

**Queering the Torah:  
The Role of Contemporary Midrash In Claiming Revelation for LGBTQ Jews**

**Jill Hammer**

... foundation stories have been “making” each of us since we were born, and they have been making us collectively since well before any one of us entered the world. Yet, we are constantly remaking foundation texts in our own image.

Lori Hope Lefkovitz<sup>1</sup>

For two thousand years, midrash— creative commentary on biblical text that both explains and expands its meaning— has been an important vehicle for the evolution of Jewish theology and practice. Contemporary midrash— midrash written (or otherwise artistically composed) by contemporary artists— maintains the purpose of this ancient genre, shifting Jewish self-understanding through creative approaches to biblical text. It also introduces modern elements of doubt, subjectivity and challenge. For example, feminist writers and artists have transformed Jewish ways of looking at gender by creating midrashim in which biblical women speak for themselves. In recent years, Jews who identify as LGBT have also begun to create midrash that inscribes queerness into sacred text. This midrash not only challenges the reader to accept LGBT individuals as part of the core community of Torah interpreters, but also invites LGBT Jews to see themselves as a fundamental part of the Jewish past, present, and future.

This chapter will focus on the way that contemporary queer (queer here including self-defined gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer) Jews have used narrative midrash as Jews have always used it: to find themselves within the text, and to

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Lori Hope Lefkovitz, *Scripture: The First Stories of Jewish Sexual Identity* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2010), p. 2.

define their relationship to Torah and Jewish community. This chapter will focus on narrative and poetic midrash among queer Jews in the United States.

In this context, the midrashim (plural) of LGBT Jews can be grouped into three categories, each of which makes a particular kind of claim on the text.

The first category might be called “claiming a character”—the author of the midrash asks “what would happen if \_\_\_\_\_ (biblical character) were queer?” In these midrashim, characters like Joseph, David, Lilith, or Miriam reveal hidden stories in which they turn out to have queer identity, same-sex lovers, homoerotic relationships with God, etc. Sometimes, the queerness of the character becomes a way to resolve a particular textual issue, such as: “Why was Joseph romantically uninterested in Potiphar’s wife?” (This is very much in the style of the ancient midrashim, who used their own creative takes on the text to answer questions about gaps in the text.) These midrashim invite and challenge the interpretive community to see queer people as part of the Torah.

The second category is “claiming a narrative.” In these midrashim, a writer examines a particular narrative to draw forth queer themes on a larger scale. Some of these themes include revealing the hidden, love/acceptance, and personal and erotic liberation. These kinds of midrashim use what contemporary queer artists and scholars have learned from being queer and studying queer lives, to better understand what is happening beneath the surface of an ancient text. For example, this kind of midrash might read the binding of Isaac as a sexual role performance, or the story of Jacob and the angel as a wrestling with gender identity. This strategy invites us to understand that queerness has gifts of understanding and vision in relationship to the text.

In the third category of contemporary midrash, we see writers “claiming revelation.” Here, the midrashim show us that revelation itself is different because of queerness—that is, the queerness of biblical characters and/or God changes how we think about revelation. Fundamental assumptions such as the centrality and truth of the text, and the nature of the covenant with the divine, shift when they come into contact with queer perspectives. This is perhaps the most radical step taken by modern LGBT midrashists—yet midrashists of each generation, from the Talmudic sages to the creators of the kabbalah, have in fact changed Jewish views of revelation. So too, the writers of LGBT-themed midrash are changing how Jews understand Torah. This chapter will offer

examples of contemporary midrash in these three categories and examine the ways each category of midrash affects the reading of sacred text. Through midrash, the modern process of “queering” Jewish life takes on a timeless dimension and is woven into a Jewish interpretive conversation that is as old as Judaism itself.

Throughout this chapter, as we look at authors who write in all three of these categories, we will see how the different strategies entwine with one another. These midrashim, which root the modern phenomenon of queerness in an ancient conversation, indeed may change how future Jews look at Torah and revelation. If Judith Plaskow, a lesbian feminist midrashist and theologian, is correct that “the Torah is the partial record of God-wrestling of part of the Jewish people,”<sup>2</sup> then queer midrash is making the record not only more complete, but more whole.

