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From the Gay Synagogue to the Queer Shtetl: Normativity, Innovation, and Utopian
Imagining in the Lived Religion of Queer and Transgender Jews

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Religious Studies

by

Sonia Jennifer Crasnow

June 2017

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Dedication

This work does not simply belong to me, but to all those who helped to bring it into being. With that in mind I dedicate it to my family: Sharon, Ellis, Sascha, Steph, Kit, and Max; my friends; the research participants who generously shared their stories and time with me; and to my spouse, and partner in all things, Kate.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

From the Gay Synagogue to the Queer Shtetl: Normativity, Innovation, and Utopian
Imagining in the Lived Religion of Queer and Transgender Jews

by

Sonia Jennifer Crasnow

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Religious Studies
University of California, Riverside, June 2017
Dr. Michael Alexander, Co-Chairperson
Dr. Jane Ward, Co-Chairperson

This dissertation is based on nearly two years of multi-sited ethnographic observations and seventy-two semi-structured interviews documenting the religious lives of queer and transgender Jews in Boston and Los Angeles. My primary analytic interest is in how LGBTQ Jews adapt their religious lives in response to the privileging of heterosexuality and cisgender (non-transgender) identity, or even homophobia/transphobia, in normative Judaism. I explore how queer and transgender Jews are assimilated, or not, into normative frameworks of Jewish law, theology, ritual/liturgy, and religious spaces. Previous ethnographic research on queer religious communities within the field of Religious Studies has sometimes given minimal attention to queer and transgender theory and to gender nonconforming and transgender participants; in contrast, my work asserts the central importance of transgender participants and queer/transgender theory to such projects. My first chapter focuses on the function of LGBTQ and/or Jewish organizations as well as synagogues in fostering

LGBTQ community and inclusion in Jewish spaces. The second chapter explores the interplay between Jewish and LGBTQ identity in politics and activism with regard to Israel and Palestine, a topic that can be polarizing in both LGBTQ and Jewish communities. The third and fourth chapters analyze the disparate ways actors within normative institutional Judaism, as well as transgender Jews, address inclusion. I consider a conversation amongst rabbis on inclusion for transgender converts as well as transgender-affirming rituals created by and for transgender Jews, arguing that institutional Judaism's normative framework, which values cisgender bodies and binary gender, may result in assimilating transgender Jews into normative Judaism, or more radically, ostracizing them. In contrast to this assimilative approach for incorporating transgender Jews, I map the ways transgender Jews have created affirmation for themselves within Judaism through innovating rituals that engage Jewish tradition to celebrate transgender identities and lives.

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Introduction

Undeniably a number of momentous advancements have been made for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals within American Judaism in the last forty-five years. The world's first LGBTQ synagogue, Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC) in Los Angeles, was founded independently in 1972.¹ Soon after, BCC became officially affiliated with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, now known as the Union for Reform Judaism.² Openly lesbian and gay rabbis have been permitted to undergo ordination within Reconstructionist and Reform Judaism since the 1980s, and within Conservative Judaism since 2006. Elliot Kukla, the first out transgender rabbi, was also ordained in 2006. Most recently, a 2014 survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute concluded that 77% of American Jews support legalizing same-sex marriage.³ However, what these examples occlude is the reality that many LGBTQ Jews remain alienated by Jewish institutions that are indifferent or merely tolerant toward LGBTQ Jews rather than inclusive or affirming. As Caryn Aviv, Gregg Drinkwater, and David Shneer have reported, even Jewish institutions that believe themselves to be inclusive are frequently seen as less so by LGBTQ Jews.⁴ I argue that part of what creates

¹ BCC refers to itself as the first LGBTQ synagogue, but by some accounts Congregation Beit Simchat Torah (CBST) in New York started virtually simultaneously.

² For a more complete history of BCC's, visit their website: <http://www.bcc-la.org/about/history/>

³ Robert Jones, "Attitudes on Same-sex Marriage by Religious Affiliation and Denominational Family," *PRRI*, available from <https://www.prii.org/spotlight/attitudes-on-same-sex-marriage-by-religious-affiliation-and-denominational-family/>, accessed May 3, 2017.

⁴ Caryn Aviv, Gregg Drinkwater, and David Shneer. "We Are You: An Exploration of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Colorado's Jewish Community" (Denver: Mosaic: The National Jewish Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity, 2006), 2.

this disparity in perception is that institutional efforts toward “inclusion” often do not meet LGBTQ Jews on their own terms but rather aim to assimilate them into normative, mainstream Judaism. Ironically, instead of growing the numbers of LGBTQ Jews, this approach may alienate them from institutional Judaism.

This work reflects ethnographic research conducted between 2013-2016, which documented the religious lives of my participants: LGBTQ Jews in Boston and Los Angeles. Fieldwork for this project included observations and seventy-one semi-structured interviews with research participants. I also attended a wide range of events including services at LGBTQ and mainstream synagogues, Shabbat dinners, meetings of LGBTQ and/or Jewish organizations, a visit to an egalitarian *mikveh* (Jewish ritual bath), a discussion amongst rabbis on transgender inclusion normally closed to the public, and other miscellaneous community events. Extant ethnographic projects on LGBTQ religious individuals have often focused on congregations and congregants; however, this study follows individuals and communities, taking a “lived religions” approach in order to understand the everyday religious lives of participants outside of institutions as well as within them.

The first chapter of this work examines the ways in which Judaism and Jewish organizations foster LGBTQ Jewish community, and support LGBTQ inclusion. I consider two LGBTQ Jewish organizations: Keshet (“rainbow” in Hebrew) in Boston and JQ International (frequently referred to as JQ) in Los Angeles, both of which offer inclusion consultation services to mainstream synagogues, Jewish schools, and camps, aiming to transform these institutions into inclusive environments for LGBTQ people.

These organizations also hold community events, such as Friday night Shabbat dinners and holiday parties, aimed at creating and growing LGBTQ Jewish community in their respective urban centers. While these organizations are undeniably doing important work to increase inclusion, in my research I witnessed tensions that arose for gender nonconforming and transgender Jews engaged with them. Some expressed feeling they were tokenized or exploited by these institutions. Transgender Jews cited a lack of transgender leadership, the absence of services and outreach geared towards transgender people, and transphobia on behalf of staff and other organizational participants as driving them away.

In the second chapter I explore the interplay between Jewish and LGBTQ identity in politics and activism related to Israel/Palestine. The political situation in Israel/Palestine is a topic that can be polarizing in both LGBTQ and Jewish communities. For a variety of complex reasons the LGBTQ community is not unified regarding Israel; some denounce Israel as a perpetrator of human rights violations and racist and colonialist policies, while others argue its record on LGBTQ rights warrants support. However, there is a strain of Palestine-solidarity activism that finds its roots in the LGBTQ community. In my research, I discovered a large LGBTQ presence within Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), an activist organization that works in solidarity with marginalized individuals and groups in Palestine and Israel. One of their major ongoing projects is to encourage the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctioning (BDS) of Israeli companies that they believe to be profiting from the occupation of Palestine. JVP's growing numbers also reflect that Jews (both LGBTQ and not) are increasingly divided

over Israel. In this chapter I explore the diversity of opinions within LGBTQ Jewish community regarding Israel. I consider the complex factors that participants report as informing their politics, including ties to Israel and/or Palestine, queer politics, and Jewish values. I also consider the significance of JVP's Jewish affiliation for participants. Participants commonly cited two reasons for their specific involvement with a Jewish activist organization addressing Israel-Palestine: the diminished potential for anti-Semitic rhetoric at protests and events, and the interweaving of Judaism and activism. JVP makes Judaism central to its activism, for example, at an event protesting Israel's planned expulsion of Bedouin people and the demolition of their homes, JVP members constructed a sukkah outside of the Israeli Consulate. A sukkah is a shelter that is designed to be impermanent, which is associated with the Jewish holiday, Sukkot. This sukkah was not only intended to be a timely marker of the holiday, but also to provide Jews with a point of connection to the Bedouin, whose homes are impermanent dwellings.

