." With a definitive clarity of tone, the author declares, "I am a Golem. My body was built by human hands. And yet—If I once was *monere* [monster], I'm turning myself into *monstrare*: one who unveils."

Lehrer was born with spina bifida and "was surrounded by children with a wide range of disabilities" as a student at the Condon School for Handicapped Children in Cincinnati, Ohio, from 1963 to 1972. She writes of her time at Condon, "I had memorized the times of the day when the art room was empty and I could work in peace. The art room had always been *my* room.… Art was magical, and not just in the making: people would look at my work, then look at me with a changed expression. One far from the usual *oh poor you*."

Over the years since, her career as an artist has become deeply involved with the field of disability culture and significantly framed by Jewish culture as well. The portraits featured here are all focused on Lehrer's Jewish community in which there are numerous overlaps with her circle of disabled friends and colleagues. For her, making such pictures, in collaboration with her subjects, is a political gesture. As opposed to the traditional way that portraits are often fashioned, in which the sitter sits and the painter paints, Lehrer asks her subjects to work *with* her to create an image that speaks to the truest nature of those whom she paints.



Riva Lehrer. Deborah Brod, *2009, charcoal on paper with 3-D collage, 30 in. x 44 in. x .5 in. Courtesy of the artist*

In a recent interview, Lehrer notes,

> I'm not a portrait painter in the traditional sense. What I am is an artist who is trying to understand embodiment through the use of the portrait. So, I do portraits in order to understand what it means to live in a body that is socially challenged, that is critiqued, and there's significant pressure always to be other than you are. And that includes people who are queer and trans and, to some extent, people of color, because they end up, sometimes, in situations in which they're considered to be wrong, unacceptable.
>
> I have no interest in just painting pictures of people for their own sake. That's not what I do. I am analyzing what it means to have a body and the implications of having the kind of bodies that I'm portraying. And in that way, my work is political. It's generally not seen as political because most political figuration is built around anger and resistance. And that's not.… I could do that, but I'm more interested in the internal self. That's what the portraits are.

As Warhol had "his" Jews, this curation of Lehrer's work is in a way, an artistic act of responsa to Warhol's *Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century*. Warhol's minyan was make-believe, a grouping of Jews that was fallacious, a kind of fiction compiled without any real sense of investment on the part of the artist. The group lacked any sort of animating understanding of Jews as people, as a people. Lehrer's portraits are built with compassion and empathy for each subject, they form a community with which Lehrer has a deep understanding and kinship. It is *mishpocha* in the truest sense. Placing her own body at the