### **Queering Characters: Love as Liberation**

Andrew Ramer, a writer of short stories and a contributor to many gay men’s Jewish journals and anthologies as well as Jewish and general collections, is also a member of Congregation Sha’ar Zahav, an LGBT synagogue in San Francisco. In that role, he has facilitated general Torah study as well as queer Torah study. In Andrew Ramer’s book *Queering the Text*, he creates a collection of short prose pieces called “The Genizah of Dreams: 22 Midrashim.” The midrashim are organized in chronological order according to the biblical narrative, and each one is titled with a Hebrew letter, in addition to its prose title. As part of his work, Ramer claims a variety of characters as queer, introducing a whole cast of queer figures to the biblical text.

Ramer’s narrative of the prophetess Miriam, titled “The Tent of Miriam,” imagines a Miriam who not only dances with women as the freed slaves cross the sea, but loves women as well. In Ramer’s story, Miriam crosses the sea with her lover Zahavah, and Zahavah is the witness as Miriam begins to cry out and sing.

They had no timbrels. They had no sistrums or hand bells. They'd left Egypt with only the essential they had on their backs. But they had their hands to clap with. The midwives Puah and Shifrah led the women in a circle dance, with Miriam and Zahavah in the middle, hand in hand. Then Miriam began to sing the song of God that was moving in her. After each line the women repeated it, as they always did when she was given a holy song...

All the men and boys were gathered around the women as they sang and danced, clapping and cheering them on. And when the power began to shift, when the song and dance began to slow down, Miriam let out a final cry that echoed out over the hills. Then she turned to Zahavah, in the midst of the crowd, and pulled her wet cloak over both their heads. Wrapped in each other's arms, they kissed, deeply and fully, in that tent of theirs, that first tent of freedom our people raised up in the wilderness.<sup>3</sup>

Ramer is, like his ancestors who invented the genre of midrash, answering an implied question. The implied question is: "Why, in the biblical text, is no husband or child of Miriam the prophetess ever mentioned?" This startling omission demands an answer, and Talmudic sages have answered by providing Miriam with a husband and children. Ramer too has an answer: Miriam had a same-sex lover. Miriam's queerness provides an insight into a gap in the text.

In true midrashic form, Ramer also adds to the text. In mentioning "the first tent of freedom" erected by Miriam and Zahavah, Ramer alludes to the Tent of Meeting where Moses meets God, and the Tabernacle where Aaron serves as high priest. Ramer invents a tent of Miriam so Miriam and her lover Zahavah can have privacy as they celebrate their freedom. All later tabernacles are only a shadow of this first tent of freedom. The freedom to love, Ramer asserts in this narrative, must precede the building

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Andrew Ramer, "The Tent of Miriam," in *Queering the Text: Biblical, Medieval, and Modern Stories* (Lethe Press, 2010), p. 28-29.

of any communal sacred space. In claiming Miriam, Ramer also claims the Exodus as a narrative that can and must apply to queer individuals.

In a later tale, Ramer paints a tragic picture of the elderly King David. Unable to sleep even though his handmaiden and bedwarmer slumbers peacefully, he takes out his harp and tries to play it, but can't because his fingers hurt. He thinks: "Once I danced, naked, in front of the Ark of the Covenant. Now, I can barely walk." David turns to the small chest near his bed, one made to look like the Ark itself.

He shuffled across the room and slowly lowered himself to the hard stone floor. Kneeling in front of the chest, with trembling hands, he lifted the golden lid, with its two cherubim facing each other, their wings outspread. Inside was a faded purple cloak, neatly folded, and beneath it a tunic of red embroidered with silver and gold. He lifted them to his face and smelled them. He pressed them to his cheek. He wept then, and as he wept he softly sang the end of the song that he had sung to himself for all these years:

"My brother Jonathan, you were most dear to me. Your love was wonderful to me, greater than the love of women." (II Sam. 1:26)<sup>4</sup>

Again, Ramer is acting as a midrashist by answering an implied question: when David and Jonathan exchange clothes in I Samuel 18:4 as part of a covenant between them, what happens to the clothes David receives from Jonathan? In Ramer's story, David keeps the clothes in a box that echoes the Ark of the Covenant, showing that David views his union with Jonathan as holy. The keeping of the clothes by a mourning lover is an apparent allusion to the film *Brokeback Mountain*, in which the bereaved Ennis Del Mar keeps his lover Jack's clothes as a memorial after Jack's murder. Ramer is weaving contemporary queer culture with midrash.