In the third and fourth chapters I argue that institutional Judaism and transgender Jews take different approaches towards inclusion. Mainstream Jewish institutions often aim to assimilate transgender Jews, eliding the difference of the transgender "other" in order to integrate them into normative Judaism. In contrast, some transgender Jews are more interested in finding affirmation of transgender identity, desiring to be fully recognized and celebrated *as* transgender. In order to explore how approaches of assimilation and affirmation are applied to transgender Jews I consider two examples. The first is a discussion I observed amongst rabbis gathered to address inclusion for

transgender converts to Judaism. Because Judaism has traditionally dictated ritual and religious requirements along normative lines of sexuality and gender, it is unclear whether gendered components of conversion should be required for transgender converts. However, in debating which components to require most of the rabbis at the meeting were inclined to follow Jewish tradition as closely as possible, even when it conflicted with the desires of transgender people. In the second example, and final chapter, I consider rituals for gender transition innovated by transgender Jews. Through innovated Jewish ritual, liturgy, and hermeneutics, transgender Jews access the affirmation that normative Judaism denies them. These rituals for gender transition highlight that assimilation is not the only option for transgender Jews, and assert the potential for transgender affirmation within Judaism.

Theory

The framework of “lived religions” is synonymous with scholars of religion such as Robert Orsi, Nancy Tatom Ammerman, and David D. Hall. “Lived religion” refers to “religious practice and imagination in ongoing, dynamic relation with the realities and structures of everyday life in particular times and places.”⁵ In *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, Orsi laments that the only term available for discussing religion as people practice it is “popular religion.”⁶ As Orsi suggests, one of the values of a lived religions approach is that it avoids thinking of religion in a binary way, as either popular (represented by the practices and beliefs of

⁵ Orsi, Robert, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) xiii.

⁶ Ibid.

everyday people) or official (represented by the practices and beliefs of established religious officials). Popular religion, or religion as it is practiced by lay people, may be practiced in ways that are personally meaningful, but which diverge from the normative religious establishment. Official religion is religion as it is dictated/practiced by members of the religious establishment: priests, rabbis, imams, or other keepers of esoteric and “authentic” knowledge about religion and how it should be practiced. These categories are insufficient, however, for capturing the complex reality of religion and spirituality, which is expressed in diverse ways that might be called both popular and official amongst lay people, as well as religious officials.

Instead of studying religion as either popular or elite, a lived religions approach allows for the flexible reality of how people practice their religions, and attempts to avoid passing judgment on the practices themselves based on their resemblance to, or divergence from, normative religious practice. As David D. Hall says, “Where lived religion goes its own way is in breaking with the distinction between high and low that seems inevitably to recur in studies of popular religion.”⁷ Some religious actors engage in normative or traditional religious practice, others practice an individualized religiosity, or one that incorporates elements from multiple religions, and many engage with both popular and official religious practices. A lived religions methodology acknowledges participants’ diverse religious and spiritual beliefs, which defy classification as either popular or official, and instead documents participants’ religious lives without assigning

⁷ Hall, David D. “Introduction,” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*. Ed. David D. Hall, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) ix.

value to their beliefs and actions, or implying the superiority of either popular or official religiosity. Additionally, lived religion aims for a more holistic view of individuals' religious identities, taking seriously that "religious practices and understandings have meaning only in relation to other cultural forms and in relation to the life experiences and actual circumstances of the people using them."⁸ Approaching research participants in this way decenters the potentially authoritative role of the ethnographer, acknowledging the particular value that participants bring to ethnographic research as interpreters of their own lives.

Nancy Tatom Ammerman has also demonstrated the ways that a lived religions approach offers benefits for the scholarly understanding of religions by taking seriously that individuals' religious lives are not limited to places of worship or other expressly religious contexts or events.⁹ For this project I was interested in how participants' queer and transgender Jewish identities shape and are shaped by their lives broadly, both within and outside of religious settings. Many participants were (or became) my friends, acquaintances, and neighbors, which meant that my observations and conversations with them covered a variety of contexts and were not limited to explicitly religious sites or events.¹⁰ In addition to these observations and conversations with participants, my research was also informed by data gathered from texts of first-person accounts about the

⁸ Orsi, Robert, xix-xx.

⁹ Ammerman, Nancy Tatom, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 4-6.

¹⁰ This is particularly true for participants in Jamaica Plain, where I lived while conducting my Boston area research.

experiences and lives of queer and transgender Jews.¹¹ These texts cover a variety of topics including: how queer Jewish identity is experienced, being an LGBTQ (Orthodox) rabbi, family and raising children as LGBTQ Jews, new traditions and rituals created by LGBTQ Jews, difficult encounters with binary gender in Judaism and Jewish spaces, queer Jewish protest and politics, queer Jewish education, reflections on same-sex marriage or coupling ceremonies, engagements with queer Jewish culture, and explorations of gay/lesbian Israelis encounters with Zionism.

In this work, my primary analytic interest has been how mainstream institutional Judaism, as well as LGBTQ Jews, negotiate issues surrounding LGBTQ inclusion. I argue that institutional Judaism's attempts at inclusion often take an assimilationist approach towards LGBTQ Jews, asking how LGBTQ people can be fit into the traditional Jewish framework that privileges monogamous heterosexual coupling (often specifically with other Jews), marriage, binary gender, family, procreation, and the like. My work is guided by extant scholarship on religious and LGBTQ identity, as well as on feminist approaches to religion. Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* and Rebecca Alpert's *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition* both provide frameworks for exploring how those who are "outsiders" from the perspective of traditional Judaism negotiate their place in Judaism and transform tradition. Plaskow and Alpert examine how women and lesbians (respectively) have been excluded from traditional Judaism, or presented as

¹¹ These texts include: *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, *Queer Jews*, *Keep Your Wives Away from Them*, *Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey Between Genders*, *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*, and others.

figures to be reviled. These authors consider how texts, as well as Jewish law and dominant interpretations of these texts, must be troubled because of the patriarchal and heterosexist norms present within traditional Judaism. Additionally, these authors emphasize the importance of ritual that does not simply add women and lesbians to Judaism “and stir,” but that address the specific views and needs of women and lesbians and affirms these identities within Judaism. I argue that LGBTQ Jews negotiate mainstream Judaism strategically, in part by engaging the above strategies, adapting their religious lives in response to the privileging of heterosexuality and cisgender (i.e., non-transgender) identity, or even homophobia/transphobia. These negotiations include working toward LGBTQ inclusion in religious and spiritual communities; reinterpreting scripture, practices, and beliefs that are usually interpreted as privileging heterosexuality/cisgender identity in order to render them inoffensive or even affirming; and the creation of new traditions that honor LGBTQ Jews.

While past ethnographic scholarship on LGBTQ religious communities has often explored how individuals negotiate their “conflicting” LGBTQ and religious identities, many of my participants described these identities as mutually reinforcing and inextricably intertwined. Though they did not experience internal conflict regarding their identities, issues arose for these participants in confronting elements of normative institutional Judaism that were not fully inclusive or affirming of their LGBTQ identities. Following Melissa Wilcox, I argue that the alienation experienced by LGBTQ people in religious institutions may cause them to be more inclined than their non-LGBTQ peers to use religious individualism, or the personalization of religious belief and practice,

strategically.¹² While a move toward individualism has broadly characterized the cultural landscape of the U.S. for some time, the scholarship in Religious Studies that informs my engagement with individualism particularly focuses on individualism's dramatic rise in the U.S. from the 1950s onward. Robert Bellah, et al.'s *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* encapsulates individualism in its documenting of the now well-known, pseudonymous Sheila Larson, a research participant who describes her faith as "Sheilaism."¹³ Presumably Sheila names it as such because she sees her practice as individual to her, and unlike any prescribed or official religious practice she is familiar with. While many of my participants also had individualized elements of their religious practice, they overwhelmingly identified as Jewish even when their relationship to official religion (scripture, synagogue, etc.) was tenuous at best. This phenomenon may be related to the fact that Judaism contains multitudes in terms of officially authorized practice, encapsulated by its various denominations (Reconstructionist, Renewal, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Ultra-Orthodox), as well as in its allowance for Jewish identity outside of denominations (non-denominational, post-denominational). Additionally, it may also be relevant that cultural/secular Jewish identity is widely accepted and commonly held among American

¹² Wilcox, Melissa. "When Sheila's a Lesbian: Religious Individualism among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians," *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (Winter, 2002), 511-512.

¹³ Bellah, Robert N., et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 221.

