

# *Queering Revelation:*

## *Pride, Shavuot & Notein HaTorah*

Rabbi Laurie Green  
National Pride Shabbat  
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CBM, 6<sup>th</sup> & I & GLOE

“The experience of revelation in exile is a profoundly Jewish one...it is a paradox of human nature that in exile one discovers oneself and one’s relationship to God...”<sup>1</sup>

Those words were spoken  
25 years ago,  
by Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum,  
addressing the 12th International Conference of Gay and Lesbian  
Jewish Organizations. Her talk was entitled  
“coming out as a spiritual journey.”

How much has changed since then?

25 years ago,  
we couldn’t imagine  
where we are today...  
-a gay football player,  
and a lesbian senator,  
-a Jewish trans\* woman  
as a senior white house liaison  
-another Jewish trans woman  
as the state physician of PA  
-marriage equality in all 50 states  
-and an Arab Israeli  
as the first Miss Trans Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> Kleinbaum, Sharon, “revelation in the wilderness: coming out as a spiritual journey,” keynote drash, Twelfth International Conference of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations, 2 Sivan 5761, May 24, 1991.

I thought about  
lots of different topics  
to address tonight  
But I kept coming back  
to one question:

What does it mean,  
that this year,  
the Pride Festival  
falls on the festival of Shavuot,  
the season of the Giving of the Torah, when we celebrate  
one of our central Jewish myths –  
the revelation at Sinai?

What is the uniquely  
LGBTQ experience  
of Torah?

So I reread some of my favorites, especially my teacher  
Benay Lappe, who was the first Conservative rabbi to be out  
as a lesbian, and the founder of Svara, the world's only  
Queer Yeshiva.

I love Benay's commitment to being traditionally radical,  
and her passion for teaching Talmud from a uniquely Queer  
perspective.

Benay loves the word Queer. She rarely says LGBTQ. It's  
controversial, I know, but Benay has a broad and beautiful  
understanding of what it is to be Queer, and what it is to be  
Jewish.

But my drash was still missing something?

This past Monday,  
I had the pleasure  
of spending the day  
with my teacher

Rabbi Dr. Art Green.

Dr. Green is  
a founder of the Chavurah movement,  
a world-reknowned scholar  
of Jewish mysticism,  
and the founding Dean  
of the rabbinical school  
at Hebrew College.  
So if ever  
there was a straight man  
with a beard  
who could Queer Sinai,  
I knew Art was the guy.

So I asked him,  
“Art,  
this year Pride and Shavuot  
are on the very same day.  
What should I say in my drash?”

And Art immediately started talking about the many uses  
of queer,  
and Benay’s particular understanding  
of queer sensibility  
as the subversiveness of Jewish tradition.

So I asked him,  
“How do we read the tradition  
without being afraid of the subversive?”

Art said,  
and I quote,  
“by understanding  
the imperative of reinterpretation.  
The text stays alive  
because of not only our right,  
but our **obligation**  
to constantly reread it.”

Perhaps the best illustration of this comes from a traditional source – the Sfat Emet, a 19<sup>th</sup> century spiritual teacher.

The Sfat Emet offers a beautiful reading of the blessing after the reading the Torah.

In English, the blessing reads:

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe,  
who has given us a Torah of truth,  
implanting within us eternal life.  
Blessed are You, Adonai,  
who gives the Torah.

It's a nice translation, but the Sfat Emet renders the Hebrew entirely differently. For Hebrew is a language where the same word frequently means many things at once.

The Sfat Emet tells us that Torah of Truth (torat emet in Hebrew) refers to the Written Torah, the Biblical text in the scroll.

Implanting within us eternal life, however, does not mean life after death as we might assume, but rather

“m’chayei olam nata b’tocheinu”  
refers to the Oral Torah,  
all the ways our tradition has been interpreted...to this day.

Oral Torah,  
the interpretation of Torah,  
lives within **us**  
(chayei... b’tocheinu).

Torah “demands  
we be involved  
in the process.”<sup>2</sup>

That alone would be beautiful,  
but the Sfat Emet goes on.  
He notes that  
at the beginning of the blessing,  
Torah is given in the PAST TENSE,  
but at the end of the blessing,  
natan becomes notein,  
God GIVES us the Torah  
in the PRESENT TENSE.

The Sfat Emet concludes,  
only when you combine  
the Torah in the scroll  
with the Torah that lives within **us**,  
only then  
is the Torah given  
in the PRESENT.

Each and every one of us  
have our own Torah to teach.  
That Torah  
is not only  
holy for us,

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<sup>2</sup> Private conversation with Art Green 6/6/16 at Temple Isaiah in Maryland during Board of Rabbis Joint Yom Iyun.

but it is part  
of an ancient and ongoing tradition

“Revelation is a great stream of truth, with more of it  
revealed  
in each generation.”<sup>3</sup>  
Now that  
is a VERY SUBVERSIVE idea...  
How Queer!

In the words of our texts,  
“the stone the builders rejected  
has become the corner stone.”<sup>4</sup>  
“Never shall we be ashamed again.”<sup>5</sup>  
For from Sinai  
comes forth  
“a great voice that has never ceased.”<sup>6</sup>

Shabbat shalom!  
Hag Sameach!  
Happy Pride!

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<sup>3</sup> Green, Art. A Guide to the Zohar, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 118:22.

<sup>5</sup> Ahavah Rabbah, Morning Liturgy.

<sup>6</sup> Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 19:6.