Further, the cherubim on David's box allude to a talmudic story in which the cherubim on the ark are "male and female" and intertwined in lovemaking.<sup>5</sup> In Ramer's

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Andrew Ramer, "The Wooden Box," in *Queering the Text: Biblical, Medieval, and Modern Stories* (Lethe Press, 2010), p. 46.

story of male lovers, the cherubim must be assumed to be male; a testament to the sanctity of same-sex love. The powerful homoerotic tropes in the story of David and Jonathan here become a claiming of those characters as a sacred part of the biblical canon, a love story as holy as the Ark of the Covenant. It is not hard to see the link between this midrash and Ramer's Miriam tale, in which lovers erect the first sacred tent. As Ramer claims characters as queer, he makes the larger assertion that love between people must be sanctified, is sanctified, no matter the identity of the lovers.

The feminist poet and novelist Susan Gold's poem "In the Garden" appears as part of *Which Lilith?*, an anthology of writers exploring the persona of Lilith: the ancient Near Eastern and Jewish demoness who later became a celebrated heroine among modern feminists. Jewish legend imagines Lilith as Adam's first wife, who fled Eden and chose to live as a demon rather than remain subordinate in her marriage. Gold re-imagines the story of Eve, the serpent, and the fruit of knowledge, with Lilith as a prominent character.

*Lilith stopped her.*

*"My juice is sweeter," she whispered,*

*"and my flesh will teach much more."*

*She pulled Eve gently down on top of her,*

*that tongue which could beat so fast*

*in the right places.*

*"Dear sister," Eve cried*

*when the pearls of her body swelled*

*for the first time.*

*Lilith shed her skin, her story,*

*wrapped it around Eve.*

*"It will be a cold journey," she said.<sup>6</sup>*

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Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 54a

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Susan Gold, "In the Garden," in *Which Lilith? Feminist Writers Re-Crete the World's First Woman*. Eds. Enid Dame, Lilly Rivlin, and Henny Wenkart (Jason Aronson, 1998), p. 199.

Midrash of the rabbinic period imagines the snake desiring Eve sexually and enticing her to eat the fruit so that he may be her sex partner.<sup>7</sup> Gold uses a similar midrashic narrative yet turns it on its head. In her midrashic take on the story, Lilith, the fruit, and the serpent are one, and Lilith desires and seduces Eve through an act of sexual devouring. Gold claims Eve and Lilith as queer characters, and in doing so, re-reads the story of the tree of knowledge of good and evil as a story of the discovery of same-sex desire.

Lilith, the serpent, then sheds her skin and gives it to Eve as a covering to keep her warm on her “cold journey.” This garmenting alludes to the moment in Genesis when God makes clothes for Adam and Eve out of skin before sending them from the garden (Genesis 3:21). Targum Yonatan, an ancient interpretive translation of the Torah, imagines these clothes as made from snakeskin. In her poem, Gold seems to agree. Yet the snakeskin is not only shelter but also story. The queer Eve will face opposition and repression. She will need the story of Lilith the rebel as her protective clothing if she is to thrive in the harsh world she is entering. By depicting Lilith as the one who clothes Eve, Gold makes Lilith the nurturer, the liberator, the storyteller—Lilith becomes God, as well as the snake and the fruit. Gold has queered not only almost all the characters in the narrative but the narrative itself. She suggests that the meaning of Eve’s expulsion from Eden is not that she sinned but that she gained consciousness. In Gold’s reading of Eden, life as a free person requires conscious liberation of one’s identity, sexuality, and social role.

The midrash written by feminist theologian Judith Plaskow, “The Coming of Lilith,” makes a similar point. In Plaskow’s midrash, Lilith abandons the garden after Adam attempts to subjugate her, but then breaks back in to meet Adam’s new wife Eve. Eve, until now “was basically satisfied with the role of Adam’s wife and helper. The only thing that really disturbed her was the excluding closeness of the relationship between Adam and God.” Lilith’s appearance in the garden sparks Eve’s curiosity and her desire for connection.

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Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 9a and b.

*Was Lilith indeed just another woman? Adam had said she was a demon. Another woman! The very idea attracted Eve. She had never seen another creature like herself before. And how beautiful and strong Lilith looked! How bravely she had fought! Slowly, slowly, Eve began to think about the limits of her own life within the garden.*<sup>8</sup>

Eve and Lilith talk and tell stories “till the bond of sisterhood grew between them.” Plaskow concludes: “And God and Adam were expectant and afraid the day Eve and Lilith returned to the garden, bursting with possibilities, ready to build it together.” While Plaskow never directly claims Lilith or Eve as queer characters, Eve’s attraction to Lilith’s strength and beauty does in a sense “queer” Eve. Plaskow’s story implies, as Gold’s poem implies, that one can radically come to consciousness through relationship with another woman.