Jews.¹⁴ Due to the popularity of cultural/secular Judaism, it is possible that deviations from normative Jewish religious practice may not present the same challenge to identifying as Jewish regardless of what an individual's practice entails. This cultural Jewish identity also gives significant power to one's social connections – for some participants the fact that they spent much of their time socializing in a community of Jews, whether through organizations or informal Jewish community, also supported an understanding of themselves as Jewish. Perhaps because of the reasons above, many participants appeared to feel ownership over their Jewish identities such that individualized or personalized practice did not present a challenge in their minds to this identity. Jewish identity functioned as a malleable and broadly inclusive identity for participants, allowing personalized religious and spiritual practice and nonnormative ritual, liturgical, and theological innovations to remain solidly fixed within Jewish identity for many participants.

The personalization of religious belief and practice that Sheila represents, not in terms of a type of religious profile, but rather as a strategy for engaging with religious belief and practice, may be especially relevant for LGBTQ religious individuals. As Wilcox has suggested, “For those whose identities collide sharply with official religious doctrine, the increased flexibility of individual belief and practice, along with the growth

¹⁴ According to the 2013 PEW Research Center survey on Jewish Americans, 62% of respondents said being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture. “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” *PEW Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, available from <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>, accessed May 13, 2017.

of congregational, denominational, and religious shopping and switching, can be of critical importance.”¹⁵ Moreover, for LGBTQ religious individuals, religious individualism and innovation may provide individuals with a way to circumvent or lessen the effects of harmful anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and doctrine. For this reason, it might seem as though individualism and innovation are primarily useful for religiously traditional individuals, however, the interest among participants’ in individualized and innovated religious practice spanned religious affiliations (Reform, Unaffiliated, Orthodox, etc.). In fact, some religiously traditional (and other) participants expressed being less interested in innovation because of its perceived departure from traditional Judaism. Among those who are interested in innovation, for some individualized and innovated practice makes engaging with Judaism possible, for others it enriches their experience of Judaism to have LGBTQ identity acknowledged and honored within it. The relationship between innovation and individualism, as well as the use of individualism as a strategy by LGBTQ Jews make studies on LGBTQ religious individuals, such as this one, important for what they add to scholarship on religious individualism. In selecting from traditional religious elements, reinterpreting tradition, and proposing liturgy, ritual, and theologies that are inoffensive or affirming, LGBTQ Jews can mitigate the inclusion gap that religious institutions overlook or ignore and engage with religion in a way that is personally meaningful.

¹⁵ Wilcox, Melissa. “When Sheila’s a Lesbian: Religious Individualism among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians,” *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (Winter, 2002), 511.

Method

In the Fall of 2011 I traveled to Israel to study at Hebrew University in Jerusalem as part of my PhD work focused on American Judaism. During my time at Hebrew University I took courses on Israel, Judaism, and Hebrew. The trip came at an unfortunate time, since I had only recently come out (first as gay, and soon after as queer) only about a year before, and I was three months into my first romantic partnership since coming out.¹⁶ I decided that the best way to make the trip, and the long-distance relationship, more tolerable was to conduct research while in Israel on my newfound topic of interest: the intersection of Jewish and queer identity. I conducted Google searches that led me to a trip co-organized by Keshet and A Wider Bridge.¹⁷ Though the trip was largely comprised of folks living in the U.S. and travelling to Israel to visit, there was one other student who was currently living in Israel who also joined the trip – after his ordination that person would become Rabbi Rosenblum. He was one of the first participants I met, and in our conversations he introduced me to his vibrant LGBTQ Jewish community in Jamaica Plain, Boston. One of the most amusing parts about our encounter is that from my perspective it was not our first, as I confessed to him, I had seen him before, at the *shuk* (open air market). He and a woman I would later learn was his roommate were looking through the crates of food and I noticed him precisely because of his gender. I tried not to stare, but I wanted desperately to talk to him – to connect with another queer person in Jerusalem’s unfriendly environment. I did not

¹⁶ In addition to identifying as queer I now also identify as a non-binary trans person.

¹⁷ A Wider Bridge is a San Francisco based organization focused on connecting LGBTQ people in the U.S. with Israel.

manage to overcome my shyness so instead I wandered a radius around the two of them and stole glances in their direction until, regretfully, giving up and moving on. A few weeks later when I joined the Keshet/A Wider Bridge Trip I was grateful for the second chance to meet him. He looked the same as he had in the *shuk*. He had short light brown hair pushed forward, coming to a sort of loose point at the peak of his forehead. On the crown of his head sat a kippah clipped to his hair. He had light skin, brown eyes, a somewhat stocky build, and a face with no visible hair on it. As I would come to know over years of friendship his wardrobe consists of button downs, polo shirts, khakis, jeans, slacks, and shorts that come to just above his knees. Both his dress and his straightforward manner give away in somewhat stereotypical fashion that he is from the Northeast. Rabbi Rosenblum and I had a lot that connected us during our time in Israel: we both were female assigned at birth, gender nonconforming queers living in Jerusalem and trying to survive. For that reason, and because we enjoy each other's company, Rabbi Rosenblum and I became friends. This trip also introduced me to the work of Keshet, and to the members of the Keshet staff who became participants in this research project.

At the start of this research project I had it approved by the International Review Board, and I have continued to renew the approval with IRB as required annually. I recruited participants for this research in a variety of ways. As mentioned above, I met my first participants in Israel. The first two people to introduce me to their community in Jamaica Plain (JP), Boston were Rabbi Rosenblum and Alexandra. Rabbi Rosenblum was a rabbinical student in Boston at the time while Alexandra was a staff member at Keshet. I met both of them on the A Wider Bridge/Keshet Israel trip. They described JP as

housing what they called the “quetl” or queer shtetl. This name refers to a few blocks in JP where a high density of queer Jews live. Although in reality many participants lived beyond this area, it is undeniable that Jamaica Plain is home to a significant queer and transgender Jewish population. I conducted interviews with 46 participants in the Boston area, and at least 30 of them lived in Jamaica Plain at the time, with another three participants saying they had previously lived there or planned to move there. Those who did not live in JP described picking their neighborhoods because of affordability or proximity to work, school, and/or their synagogue. Almost everyone I interviewed was a part of the same expanded social network in JP. My first connections came through the snowball effect of being introduced to many people in the community as a friend and graduate student conducting research on queer and transgender Jews. Most people I asked for an interview agreed. I can think of only five people across Los Angeles and Boston who I asked for an interview who declined or ignored the request. The willingness of individuals in Jamaica Plain to participate was likely related both to the fact that I was introduced to the community as a friend of Alexandra and Rabbi Rosenblum’s and as a fellow queer Jew, in addition to being a researcher working on a PhD. My insider status as someone who was vouched for by members of the community who were already trusted within the community, as well as my personal queer Jewish identity likely helped participants to feel comfortable being a part of the project. The community in Jamaica Plain is also largely academic, many of the individuals I interviewed were, or had been, students and themselves had conducted research projects, and a belief among many participants in the value of research as well as in the import of projects on queer and trans

Jews also made participants willing to speak with me.¹⁸ In addition to relying on connections through participants I met in person I also approached staff at Keshet and the organizer of Am Tikva (the LGBTQ synagogue in Boston) directly, and used social media to advertise on the Facebook groups for Keshet and Am Tikva.

In contrast, in Los Angeles while I still had insider status as a queer/trans Jew, I did not have already established connections on the ground within the queer and trans Jewish community. I conducted interviews with 26 participants in Los Angeles, and I utilized a variety of methods to contact participants: I joined a Los Angeles based LGBTQ Jewish Meetup.com group and messaged individuals in that group asking for interviews; I attended services at IKAR and Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC) and talked to people I met there; I asked clergy at BCC and staff at JQ for interviews, and to distribute my call for interviews; I also interviewed a clergy member at IKAR; and I posted my call for interviews on Facebook groups for Queer members of IKAR and a Los Angeles Queer Jewish group. While I did not have the same connections to the community in Los Angeles I did get some introductions to members of the queer and trans Jewish community in Los Angeles through Rabbi Rosenblum, who coincidentally also moved to L.A. during my research project to take a job in the area. Once I had initial interviews and connections in the L.A. area, I garnered additional interviews through connections these interviewees provided.

¹⁸ At the conclusion of many interviews, interviewees commented on the necessity or import of a contemporary research project on queer and trans Jews.

