

The Queer Path of the Boundary Crosser *Shatnez* and Civilization

by Jay Michaelson

IS THE LIMINAL SACRED, OR TERRIFYING? IT IS both, according to most anthropologists and scholars of religion. Rites primitive and modern imbue times and spaces of transition with holiness precisely to sanctify what would otherwise be a foretaste of death. In the moment of in-between, that point of inflection between what was and what is only now becoming, we are neither what we were nor what we will be. We are nothing, in other words, if only for the briefest of moments—and in the extinction of nothingness, of ayin, we approach divinity.

Yet the extinction of nothingness does not build homes or till the earth. Civilized (that is, Western) religion, as it domesticates the wild and artificially bounds the unbounded, is precisely about the yoking of chaos. In the biblical story, God creates

order out of the primordial chaos, the “tohu and bohu” in which some scholars detect echoes of the Babylonian Tiamat, defeated and divided by Marduk. Now rules are established, beginning with the most basic of taboos governing sexuality and establishing sexual order (almost always, in our culture, patriarchy). Now civilization can begin.

Surely, if it is anything, mainstream Judaism is a religion of civilization. Yes, it has its occasional vestiges of the Dionysian, David dancing before the Ark and folk festivals of orgiastic love. But from its founding moments, Jewish tradition is about the tablets of the law, not the golden calf; Moses’ descent to the people, not his ascent to the ineffable. It’s so odd, and yet so quintessentially Israelite, that our sage ascends a Divine mountain, but what we learn (in the biblical text, at least) is not the majestic theophany itself, the very body and face of God, but what that God tells Moses about life down here on Earth. Imagine one of our latter-day prophets announcing a “message from God” about tort law.

In such a religion, in a culture devoted to the cultivation of civilization, the notion of boundary is absolutely essential. One does not organize clans, tribes, and nations without a healthy respect for hierarchy, law, and propriety; and within the Jewish tradition, this respect for boundaries reaches its apotheosis. God mandates law—not only civil law, but even law that imprints itself upon God’s own creation. Following Mary Douglas’s reading of the Bible, for example, we can see the Jewish dietary laws as reflecting the idealized plan of Genesis itself, dividing water creatures from air creatures, air creatures from earth’s, and abhorring any transgression of the boundary. God saw that it was good—because now it was ordered: dark from light, the chosen from the others, everything neatly divided into binaries of either/or.

Where, then, are the boundary-crossers, those who defy the either/or, live apart from the conventional structure of family and tribe, and undermine the binaries that underlie the civilizing thrust of Judaism?

In contemporary queer theory, binaries are the enemy. They are false, they are social constructions—and they invariably administer power to the powerful, subjecting the weak to the rule of the strong. It’s not just that dyads such as them/us, black/white, and female/male are incorrect—it’s that the former term is consistently subordinated to the latter. In fact, as latter-day Jewish philosophers Emanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida have shown, even the basic dualisms of self/other and presence/absence contain within them the seed of oppression, marginalization, and subjugation. As soon as we divide, we begin to conquer.

But in Jewish tradition, binaries are necessary; they are needed; they are holy. We can talk all we like about God encompassing all—uniting good and evil, joining self and other—but that’s God. The only Jews who efface such boundaries are heretics: Sabateans, Frankists, and others. For the rest of us, our rabbis draw infinitely small distinctions to better divide and comprehend the world. Each minute that ticks by on these digital clocks of law carries its own special significance. With only a few exceptions, there is no in-between.

Those who find themselves astride one or another boundary—a transgendered woman, say, or a man who wishes to be made love to by a man—thus find themselves in an inextricably complex relationship to the social, traditional Judaism of the halachic mainstream. So do inter-religious couples, or single parents, or others following (or creating) alternative models of Jewish sexual-social life. And so does anyone who sees himself/herself/themselves as both rather than either/or.

In our public conversations, we may all be the same; for all the hubbub in the media, there’s nothing more ordinary than two men or women standing under the chuppah to get married. Thus the liberal, assimilationist discourse on homosexuality is important—not just because it’s convenient for lesbian couples to file joint tax returns, but also because moments of intimacy are not the business of the secular state (this is the essence of the “right to privacy”), and because privilege, however constructed or inapplicable it may be, should still be allotted to all who’d like to seek it, rather than restrict-

ed only to some. Maybe to some people, marriage is dyadic, limiting, and intrinsically heteronormative—but let me have it too if I want it.