The authors who claim their characters as queer are making an argument for their characters as human: people who love with integrity, people who are committed to freedom and the truth. Yet one cannot queer a character without queering a narrative. When characters become queer, their existence changes the meaning of the narrative. We must now explore what happens when contemporary midrashists queer biblical narrative themes using their own lives.

### **Queering Narratives: Wrestling and Surrendering**

Joy Ladin, the award-winning poet and author of the memoir *Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey between Genders*, is a professor of English at Yeshiva University. Many of Ladin’s poems deal with the question of how to discover and/or create a gender identity. Ladin, who from an early age was interested in God, frequently addresses God throughout her work. In her newest book, she includes several poems that use biblical

text to reflect on the themes of her own life, including “Wrestling”, a midrash on Jacob and the angel:

*You wish you'd stayed on your family's side.*

*Not that you're losing. Not at all.*

*The angel's wings snap  
in the vice of your thighs.*

*The angel gropes,  
searching out the sinew of light,  
the blessing you stole in disguise*

*from a father who could only love  
what he couldn't recognize. The angel threatens  
to kill; to die;*

*claims to be your father's God;  
your father himself, abashed and blind;  
the fear that took his eyes.*

*You wish you could let him go. Lose  
to keep him alive. Dissolving  
in the breaking light,*

*he begs you to let him fly,  
his feathers melting,  
running down your thigh.<sup>9</sup>*

Ladin begins “You wish you had stayed on your family’s side.” Here, Ladin is in the familiar landscape of Genesis, in the dramatic scene where Jacob leaves his family to spend the night in darkness and wrestle an angel. Yet the first line has a double meaning: the “family’s side” is not only the side of the river on which Jacob’s family camps, but the “family’s side” that Ladin knows, the side that has demanded she not be herself. Ladin’s transgender Jacob feels loss for loved ones who have been left behind as the transformation has taken place.

In Ladin’s retelling, the angel is not a divine being, or even the spirit of Jacob’s brother Esau as some midrashim suggest. The angel is Ladin’s father, a father “who could only love what he couldn’t recognize” and now searches out “the blessing you stole in disguise.” Ladin identifies with Jacob, for she too hid her identity to get her father’s blessing. Now, the deception ends. The blind angel wrestles with Ladin in her new identity as woman, and he can’t win: “Not that you’re losing. Not at all. The angel’s wings snap/in the vice of your thighs.” The word “thighs” is thick with meaning. Jacob is wrenched in the thigh as he wrestles with the angel. In the biblical lexicon, thigh also means genitalia. In this midrash, Jacob’s thigh injury becomes a metaphor for gender transition. The truth of this transition is what makes the human wrestler victorious and snaps the angel’s wings.

The angel who has believed in Ladin’s maleness “threatens to kill; to die; to be your father’s God”— all the threats Ladin no doubt received as she transitioned despite her family’s objections. Yet in the end the angel loses easily to Ladin’s true self, and Ladin herself is left feeling sorry for the pathetic angel whom she loves: “You wish you could let him go. Lose/to keep him alive.” As in so much of Ladin’s writing, she acknowledges the cost of the victory: “He begs you to let him fly, his feathers melting, running down your thigh.” Like Icarus, the angel melts at the touch of the sun, and begs to be let go before the sun’s full force arrives—perhaps, before the whole truth of Jacob’s new self is brought to bear. Ladin loses a loved one, but gains herself.

Jacob emerges from his struggle as Israel, and Ladin emerges from her struggle as Joy, a woman with a new name. It is less that Ladin is queering a character called Jacob, and more that she is using the character of Jacob as a way to more deeply understand her own wrestling. Ladin’s angel is the past, the past of a transgender person with all of its

complexities, joys, and sorrows. Ladin's task is to claim her victory and her new name despite the losses. In another of Ladin's midrashic poems, she writes in the voice of her body:

*I'm not what you want, but I am what I've always been:*

*Your mother, your daughter, your stream of water,*

*your home and your road beyond it.*

*Lift me up like a timbrel. The others are waiting.*

*It's time to join the dance.*

Ladin now becomes Miriam, and takes her body up like a timbrel, dancing her own liberation in spite of the long exile she has suffered. After reading her words, we cannot read these biblical texts of wrestling and liberation without thinking of Ladin's journey between genders. This is what it means to queer a narrative: to return the narrative utterly changed by its encounter with the queer midrashist.