I want to conclude with a note on naming. Assigning a name to an individual is a challenging task because there is much to consider. While anonymity is common practice in ethnographic projects in order to protect those who participate in the research, changing names and identifying information might also run the risk of erasing the particularities of participants' identities. As Melissa Wilcox has suggested, this danger is perhaps all the more present when working with queer and transgender participants, "whose identities are often quite consciously negotiated, and the level of their visibility carefully chosen and managed."¹⁹ Though I largely adhered to normative standards for assigning pseudonyms in social scientific work, choosing pseudonyms for all participants except for public figures, I did my utmost to choose names that honored each participant's heritage, ethnicity, and race, especially as these elements of their identities are reflected in their names. Additionally, in working with queer and trans participants I was confronted with challenges related to those Wilcox raises. I was in the unenviable position of selecting names for trans folks who no longer use their birth names, and had selected their names for themselves. In these cases I attempted to honor participants' gender identities, as well as other identities they wanted these names to convey. For example, some trans participants in Jamaica Plain chose Hebrew names that reflected the joining of their queer/trans and Jewish identities. I tried to reflect these choices in my own. In the case of Rabbi Rosenblum, I omitted a first name altogether; this is because I could not come to a solution I was comfortable with for representing his full name while

¹⁹ Wilcox, Melissa. *Queer Women and Religious Individualism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 224.

also maintaining his anonymity. While I know that my selections of pseudonyms could not be completely effective for capturing what is communicated in the names of each participant, it is my hope and intention that nonetheless participants' identities and personhoods are clearly and accurately represented in what I have recorded and presented in this work.

Chapter 1

Outsiders & Insiders: LGBTQ/Jewish Organizations, Inclusion, and Community Building

Contemporary American Judaism is in flux, in part because of growing numbers of Jews who identify as transgender and gender variant, as well as a larger societal shift towards increased legal and social inclusion for LGBTQ people, both of which have increased awareness about LGBTQ inclusion in many Jewish communities. Because LGBTQ inclusion has become virtually synonymous with liberal politics, and because liberal Jewish communities tend to be more flexible in their interpretations of Jewish tradition, Reform, Reconstructionist, and some Conservative synagogues have especially taken on this cause.

Reform Judaism has LGBTQ congregations within it, its synagogues are open to LGBTQ Jews, it ordains LGBTQ rabbis, and many of its rabbis perform LGBTQ marriage ceremonies. In 1990 the Union for Reform Judaism declared lesbian and gay Jews to be equal members of the religious community, and Reform Judaism's principal body the Central Conference for American Rabbis (CCAR) endorsed allowing lesbian and gay Jews to be a part of the rabbinate. The CCAR approved same-sex civil marriage in 1996, and religious marriage ceremonies in 1998. The CCAR first addressed transgender Jews in 1978, when they declared that those who had undergone "sex reassignment surgery" could be married according to Jewish tradition. In 2003, the Union

for Reform Judaism retroactively applied its policy on gays and lesbians to include transgender and bisexual Jews.²⁰

Conservative Judaism has a wider variety of stances represented within it on each of these issues. In 2006 Conservative Judaism voted to allow the ordination of gay rabbis and the celebration of same-sex commitment ceremonies, however, three official opinions (one for and two against) were handed down at this time allowing individual congregations to decide their positions independently.²¹ A 2003 responsum (or reply/ruling by a rabbi or scholar of Judaism to an inquiry into matters of Jewish law) approved by the governing rabbinic body of the Conservative movement continues to shape current discussions about the place of transgender Jews. The responsum concluded, “that individuals who have undergone full SRS [sexual reassignment surgery] and whose sex reassignment has been recognized by civil authorities are considered to have changed their sex status according to Jewish law.”²² This ruling, which gives recognition to trans people once they have surgically transitioned, has earned both praise and critique. The ruling affirms the gender determination of some trans Jews, but denies it to the many

²⁰ “Resolution on the Rights of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People,” *Union for Reform Judaism*, available from <https://www.urj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/resolution-rights-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-people>, accessed May 7, 2017.

²¹ Rabbis Elliot N. Dorff, Daniel S. Nevins, & Avram I. Reisner, “Homosexuality, Human Dignity, & Halakhah: A Combined Responsum for the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards,” available from http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/20052010/dorff_nevins_reisner_dignity.pdf, accessed May 7, 2017. This was approved by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) on December 6, 2006.

²² Noach Dzmura, *Balancing on the Mechtza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 12.

who, for various reasons, cannot or choose not to undergo surgery. At least one transgender rabbi is currently at work on a new responsum because she and many other trans Jews do not feel the extant responsa appropriately address the issue.

Orthodox Judaism generally condemns homosexuality as a result of dominant interpretations of Leviticus 18:22: “thou shall not lie with mankind as with womankind; it is an abomination.”²³ However, there is some range of opinion amongst individual rabbis. For example, a homosexual congregant who asks his Orthodox rabbi for advice about his homosexuality may not receive admonishment but simply the advice to refrain from anal sex. Other rabbis may view homosexuality negatively but believe that homosexuals are “afflicted” or “ill” and thus deserving of compassion. Still others condemn both homosexuality and homosexuals. Mainstream Orthodox Judaism also interprets Jewish law to forbid changing one’s sex because it is prohibited to render oneself sterile or to surgically alter one’s genitals. Traditional interpretations of biblical passages are understood to reinforce this stance. Leviticus 22:24 states, “that which is mauled or crushed or torn or cut you shall not offer unto the Lord; nor should you do this in your land.” Deuteronomy 2:5 is traditionally interpreted to prohibit wearing clothing designated for the “opposite” gender. Although exceptions to laws such as this one are sometimes permissible in cases where a person’s life is in danger, as might be the case for someone struggling with gender dysphoria, Orthodox rabbis generally do not apply

²³ Some have argued that *to'evah*, which is frequently translated as “abomination,” might rather be understood as “taboo,” or a non-Israelite practice.

this exception in a way that allows for transition; instead “other options” for saving the person’s life would be utilized, although these options are not described.²⁴

The mainstream Orthodox view of transsexuality and transgender identity views both as “medical and psychological illnesses.”²⁵ However, Beth Orens, an Orthodox transgender woman, explains that – despite the mainstream Orthodox position – she is aware of claims

from *frum* trans men and trans women that permission to undergo SRS (in the case of a specific trans woman), or to receive hormone treatment without undergoing SRS (in the case of a specific FTM) was granted by individual rabbis; yet no rabbi has yet publicly acknowledged that such a decision (in favor of transsexual or transgender expression and in support of the new sex and gender) has been made.²⁶

The majority of Orthodox rabbis conclude that regardless of whether transition is done with legal approval or not the individual should still be considered the gender they were assigned at birth. There exists one Orthodox minority decision asserting that trans people who have undergone gender-affirming surgery may be considered their preferred gender. Orens considers this position, put forth by Rabbi Yehuda Waldenberg, and summarizes its implications as follows: “a change of sex that results in the individual appearing mostly to be a new gender actually changes that individual’s gender in the eyes of Jewish law. And... this is obvious enough that it can end a marriage without either death or divorce, which is an extreme position in Jewish law.”²⁷ While this minority response is

²⁴ Beth Orens, “Judaism and Gender Issues,” *Balancing on the Mechitza*, ed. Noach Dzmura, (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 224.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Orens, “Judaism and Gender Issues,” 225.

²⁷ Orens, “Judaism and Gender Issues,” 226

radical in its affirmation of trans people's gender identities within traditional Judaism, it is limited in that it applies only to transsexuals who have undergone surgery, and in that it does not indicate the permissibility of hormone therapy or surgery.

While Orens is concerned with finding the potential in Rabbi Waldenberg's responsum it is worth noting that his response situates the discussion of the transgender person in the traditional patriarchal and heterosexist framework of Orthodox Judaism. He states that a man who has transitioned does not need a writ of divorce because "she is truly a man."²⁸ In cases where a woman has transitioned, her marriage is nullified because "the wife of a woman is not a recognized status in Jewish law."²⁹ In the first case the man is exempt from needing the writ of divorce because men, unlike women, do not need a writ of divorce. Thus, the patriarchal structure of traditional Judaism allows for the exemption. In the second case the woman is exempt from needing a writ due to the lack of recognition for same-gender relationships. Thus, the heterosexist structure of traditional Judaism allows for the exemption. So while this response provides recognition on the part of Orthodox Judaism for some trans people who choose to, or are able to, undergo gender-affirming surgery, it is also worth noting that these exemptions only allow transgender inclusion through the reification of patriarchy and heterosexism respectively.

