

Queering Revelation:

Pride, Shavuot & Notein HaTorah

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CBM, 6th & 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....”¹

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.

¹ 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 19th 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.”²

That alone would be beautiful,
but the Sfatai 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 Sfatai 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,

² 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.”³
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.”⁴
“Never shall we be ashamed again.”⁵
For from Sinai
comes forth
“a great voice that has never ceased.”⁶

Shabbat shalom!
Hag Sameach!
Happy Pride!

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

⁴ Psalm 118:22.

⁵ Ahavah Rabbah, Morning Liturgy.

⁶ Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 19:6.