Jay Michaelson is an author, poet, activist, journalist, lawyer, and scholar, as well as the Director of the LGBT Global Rights Initiative at the Democracy Council. He founded Nehirim, a national community for LGBTQ Jews. He has served as "an innovator and occasional gadfly"<sup>10</sup> to the Jewish and general community. In his book of poems, *another word for sky*, Michaelson frequently addresses his experience as a Jew and as a gay man.

One of Michaelson's poems is titled "in praise of Isaac, of whom it is said, he knew what it was to be a woman." Michaelson is here delving into the kabbalah, in which many biblical characters are associated with a particular divine quality. Isaac is associated with *gevurah*, which means constriction or boundary-making. In the kabbalah, *gevurah* is a feminine quality, and so Isaac is mystically gendered female though his gender in the text is male. Abraham, Isaac's father, is associated with *chesed*, which means lovingkindness or expansiveness, a quality that the kabbalah genders male.

Near the beginning of the poem, Michaelson writes:

*Isaac is the fulcrum who gives himself over  
he lay back on the altar naked  
allowed his father to tie him up  
i want to imagine  
his body  
at that moment  
as he surrendered  
to holy god  
and his father*

*isaac is the yielder and the receiver of love  
abraham spreads forth his hands and isaac's mouth falls open  
And he is ready to honor god in his receiving...<sup>11</sup>*

Michaelson invites us to connect the image of Isaac on the altar with the act of sexual surrender. In the kabbalah, the divine feminine aspect of *gevurah* is about constriction but also about containment, about the holding or receiving of divine energy. Michaelson accepts the mystical reading of the text in which Isaac plays a feminine role, yet interprets this medieval reading of the text in a new way, connecting it to an experience of embodying the feminine through sexual surrender to another man.

Concluding the poem, Michaelson writes:

*and the Zohar says  
he is woman in man  
and says  
he knew*

*he knew what it was to be a woman*

*as cain knew his wife  
he knew in his soul his body  
isaac knew what it was to be a woman  
as he was bound upon the altar  
ready to be opened  
for god*<sup>12</sup>

Michaelson returns to the mystical understanding of Isaac as woman in man through his identification with the female aspects of *gevurah*. Michaelson dwells on the word “knew” (which in biblical language means to be intimate with, to have intercourse with) and suggests that Isaac knew in the most intimate way what it meant to be female, while playing the “feminine” role of submissive erotic partner—not to Abraham but to God. This connects to Michaelson’s own experience as a gay mystic who seeks out divine connection and sometimes experiences this connection as sexual. In another poem, Michaelson writes: “let me commence/the knowing/of knowing/the peeling back/of the garments/the gentlest undressing/of this.”<sup>13</sup>

Michaelson’s poem about Isaac conflates sexual surrender with femininity in a way that may be disturbing to feminists who have worked to undo that conflation. And, Michaelson can be said to be queering the narrative of the Akedah by noting the erotic undertones of that story for him as a gay man. Through engagement with Isaac as the sexually charged mysticism of the kabbalists depicts him, Michaelson comments on how the submissive erotic role feels feminine to him and changes his experience of his gender role. This poet reads the narrative of the binding of Isaac as erotic because of his experiences and identity as a queer Jew.

Ladin and Michaelson offer us opposing metaphors: a narrative of triumph (that in Ladin’s telling is not triumphant) and a narrative of surrender (that in Michaelson’s telling is self-affirming). Their midrash sheds a light on those stories that only queer

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Jay Michaelson, *another word for sky* (Lethe Press, 2007), p. 58-59.

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Jay Michaelson, “The Knowing,” in *Zeek Magazine* (January 2005); <http://www.jaymichaelson.net/20050101/>

midrashists could shed, and irrevocably expand the meaning of the text. In doing so, they begin to approach the third strategy of queer midrashists, which is queering revelation itself.