Orens concludes by comparing Rabbi Waldenberg's assessment of trans Jews to his consideration of abortion. In the case of abortion he treats psychological trauma as a

²⁸ Rabbi Waldenberg cited in Beth Orens, "Judaism and Gender Issues," 226.

²⁹ Orens, "Judaism and Gender Issues," 226.

danger with the potential to make abortion permissible even in the absence of a physical threat. Orens suggests that in light of his ruling on abortion “and in light of the terribly high rate of clinical depression and/or suicide among transsexuals, a case might be made for permitting hormone therapy and surgery in certain cases.”³⁰ This seems especially possible given recent shifts within Orthodoxy away from the promotion of “conversion therapy.” These shifts have been fueled by evidence of the psychological harm of such treatments. I discuss this in greater detail in the following section on institutional Judaism.

Synagogues and organizations devoted to the religious and social needs of LGBTQ Jews have also sprung up in response to the growing need for these services. Keshet, the most prominent national LGBT Jewish organization, was founded by Idit Klein in Jamaica Plain, Boston in 1996. Keshet aims to instruct Jewish institutions, synagogues, and schools on how to include and affirm LGBTQ Jews. Keshet also fosters LGBTQ Jewish community, hosting religious, cultural, and social events. Religious events supported by Keshet may mark traditional elements of Jewish life like Shabbat or Jewish holidays, or they may reflect LGBTQ Jewish ritual innovation. Several participants described attending or participating in a naming ritual hosted by Keshet. In a Shabbat morning service led by community members, people in the community were able to take on new Hebrew names and have them affirmed in their community. According to Alexandra, who worked for Keshet at the time of our interview, many of those participating in the ritual were trans or genderqueer, while a few were people taking on

³⁰ Orens, “Judaism and Gender Issues,” 228.

Hebrew names as converts to Judaism. Alexandra described the service to me as follows, “that service was really queer, we had some explicitly queer readings and D’var Torah [a talk based on the weekly Torah portion] that was offered but one of the things that made it really awesome was a shift in the ritual... [the ritual] generally involves being called to the Torah first by your old Hebrew name... we just took [that] part out.”³¹ Since using a trans person’s birth name or old name is considered inappropriate, hurtful, or even transphobic (it is sometimes called “deadnaming” in queer/trans community), it was important to remove this component of the ritual in order to ensure trans people felt comfortable accessing it.

Keshet also makes efforts to welcome all Jews regardless of what their Jewish religious or secular identity looks like. Similarly, Keshet fosters a community both for those who grew up thinking being Jewish and LGBTQ was an impossible contradiction and for those who never questioned that these identities could exist and flourish in tandem. Alexandra also shared that in her work with Jewish schools, it can be strategic to appeal first, not to the necessity of providing compassion and understanding for the LGBTQ person, but instead engaging Jewish community from the perspective of their Jewish values and ethics. She said she begins by asking schools what their core values are in order to encourage their reflection on how they as an institution make choices broadly, before drilling down to how these Jewish values should influence issues like LGBTQ inclusion. In other words, part of the power of an organization like Keshet in changing

³¹ Alexandra, interview by author, 29 November 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

the stances of Jewish communities on LGBTQ inclusion is that Keshet is able to engage Jewish institutions from the shared starting point of Jewish identity, ethics, and values. For example, Keshet asks Jewish schools to consider how LGBTQ Jewish students challenge the school's sense of halakah (Jewish law) and Jewish practice, and then to consider how much flexibility they may have on these issues. In this way Keshet takes the Jewish commitments of these institutions seriously, but also asks them to question and evaluate the ethical foundations of such commitments.

Whether a positive or negative assessment, some participants labeled Keshet more of a social organization than a religious one. While Keshet hosts events that may be rooted within a Jewish context, it was perceived by many to largely figure social interaction and community building. One of the challenges Keshet was addressing during my time in Boston was the question of how to continue to remain relevant as a social entity in Boston. Many of the participants I spoke with had found Keshet events to be useful for community building in the past but now that they had established communities, friend groups, and partnerships, they were no longer interested in attending events. Some even speculated that a kind of social drain had taken place in Keshet as those who were more socially adept utilized Keshet events to connect to friends and build social networks outside of Jewish organizations and institutions, subsequently abandoning Keshet.

While many of my participants in Boston participated in religious communities, these communities were more often fluid than rooted in specific institutions or organizations. Broadly speaking, common characteristics in the religious lives of Boston participants were: attendance at Shabbat dinners with members of friend groups, informal

Torah study, community prayer groups, occasional attendance at events held by Jewish organizations (Moishe Kavod House, Workmen's Circle, etc.) and services at the neighborhood synagogue, which was popular in part simply because the rabbi was generally liberal-minded and it was local, but also because services often featured LGBTQ Jewish rabbinical students.

JQ (sometimes referred to as JQ International) in Los Angeles, which was started by Asher Gellis in 2005, similarly devotes its energies to community building, social events, education, and religious gatherings such as Shabbat services. JQ sees its values as rooted in Judaism, and the organization transcends denominations as part of its effort to be as inclusive as possible. It also aims to include people from multiple faith backgrounds. One of the events JQ has held is a Muslim Shabbat for Iftar. This event brings Jews and Muslims, both LGBTQ and not, together for an interfaith celebration. In this way JQ uses the term "ally" to refer both to straight and cisgender people and also non-Jews. In terms of the type of religious observance reflected in the organization, there are efforts to diversify. JQ also recognizes that many of those in their target audience have had experiences in Jewish community that have left them feeling severely disenfranchised, and a portion identify as agnostic or atheist as a result. The organization also takes into account what needs their constituents have that might better be met elsewhere, since Los Angeles has two LGBTQ oriented synagogues, and a handful of others that are LGBTQ-friendly. For this reason JQ partners with synagogues in order to hold Shabbats and other services, but they do not typically hold such official organizational events alone. However, JQ does support ritual as it might otherwise take

place in the home, so it has hosted community Shabbat services in volunteers' homes. According to JQ staff, their approach to Judaism comes from a place of diverse Jewish concepts including faith, culture, politics, values, and social action. The JQ staff themselves represent diversity within Jewish practice; some do not belong to synagogues, others are involved with Beth Chayim Chadashim (an LGBTQ synagogue in L.A.). JQ also runs a Warmline, which is a volunteer-run phone line devoted primarily to serving LGBTQ Jews who have questions or need support. The director of the Warmline is Rachel Bat-Or, a licensed psychotherapist and rabbi who also identifies as a lesbian. Education comprises a large part of JQ's work, and they have been involved with efforts at a variety of Jewish institutions and organizations, such as Jewish schools and the organization Birthright, to increase awareness with regard to inclusion in meaningful rather than superficial ways.

While Keshet and JQ are undeniably doing important work to increase inclusion, in my research I also witnessed tensions that arose for some, especially for trans Jews, who engaged with them. Some trans participants expressed being worried about, or feeling that they were, tokenized or exploited by Jewish organizations. A lack of trans leadership in organizations, transphobia on behalf of other organizational participants – both LGBTQ and not, as well as a lack of services for and outreach to trans people on the part of these organizations all worked to drive trans Jews away. One trans participant told me he was reluctant to get involved with a local LGBTQ Jewish organization because he felt they were only interested in serving gay men, and disingenuous in their interest in the trans community. He perceived outreach to the trans community, especially in lieu of

trans-specific programming, as a ploy for trans dollars rather than a gesture of good will. This was reinforced for him by the fact that another trans person he knew had already worked to advise the organization on how to become more trans friendly without any apparent outcome. Another participant described reaching a boiling point while working for an LGBTQ Jewish organization where it was a struggle to convince other people in the organization to provide a gender-neutral bathroom during the hours of set up for a work event.