From the Art Editor

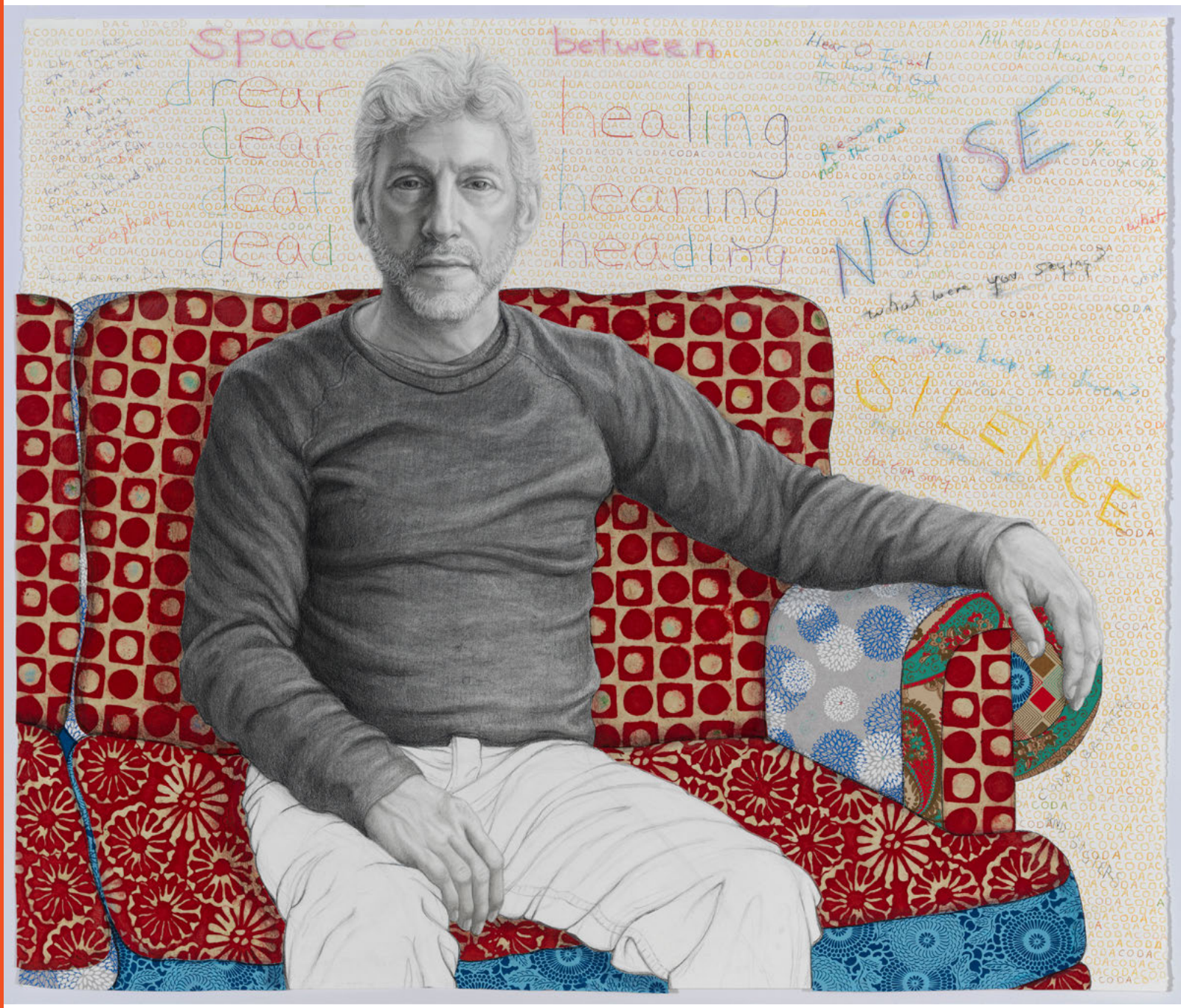
Riva Leher. Douglas and Nathan Lehrer, *2002. Graphite on Schoellershammer board, 30 in. x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist*

center of her work as an artist/activist and human, Lehrer says, "I'm capital D disabled and capital J Jewish. I'm certainly capital Q queer and an artist through and through. But my body drives the train.… When I present my portrait work with people with impairments and who deal with stigma I can't just talk about the art or some other aspect of the art … for instance, I'll start talking about working with some trans or queer subjects and most of the time people just want to bring it back to disability. It often feels like a lot of me is left outside the door."

As the writer Laura Martin has stated, "Riva stands squarely at the intersection of so many identities: advocate, disabled, queer, artist, writer, professor, public speaker, Jewish, and a woman."

Riva Lehrer and Lauren Berlant. The Risk Pictures: Lauren Berlant, *2018. Charcoal and mixed media on paper, 44 in. x 30 in. Collection of The National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Museum Courtesy of the artist*