In our most intimate moments, however, we are not all the same—and the more one is attuned to the inflections of intimacy, the more apparent the difference becomes. A queer man uniting his inner masculine and feminine is different from the union of a man and a woman. Intimacy between women is different from phallocentric assumptions about penetration and control. And for religious traditions, unlike for the secular state, this difference is crucial. Yet it is the erasure of that difference which characterizes the Jewish oppression of queers, who are regarded, halachically, as misbehaving

A "LABOR INTENSIVE" STRATEGY

(continued from page 32) straights.

Contrast the Jewish erasure with the ways in which other traditions have seen queerness as holy. Several Native American traditions believed that people we would now label as gay or lesbian actually possessed two spirits, one masculine and one feminine, and accorded them special significance in society. Some were medicine men (or women, or neither men nor women), some assumed gender roles different from their anatomical sex, some were shamans and warriors. Few were "virtually normal." Likewise the gender variant castes in India, or in the ancient Mediterranean. These histories may not be familiar to us—no one learns their gay heritage at Sunday schools and Seders—but they are there, recorded in histories oral and written, as well as in the prohibitions of the orthodox.

Ironically, this sacred difference of "third-gendered" people derived from their transcendence (or transgression) of distinction. Ordinary life is the place of distinctions; thus those who transcend distinctions likewise transcend ordinary life. As such, in their defiance of conventional boundaries, the gender-variant shamans of the Plains Indians (including Omaha, Sioux, Iban, and Hidatsa people) and Siberia (including the Chukchi, Yakut, and Koryak tribes), the *basir* of Borneo, the male *isangoma* of the Zulu were seen to be in closer contact with the "other dimension"—that of the spiritual.

The Jewish tradition, however, doesn't have anything close to this transgressive outsider/insider. Jewish tradition prefers to domesticate the liminal, to find a place for it within ordered society, like the Bacchae buried beneath Athens in Euripides. We honor not the shaman in the wilderness (queer or otherwise) but the *ba'al habayit* at home with his family. The Jewish saint lives in the world, not beyond it. (Even the wanderers of the Bible—Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and the rest—find their way back home eventually; the great exception to the rule, Elijah, is a supernatural—that is, super-human—figure.) So what is the place of the boundary-crosser within even a radically inclusive Jewish community, if it is at all to be worthy of the name?

In a sense, the answer to that question depends on how we conceive of Judaism itself. If "Judaism" means the normative practices of the rabbis, interpreting the Bible and explicating revelation for all, then the only role for Jewish queers is to assimilate, find space in traditional communities with textual readings like Rabbi Steve Greenberg's and others, and ask for inclusive liturgy in their synagogues and community centers. No small feat—but not revolution either.

If, on the other hand, one conceives of "Judaism" as describing the practices of the Jewish people—*describing*, not *prescribing*—then the agenda suddenly shifts. Now the question becomes not how gays can be accepted into the same Jewish world, but what the gay Jew's unique destiny is. Was there a class of *kedeshim*, of Israelite sex-priests who offered experiences of Divine communion to men and women alike? Were there Israelite spiritualities maintained by marginal women who lived outside of the familial structure, and in congrega-

IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO

(continued from page 32) tions of their own? Scholars tell us that the answers to these questions are probably affirmative, even though we may never reconstruct what these people's lives were like. But as a personal (not historical) matter, to include such modes of being within my own identity as a Jew is both thrilling and threatening. Thrilling because it means I have a history—that God has made gay people for millennia, and they have constructed spiritual lives alongside of, and despite, the orthodoxies of their day. But threatening because this is the path of the outsider.

Notwithstanding the hysteria of the homophobes, there are not enough queer Jews in the world to threaten the foundations of the Jewish community. But in terms of personal identity, one is enough. If the act of boundary-crossing, at once the formative move of the Hebrew (*ivri*, crossing-over) people and the antithesis of normative Jewish life, is to be admitted as an act of devotion to God, then what becomes of the prescribed codes of worship, or the sense of security that comes from fidelity to the permitted? The *nomos* gives meaning, and security—what is lost when it is transgressed? Personally, for example, I find that adherence to the dietary laws, even in their arcane details and historical accidents, nonetheless provides me with a sense of closeness to God. But if I am to truly be a boundary-crosser, is it the love of heaven that keeps my dishes separate—or is it merely cowardice?

One reason that eros is so carefully patrolled by law is that, blessed by the simplicity of love, it is easy to forget distinctions. Labels, distinctions, genders and transgressions matter little when my partner is in my arms and love is the most natural thing in the world. Yet while such moments of innocence are delightful, they are also infantile. *Shatnez*, the Biblically-prescribed blending of wool and linen, which was prohibited precisely because it was sacred to the Egyptians (possibly like forbidden sexual unions), also looks, from a distance, to be cloth like any other. Only on closer inspection do its transgressed distinctions become apparent—whether as a path to God or to chaos.

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