### **Queering Revelation**

Queer midrash takes its most radical stance in relationship to the sacred text when it shifts its relationship to the text itself. Traditional midrash may radically shift the meaning of the text, but it always takes the text as revelatory, even while claiming the right to interpret the text in ways that radically differ from the text's apparent meaning. Like some other contemporary midrash, queer midrash can take the traditional form of creative expansion of the text, while actually questioning the authority of the text. When queer midrashists take this route, they are reminding us that the experience of being queer, of standing in opposition to a traditional construction of sexual identity and/or gender identity, can change our relationship to the concept of revelation.

Jacob J. Staub is a rabbi and a professor at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is also a poet and midrashist, and teaches workshops in writing queer midrash. In his poem, "Golden Calf," Staub speaks with the voice of the Israelites who worship the calf, celebrating the calf not as a rebellion against God but as the throne of a liberating God: "Sing unto the One who smites the tyrant... With broken bodies of former slaves, we undulate, following the Source enthroned into a wilderness of promise."<sup>14</sup>

This is a profound departure from the way most interpreters construe the Golden Calf. Most Jewish commentators regard the worshipping of the Golden Calf as the central sin of the Israelites in the wilderness. Yet Staub turns away from this interpretation. Instead of criticizing the worshippers of the Calf, Staub criticizes Moses and the Levites because they do not accept the people's offering.

*And up over the ridge, the Levites wait, in formation,*

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Jacob J. Staub, Golden Calf, in *Zeek Magazine* (July 2005); [http://www.zeek.net/poetry\\_0507.shtml](http://www.zeek.net/poetry_0507.shtml)

*Swords on thighs, servants of the Lord, privileged  
To follow orders, to do as they are told....  
They have been instructed in the proper use of herbs and oils,  
In the dire consequences of disobedience, of initiative, of openheartedness...*

Staub shows us the Levites as rigid and authoritarian. Not only the Levites but Moses himself wait to condemn the worshippers:

*Moses claims that You love only him,  
that we were spared because he intervened,  
that You do not like our offering.  
Moses, who has never seen Your face—  
Not in the silent, steamy eyes of Tzipporah,  
from whom he stays cloistered,  
not in the bloody foreskins of his sons,  
whom he ignores in the name of his holy work.  
Moses, who doesn't touch.  
Moses, who doesn't dance.  
Moses, the bridegroom of blood.*

*Guide him please, Holy One of Compassion.  
We don't need another Pharaoh to lead us into freedom.  
Love him doubly, forgive him his wrath.  
He was taken as an infant from his mother.  
Only You know what befell the lad in the palace,  
but below, all we see is his sweltering rage.  
Otherwise, as You surely can foresee,  
generations will mistake  
fervent worship for idolatry.*

Staub locates Moses' anger at the worshippers of the calf in his repressed sexuality. Staub's poem, like Ramer's and Gold's, is built on earlier midrashim as well as on biblical text. In many rabbinic and medieval midrashim, Moses separates from his wife, abandoning her sexually, in order to be more available to intimate contact with God.<sup>15</sup> Staub's poem implies that Moses "stays cloistered" from his wife not in order to be close to God but in order not to know what he feels. Moses "doesn't touch"—just as those who are afraid of their own desire don't touch others. Here, Staub alludes indirectly to the Exodus narrative in which Moses commands the people who are preparing to receive Torah: "Do not go near a woman."<sup>16</sup> Staub's implication is that those in authority, when they fear their own desires, misrepresent and condemn the desires of others as evil.

Staub takes Moses to task for condemning the Golden Calf, claiming that "Moses has never seen Your face." Staub takes a stand against those who use the Bible to condemn same-sex love and all other forms of queerness, and asserts that such people cannot really know God. By depicting an isolated Moses who claims God only loves him, Staub is making Moses over as a stereotypical fundamentalist politician who spews homophobic hate in order to hide his own homoerotic feelings. When Staub writes "Only You know what befell the lad in the palace," he suggests that Moses may have been abused in some way that led to his rage and intolerance. Staub's poem offers the plea that "we don't need another Pharaoh to lead us into freedom." Those who repress their own desires will become enslavers, even if they claim the liberation narratives of the Bible as their own.