Keshet and JQ were not the only sites of relevance to my participants. In the Boston area, participants mentioned other Jewish and LGBTQ organizations that were also of significant import to them, including: Moishe Kavod House, Nehar Shalom, Am Tikva, and Jewish Voice for Peace (I skip over JVP in this chapter since I discuss it at length in Chapter 2). In Los Angeles these organizations were Beth Chayim Chadashim and IKAR. Three national organizations were also particularly important for some participants: Nehirim, which no longer exists, but which facilitated LGBTQ Jewish retreats; Eshel, an organization for LGBTQ Orthodox and religiously traditional Jews; and SVARA, an organization that fosters queer Talmud study. I should note that this is not a complete capturing of the organizational landscape that LGBTQ Jews in these cities move through, but rather an attempt to document groups that were mentioned frequently as important to those I spoke with or are otherwise relevant to my focus on LGBTQ Jewish sites (such as Am Tikva).

Moishe Kavod House

There is an international Moishe House Network, and each of these houses provide “a vibrant, home-based Jewish community for people in their 20s and 30s dedicated to tikkun olam, the repair of the world.”³² In each of these houses “arts, learning, Jewish spiritual practice, and social justice work” are integrated in order “to create a welcoming Jewish community that is personally meaningful and deeply engaged with the world.”³³ The values of the organization include inclusivity, engagement with Jewish tradition, progressive attitudes towards social justice and the environment, work in local communities, the encouragement of leadership, and a desire to inspire others to engage in the same kind of work.

Though Moishe Kavod House (MKH) came up in a number of interviews, many participants were no longer heavily involved in the organization. For some this was because they felt they had “aged out” of the organization, some felt there was a top-down approach reflected by too much control at the institutional level that overtook possibilities for more grassroots control, and others simply did not find the community they were hoping to when they joined. While most people described MKH as a progressive community, the organization receives mixed reviews on whether it is a welcoming place for LGBTQ Jews. On the one hand, LGBTQ people come to events at MKH and even live in the house. While I was in Boston I attended a Keshet Transgender Working Group meeting that was held at MKH. It was held there in part because Liora, one of my

³² More information available at <http://kavodhouse.com/about-us/>

³³ Ibid.

participants, was very involved in the working group as well as at MKH. Her partner, who is trans, was living in the MKH house at the time. On the other hand, a number of participants thought of MKH as too straight for them. While some felt this way because they perceived the organization's culture as heteronormative, others identified a specific conflict that had occurred around women-only Rosh Hodesh (beginning of the month) meetings at the organization that had created tensions for some trans attendees and their allies.

Nehar Shalom

Nehar Shalom also served as an important Jewish site for my Boston participants, and especially those who lived within Jamaica Plain because of its proximity to their homes. Nehar Shalom is an unaffiliated synagogue that meets on the first floor of a home in a residential area of Jamaica Plain, not far from Jamaica Pond. The synagogue describes itself as “a small, intimate Jewish community, growing organically in a richly diverse, vibrant and socially conscious neighborhood of Boston.”³⁴ According to their website, they are the first synagogue ever located in Jamaica Plain. This is not insignificant since participants, some of whom do not drive on Shabbat, acknowledged they may not have attended services at Nehar Shalom if there were another local option. The practice at Nehar Shalom is religiously traditional and mostly in Hebrew, something that presented a barrier to some of those I spoke with. On the other hand, the synagogue also features singing prominently, which provided an opportunity for spiritual engagement for those unfamiliar with Hebrew and traditional liturgy. Significantly,

³⁴ More information available at <https://neharshalom.org/about/welcome/>

Nehar Shalom also states on the “Welcome” page of its website that the synagogue offers “a safe place of worship and belonging to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer Jews.”³⁵

Overwhelmingly participants linked their enjoyment of services at Nehar Shalom not to the head rabbi or to the liturgy, the latter of which some complained was alienating, but rather to the LGBTQ Jews in their community who both led and attended services there. The stated model for services at Nehar Shalom is the “openness of the Chassidic shtibl or prayer room,” which translates to a desire “not to be rabbi centered, but to offer leadership opportunity to all.”³⁶ This is important since the leadership of LGBTQ Jews, who bring queer hermeneutics to their rabbinical duties in the synagogue, is a central draw for my participants. Many of these LGBTQ Jews are not lay people, but rather are rabbinical students at Hebrew College. In providing a LGBTQ affirming religious environment through its support of these rabbinical students, Nehar Shalom in turn brought LGBTQ Jews to the synagogue creating a religious and social space for participants.

Am Tikva

Unlike the examples above, Am Tikva was not a significant site for many of my participants. However, it was a site of significance in the sense that it is Boston’s LGBTQ synagogue, and while its numbers boomed in the mid to late 1980s participation has dwindled considerably. Am Tikva is a congregation that meets within the auditorium of

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

another synagogue, Temple Sinai. According to the congregation's leader, Am Tikva's High Holiday services at the height of its popularity drew hundreds of participants while today their Friday night services are on average comprised of roughly 35 people. The decreased number of participants can be attributed to the success of mainstreaming. In other words, those who were coming to Am Tikva in the 1980s now largely attend mainstream synagogues, if they still attend synagogue. For Earl, who has been involved with Am Tiva from the start, he still finds value in what Am Tikva offers. In particular he experiences a need for liturgy that is designed with LGBTQ Jews in mind. The existence of Am Tikva, and the lack of participation there coupled with the reality that many of my participants are also invested in LGBTQ-specific liturgy suggests that providing an organizational space that uses this liturgy is not enough to draw in numbers. Keshet's difficulties with maintaining and growing the numbers of participants at its events similarly highlight this. Earl, a man in his late 60s who is involved in running Am Tikva, mentioned Keshet as well, although as a man in his late 60s, though he finds Keshet events to be an inadequate replacement for Am Tikva because the Keshet crowd is largely much younger than him.

When I asked my participants, the majority of whom did not attend Am Tikva, why they were not interested in the synagogue I received varying responses. Some had never heard of Am Tikva, and did not know there was a synagogue in Boston that called itself LGBTQ, until I told them. Another kind of response indicated that my participants did not see Am Tiva as an organization aligned with their identities and interests. Tess described Am Tikva as a group of "middle-aged gay men," a characterization that

indicates her disinterest in being a part of a group that is not aligned with her identities: woman, queer (rather than gay), and young.³⁷ A third kind of response characterized those who attend services at Am Tikva, in a similar fashion to those who still attended Keshet events, as socially awkward individuals who were more likely to need Am Tikva and Keshet than those who were more socially adept. Participants in Boston generally understood the “normal” or “cool” way to be in community to consist of maintaining friend groups that moved fluidly through organizations and synagogues, rather than being rooted within them. Individualized or personalized religious practice that might use the tools, resources, and venues provided by organizations and institutions, but was rooted in the grassroots or the communal, characterized the Jewish lives of many of my Boston participants – particularly those in the Jamaica Plain queer Jewish community.

Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC)

Beth Chayim Chadashim in Los Angeles presents a stark contrast to Am Tikva in the sense that it is an established and more well-attended synagogue. BCC was started in 1972, and proudly touts itself as the “world’s first synagogue founded by, and with an outreach to, lesbians and gay men.”³⁸ In 1974 BCC was approved by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, now known as the Union for Reform Judaism. Like other synagogues, BCC offers religious services, however these services are infused with LGBTQ-affirming elements. This is also reflected in BCC’s prayer book, which refers to God using gender-neutral language. BCC also has a social component, which is reflected

³⁷ Tess, interview by author, 6 November 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

³⁸ More information available at <http://www.bcc-la.org/about/>

in the social groups offered by the synagogue including a 20s and 30s group and men's *havurah* (group) and women's *havurah*. The 20s/30s *havurah* "plans social, educational, spiritual, and volunteer events."³⁹ BCC also offers opportunities to engage in service and has a long history of providing food and support to those with HIV/AIDS. "In 1987 BCC inaugurated its monthly dinners, bringing Persons with AIDS (PWA) and their partners together with BCC members and clergy for a free meal with conversation and support."⁴⁰ This program evolved over time and now exists in its current iteration as Project Chicken Soup, which currently operates as a self-sustaining non-profit. One of the difficulties leadership at BCC face is the challenge of recruiting young individuals to join BCC as members and to stay in the congregation over time. Manuel, who was very involved at BCC, told me that as a person under 30 who was involved in the congregation there was a hope that he would bring in more young Jews. He expressed that it was very difficult to draw young Jews in, though he did not see this as particular to BCC. He said, "I think in Southern California it's harder to bring young Jews into a synagogue... it's not a cool thing to go to."⁴¹ While BCC has consistent participation, many of those who attend regularly are 40 or older. Among my participants in Los Angeles, the majority of whom were in their 20s and 30s, most did not consider BCC to be a significant site for them.