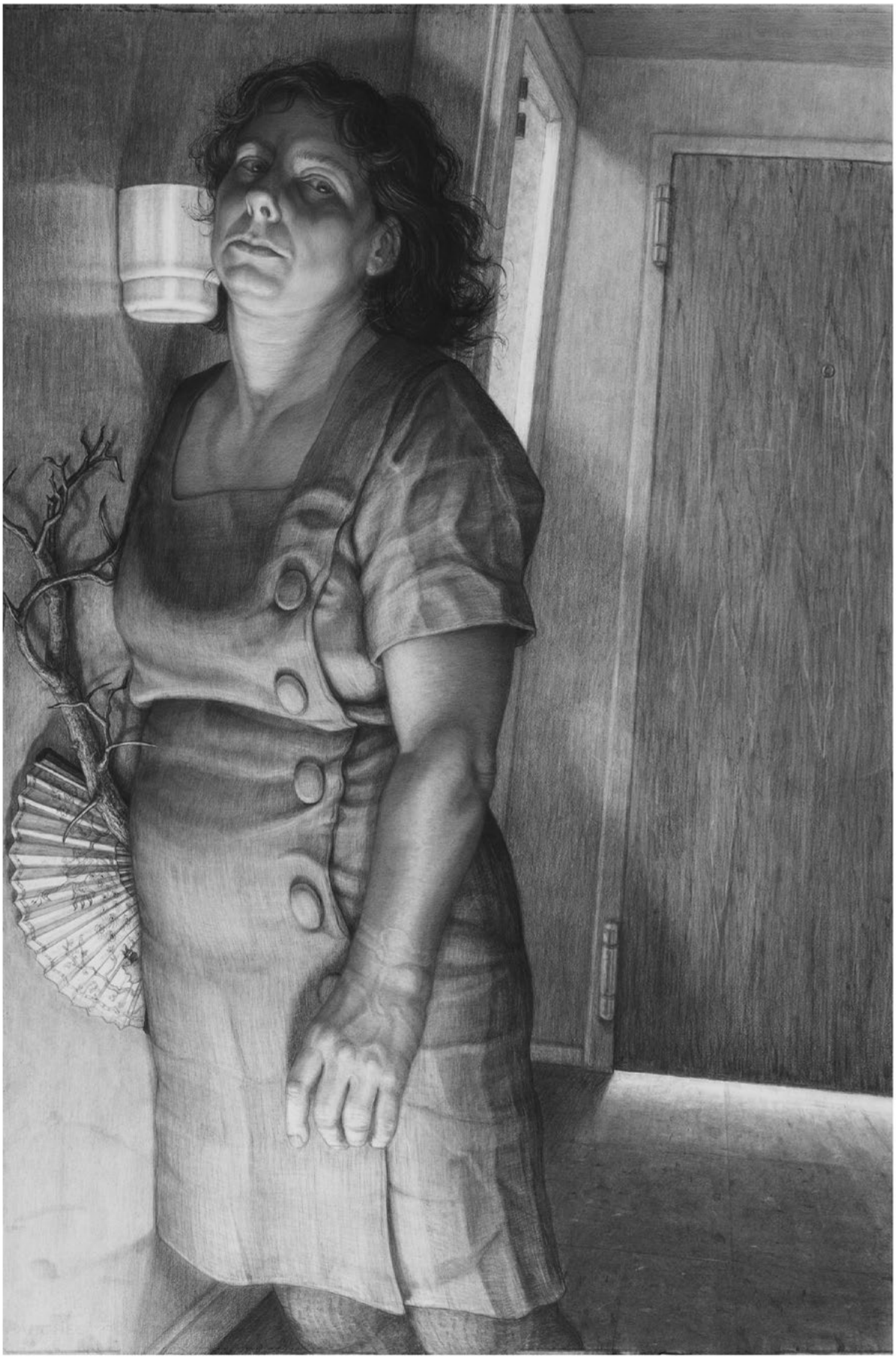
From the Art Editor



Riva Lehrer and Lennard Davis. The Risk Pictures: Lennard Davis, *2016. Mixed media and collage on paper, 30 in. x 44 in. Courtesy of the artist*

Riva Lehrer. Neil Marcus*, 2007. Charcoal on paper, 44 in. x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist*

Riva Lehrer. Nomy Lamm, *2007. Charcoal on paper, 44 in. x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist*



Riva Lehrer. Rachel Youens, *2008. Charcoal on paper, 44 in. x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist*

From the Art Editor

Riva Lehrer. Susan Nussbaum, *1998. Acrylic on panel, 16 in. x 26 in. Courtesy of the artist*

Links to Riva Lehrer's work and articles about the artist:

https://www.3arts.org/artist/riva-lehrer/

https://www.zollaliebermangallery.com/riva-lehrer.html

https://blog.americansforthearts.org/2022/03/17/riva-lehrer-and-the-complex-world-of-art-and-disability-advocacy

https://www.rivalehrerart.com/gallery

https://art.newcity.com/2024/09/13/take-risks-a-review-of-riva-lehrer-at-zolla-lieberman-gallery/

https://hyperallergic.com/951840/riva-lehrer-portraits-bring-out-the-beauty-in-difference/

https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2021/12/13/riva-lehrer-interviewed/

https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/2020/12/09/qa-with-riva-lehrer/

https://jwa.org/blog/interview-riva-lehrer-artist-and-author-golem-girl-0Loie

Riva Lehrer. Suspension: RR (Rhoda Rosen)*, 2014. Charcoal, mixed media, and acupuncture needles on board 28" x 38" x .25" Courtesy of the artist*

Riva Lehrer. Lawrence Weschler*, 2008. Charcoal, mixed media, and collage on paper, 44 in. x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist*

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