Staub invites his readers into what feminist Bible scholar Phyllis Tribble has called a "hermeneutic of suspicion." In Staub's reading, the Israelites' worship of the Golden Calf has a pure intent, but Moses cannot see it—just as, in Staub's own contemporary American society, queer people seek to love one another, and bigots misrepresent this love as false or hurtful. Staub borrows the narrative of the Torah to discuss one of the

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From classical rabbinic literature: Midrash Tanhuma, Tzav 13; Sifrei Numbers, 99; Sifrei Zuta 12:1

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Exodus 19:15

painful truths of the modern political landscape for LGBTQI people. Staub also asks readers of Exodus to rethink how generations of commentators have viewed the story of the Golden Calf: as a tale of depraved idolatrous revelers unreasonably rebelling against monotheistic structures put into place for their own good. Might not the Golden Calf have been an expression of piety, one the powers-that-be could not accept? Might the authority of the text itself be compromised by writers and interpreters who avoided queerness instead of embracing it? Staub's own queerness allows him to entertain this radical possibility. In rewriting the Torah narrative of the Golden Calf, Staub has shifted our relationship to idolatry, law, and the role of sacred text in religious life.

Noach Dzmura, a transgender Jewish activist and writer, is the editor of *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*. He writes a midrash on the story of Korach, the Levite who challenges Moses' authority and is swallowed by the earth as a punishment. In Dzmura's reading, Korach is, essentially, a community activist. Korach begins by telling us: "I love Moses, but he is having delusions of grandeur again."<sup>17</sup> In a similar vein, we can imagine some contemporary queer Jews telling us that they love the Torah, yet are frustrated by the level of authority the tradition has claimed over their lives.

In Dzmura's midrash, the duel between Korach and Moses, and the opening of the earth's mouth at Moses' command, is hype, created by a dictatorial theocracy and conveniently supported by a coincidental earthquake. Korach complains: "This is PR. This is spin. I'm being set up to take a fall and to establish the authority of Heaven." So too, contemporary queer Jews may resent their identity and sexuality being rejected by co-religionists who are willing to uphold the tradition at the expense of fellow human beings.

In Dzmura's midrash, Korach's tent does indeed fall into the earth, but with the help of the neighbors Korach hauls it out and moves to the margins of the neighborhood. Like Staub's poem, Dzmura's poem takes direct aim at the theopolitical machine that demands queer people's lives be sacrificed on the altar of religious authority. Dzmura's

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Noach Dzmura, "Parashat Korach: Modern Midrash: Korach Retold," part of the Torah Queeries project (June 27, 2008); <https://www.keshetonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Modern-Midrash-Korach-Retold.pdf>

midrash asserts that while queer folk may be living “along the margins,” they are nowhere near as intimidated by the opposition as some may wish to believe. They are part of revelation, and like generations of Jews before them, they are telling stories that have not yet been told.

Dzumura’s Korach concludes: “For now, we have priests. But I have a feeling it won’t be that way forever.” Here, Dzmura is not only reminding us that the rabbinate succeeded the priesthood, but also claiming the possibility of a new revelation, an authority structure that includes rather than dismisses the voices on the margins. Like Staub, Dzmura creates an audacious midrash in which the nature of revelation changes as the voices of the disempowered begin to be heard. Midrash becomes not only an addition to the Torah but a counterTorah, not only filling in gaps in the text but repairing the text itself.

## **Conclusion**

In his essay “Sex and Seder: A New Queer Midrash for Passover,” Amichai Lau-Lavie, founding director of Storahtelling Inc., spiritual leader of Lab/Shul, “iconoclastic mystic” and queer Jew, writes the following blessing: “May the knowledge that we are made in the image of the Divine assure us that deep within there is the promise of liberation, a way out for each one of us, an exodus out of the narrow places of bondage and separation and suffering and shame and loneliness into the vast land of freedom and togetherness and hope and promise and pride, today, each day, as in those ancient times.”<sup>18</sup> Lau-Lavie queers the narrative of the Exodus, seeing in it (as many generations, from the fleeing Jews of Spain to the escaping African-American slaves saw in it) the story of the liberation of his own people.

This is the function of midrash: for sacred text and lives lived in real time to touch one another. Queer midrash, a unique phenomenon in history, nevertheless participates in this universal desire for the mythic narrative to weave itself with the human experience. Queer Jews are finding their way into Judaism through all sorts of avenues; culture, ritual innovation, legal and political advocacy, community organizing. In

creating midrash, queer Jews are not only naming and liberating themselves but the past and the future. They are offering interpretive insights to an ancient text, and making their own lives part of that text, thereby making the same claim on revelation that Jews have always made. The midrashim they create will lay the ground for queer Jews to become not only an accepted part of the Jewish story, but a treasury of new perspectives. By committing to the interpretation of their tradition, queer Jews are finding new ways to make sacred text come alive.