IKAR

IKAR is a spiritual community not affiliated with any denomination that meets at Shalhevet High School in Los Angeles. While IKAR hopes people of all denominations

³⁹ More information available at <http://www.bcc-la.org/programs/20s30s-havurah/>

⁴⁰ More information available at <http://www.bcc-la.org/programs/project-chicken-soup/>

⁴¹ Manuel, interview by author, 6 February 2015, Los Angeles, CA, tape recording.

will feel welcome at its services, much of their services are conducted in Hebrew and include melodic singing. IKAR offers services for holidays throughout the year, as well as Shabbat services every Saturday morning and on the first and third Friday night of every month. IKAR also has a community service component called *Minyan Tzedek*, which is divided into four categories: Feeding Our Neighbors, Green Action, Organizing, and Global Partnership. Feeding Our Neighbors focuses on ending “hunger, illiteracy, isolation, and homelessness” in Los Angeles.⁴² Green Action is oriented towards protecting the natural world and providing education about sustainability, which includes “growing a community garden that provides food to the homeless.”⁴³ Their organizing focus is aimed at advocating for social change that centers racial and economic justice. The emphasis on Global Partnership is primarily channeled through IKAR’s partner community in Katira, Uganda. IKAR has “brought Israel-developed solar technology to the primary school, medical clinic and to the newly constructed, IKAR-funded secondary school.”⁴⁴ Although IKAR is not an LGBTQ Jewish spiritual community, there are a number of LGBTQ Jews who attend services there and there is an informal group within IKAR for LGBTQ attendees, as well as an associated private Facebook group. Participants who attended IKAR said that the separate group for LGBTQ members of the community helped to mitigate the alienation that some feel at more normative IKAR events. Leah told me that she had been attending IKAR for three years, but before that

⁴² “Minyan Tzedek,” *IKAR*, available at <https://www.ikar-la.org/act/minyan-tzedek/>, accessed May 14, 2017.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

she attended a more conservative shul (synagogue) where she was not comfortable being fully out as LGBTQ. She was still involved with the conservative shul but had come to IKAR after hearing her peers talk about it at her rabbinical school. She said, “I like IKAR, I just, I think prayer can be meaningful, and there are so many shuls that it’s so boring... IKAR, it’s really lively and tradition is important, I like traditional prayers and texts and I also want it to feel new and I think IKAR does a good job of using music to make traditional texts come to life in that way.”⁴⁵ While IKAR has the traditional religious elements that appealed to Leah it also captured egalitarian and inclusive ideals that were likewise important. She continued,

It’s also really nice to see women rabbis and ones who aren’t trying to deny the fact that they’re women... at the end of Yom Kippur services they open the ark and people can come by, as individuals or families, to pray at the ark and I see all these same sex couples and their families, and that was a really amazing moment to be like these people are here and I can be in this space and have this traditional text and not feel like I’m the one gay person in the space.”⁴⁶

IKAR was convenient for Leah and her fellow rabbinical students because while it was not close to their campus, it was located near the houses of many rabbinical students – an area that is home to a number of synagogues.

James found IKAR after going on a number of OK Cupid dates where he was told he should visit the congregation. Before going to IKAR James had attended both Beth Chayim Chadashim and Kol Ami. While BCC is explicitly an LGBTQ synagogue, Kol Ami is implicitly supportive of LGBTQ Jews – while it is not explicitly an LGBTQ

⁴⁵ Leah, interview by author, 26 April 2015, Los Angeles, CA, tape recording.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

synagogue its LGBTQ-affirming position is central to its mission. James said these synagogues, “both had nice people, but no young people,” and at IKAR he found other young like-minded and LGBTQ identified Jews.⁴⁷ He explained that what drew him to IKAR was his search to find a synagogue that reflected a Judaism similar to what he grew up with as someone raised in Conservative Judaism, but that also had politics he agreed with.⁴⁸ James helped found the informal group for LGBTQ Jews within IKAR (referred to as QueerKar), which a number of participants told me functioned as a helpful nonnormative contrast to other events for young people at IKAR, which typically had a heteronormative overtone focused on heterosexual flirtation, sex, dating, partnership, and procreation. James saw synagogues generally as struggling to gain younger members, “folks involved in most synagogues are getting older, hitting 60, 70 and they’re not attracting younger people.”⁴⁹ He described IKAR as an exception to this trend, but saw BCC and Kol Ami as drastically affected by these changes. “It feels like where there was a market for queer Jewish synagogues 30 years ago, places like KA [Kol Ami] and BCC, there isn’t the same draw anymore. Possibly because synagogues are more [LGBTQ] friendly or because young Jews don’t seem interested in synagogues, whether queer or not.”⁵⁰ Aside from James’ larger analysis of changes in the LGBTQ Jewish community, he also suggested that Jewish community in Los Angeles was particular in that it is more dispersed than Jewish communities in some other cities. He said, “LA’s queers are not,

⁴⁷ James, interview by author, 29 April 2015, Boston, MA, tape recording.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

you know, there's not one queer community in LA. It's very split into, the word I used before was 'fractured,' split into little different cliques... There's not a lot of overlap, there aren't many people who are part of multiple communities."⁵¹ James thought this kind of fracturing was only bound to get worse as Jewish communities, like other religious communities, trend towards a disinterest in organizations and institutions – the sites that would provide cohesion to these otherwise fractured communities.

LGBTQ Judaism – Ritual, Practice, and Culture

The individuals I interviewed for this project had a variety of different Jewish practices and approaches to religious observance. They identified across denominations (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist), as well as beyond denominations (non-, post-, or trans-denominational). They identified with Judaism as a religious, spiritual, cultural, and ethnic identity in diverse combinations. Some had incorporated practices from other religious and spiritual traditions outside of Judaism such as: yoga, tarot, witchcraft, and the Orisha tradition. The LGBTQ identities of my participants are also diverse. They span the spectrum of gender identity and sexual orientation, they also incorporate ideas about non-monogamy/polyamory, kink, BDSM, and queer politics.⁵² I conclude this chapter by considering three case studies that exemplify some of the ways that participants' Jewish and LGBTQ identities intersected.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² I have presented some of the data about participants religious and LGBTQ identities in tables – please see the appendix.

Case Study 1: Jordan

One story a number of participants shared with me was of a name ceremony put on by Keshet's Transgender Working Group (TWG) in Jamaica Plain, Boston. This ceremony was a Saturday morning Shabbat service where the Torah was read and individuals were called up with their new names. According to Jordan, who helped arrange and host the event, there were over 40 people there. He described the event as one that was not only tolerant of LGBTQ people, but that "fully met the needs or, you know, really felt like a space that could be claimed as our space and their space."⁵³ The naming ceremony utilized an adapted version of a Jewish tradition used to bring babies into the Jewish world by calling them to the Torah. Those who put on the ceremony adapted this ritual for use by adults, so that those who had come to their identities, both queer and Jewish, could have them ceremonially marked within their Jewish community. Participants in the ceremony included queer and trans people as well as someone who was not given a Hebrew name as a child. Two rabbinical students who were also part of the LGBTQ Jewish community in Jamaica Plain led the ceremony. A *tallit* (prayer shawl) making event was also hosted a month before the naming ritual. While the *tallit*-making event was not directly tied to the naming ceremony, for Jordan it served as a moment to consider what it meant to him to take on the traditions of Judaism in a way that felt affirming. He had a *tallit* he received upon becoming *bat-mitzvah*, which had his old name on it, and so he made a new *tallit* for the ceremony. The ceremony itself was held at a community space they paid to rent out, and individuals were called to the Torah. Some

⁵³ Jordan, interview by author, 8 November 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

read from the Torah and those who wanted to gave explanations for their names and what they meant to them. For Jordan, his new name reflects both his Jewish and trans identities. “Every time I say my name now it’s both a confirmation slash affirmation of those pieces of my identity, so it feels very intertwined, and I love that about it.”⁵⁴

Jordan explained that at this time some gay men expressed upset that programming was not addressing them, that ceremonies like the one described above reflect an interest in a marginalized group within the LGBTQ community rather than in the interests of the whole community. However, the events at that time were organized to meet the needs of those who were heavily involved with Keshet’s work in a grassroots way. While there were a variety of places in Boston catering to middle and upper middle class white gay men and lesbians, there were fewer places for gender non-conforming and transgender people, and these individuals were showing up at Keshet. In particular, a number of trans women got involved in Keshet’s leadership at this time.⁵⁵ There were also issues of Jewish pluralism that needed to be addressed. Jordan recounted that the idea of a *trichitza* had been raised as a way of making frum or religiously traditional settings more inclusive to genderqueer and trans folks. A *trichitza* is an adaptation of a *mechitza*, a barrier that divides those praying by gender in religiously traditional spaces, which can create problems for those who do not identify as either men or women. A *trichitza* therefore serves as a prayer space for non-binary or genderqueer individuals. Though Keshet worked with LGBTQ Orthodox organizations, its own services are

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

typically egalitarian and more closely resemble services typical of Reform Judaism. This presents an ongoing difficulty for some LGBTQ Jews who prefer services that are more religiously traditional, and resemble Conservative or Orthodox Judaism.

Jordan also has a strong critique of mainstream American Judaism, which he sees as overly focused on straight Jewish relationships that result in the birth of Jewish children. He sees this model as exemplified by the focus on trips like Birthright. While some find LGBTQ Birthright trips to be meaningful Jordan explained that they do not work for him. He told me, “You can’t force it, in a model that doesn’t work and that I argue is ethically not conducive to queer people. Even if you do a queer trip, as a trans person, as someone with queer politics, that’s not good enough. I’m not going to feel comfortable in Israel on a queer trip with people toting guns around. That’s not going to meet my needs.”⁵⁶ Instead, he suggested that American Judaism can better meet his needs, and the needs of other queer Jews like him, by addressing alternative elements of Jewish identity such as: the queer history of *Yiddishkeit* (the culture of Eastern European Yiddish-speaking Jews), diaspora and the history of Jewish resiliency, liberation stories, fighting anti-Semitism in the U.S., and the history of Jews in the Civil Rights and other political movements. Jordan also lamented that mainstream Judaism does not teach LGBTQ Jews elements of Jewish tradition that could be interpreted as affirming. For example, Jordan did not learn about the six genders described in classical Jewish texts until coming to Keshet and participating in queer and trans *Beit Midrash* (house of study) events. These events covered a variety of topics including: crossdressing on Purim;

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Leviticus 18:22; and what the regulations on body manipulation mean for trans or gender non-conforming people who choose to modify their bodies. Jordan said,

One thing I learned at Keshet, there's power in both looking back at – in the Jewish tradition – and giving name to, the queer/queered elements of that... So I think that's really important and powerful to address that this has always existed even if the categories are different than the ones we have now. The fact that there are prohibitions against crossdressing, means there was crossdressing. There were prohibitions against people of the same sex having sex, which means that was happening.⁵⁷

Jordan was clear that it is important to have an understanding of what these prohibitions were meant to disrupt. In other words, it is important to ask, were the prohibitions intended to target queerness (in today's anachronistic terms) or something else? There are alternative readings on these prohibitions, for example interpretations of Leviticus 18:22, which is commonly read as a prohibition on homosexuality, that suggest the verse actually refers specifically to a prohibition against engaging with temple prostitutes or against sodomizing enemies captured in war. This interpretation seems likely to some scholars given that nearby passages in Leviticus condemn religious behaviors popular in other cultures at the time.⁵⁸

Case Study 2: Craig

Craig talked about his experience working at an LGBTQ synagogue in New York. As part of his work as a community organizer he was asked to attend services at the synagogue. Though he was initially reluctant and annoyed, the first week he went was the week of Transgender Day of Remembrance and in the prayer book at the synagogue there

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Daniel Boyarin, "Are There Any Jews in 'The History of Sexuality'?" *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1995), pp. 333-355.

is a prayer for Transgender Day of Remembrance. He described to me the power of reading the prayer,

It was this moment of seeing trans lives written into a *siddur* [prayer book]. Not even like at most I'd expect an insert at a synagogue if they were even going to do anything, but to see that actually integrated into the printed book and to have the community read that was a really powerful formative thing, seeing the power of these two things coming together... in a way that Judaism can mark and ritualize queer and trans life.⁵⁹

As a result of his experiences at this synagogue, Craig recognized the overwhelming absence of LGBTQ liturgy and ritual in normative Judaism, and after seeing examples of the ritualization of queer and trans lives, he felt called to adapt extant ritual and liturgy to make it relevant to LGBTQ Jews, and to develop new liturgy that speaks to all Jews.

Craig also saw the importance of proclaiming queer identity in mainstream Jewish spaces. During his time at the LGBTQ synagogue he began to wear a *kippah* (skullcap), that was black with a rainbow on it. When he attended events like the governor's signing of a bill, or an event at Jewish Theological Seminary – the conservative rabbinical school – the *kippah* let him send the message that queer Jews were present. Craig also told me how his relationship to *halakhah* formed over time as a student at a Reconstructionist rabbinical school and as a queer Jew. He said,

Because of the *halakhah* around gay sex, I have to take a different stance towards the nature and authority of *halakhah*, because I just don't buy that. So I think that's part of what makes me a Reconstructionist, in that I think of this as sort of the classic Reconstructionist line, is that *halakhah* has a vote but not a veto. So to say that *halakhah* is important in my life, I do turn to it, it does shape my life, and doesn't have the final say in terms of what my life looks like.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Craig, interview by author, 16 December 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Craig cites his rejection of the traditional interpretation of *halakhah* as addressing and prohibiting gay sex as a piece of what has led him to believe that *halakhah* is important but not decisive in his life – a position he sees as aligning him with Reconstructionist Judaism. Craig also sees a reflection of the values of Reconstructionist Judaism in his rabbinical school’s choices for employment. The person in charge of admissions at his school is a queer rabbi, and the admissions intern is trans (as was a previous intern). This means that the school is publicly represented by queer and trans Jews. It also means that prospective students interact with queer and trans people early on in their process of becoming familiar with the school, which signals LGBTQ inclusion to these potential students. The programming during the prospective student meeting is also LGBTQ inclusive – for example, individuals are each asked their pronouns. According to Craig, “The school not only started a trans and genderqueer working group but they now are doing intentional work to prepare Reconstructionist synagogues to hire trans rabbis because our first out trans rabbi is about to graduate and we want our congregations to be able to hire qualified rabbis and they [trans rabbis] are some of them.”⁶¹ At a synagogue Craig previously attended in another state they held a program with three panelists: a trans rabbinical student, a director of a local LGBT health center, and a straight cisgender faculty member at his rabbinical school. The trans rabbinical student provided information about their life, the director of the health center provided information about the “science” of trans people and fielded questions that might be offensive, and the faculty member provided reasons rooted in Jewish tradition for affirming trans people.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Craig told me, “I think that was a successful way to engage people, sort of in different ways, and get at their different concerns. And so I think that was a model that they are thinking of implementing at other congregations.”⁶²

Having instructors at his rabbinical school who are invested in analyzing Judaism through the lens of queerness was also influential for Craig in that it informed the discussions in his classes, and opened the door for queer interpretation of texts and theology. For example, his Bible professor wrote her dissertation on queerness in the book of Ezekiel, and Craig described a class where she talked “about this metaphor that Ezekiel uses where Israel is a woman who wears a strap-on and fucks other nations as men.”⁶³ Craig continued, “most people don’t read the text that way, but she does, and for really good reasons. I think that is what the text is saying, but I would not have that reading if it weren’t for her.” In many cases queer interpretations of texts and theology are often not discussed in rabbinical school, but Craig’s recounting demonstrates the value of including these interpretations in rabbinical school classrooms – both for queer and other students.

Case Study 3: Jacob

Jacob told me that he did not have baggage around being LGBTQ and Jewish because of the way he grew up. His family had Friday night dinners and observed holidays but did not have a relationship to Jewish law or text. For him, “Judaism was about community and social justice.”⁶⁴ Since he never went to Jewish day school or

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Jacob, interview by author, 21 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

summer camp he did not have a background rooted in these experiences, as many of his peers did, when he started rabbinical school. During his time as a student he became interested in Jewish texts.

My Judaism now is much more grounded in text than it was growing up. That is partially to the credit of SVARA... I met Rabbi Lappe [who runs SVARA] years ago, maybe 2004, and at the time she was starting a queer rabbinical school or *yeshiva* [Jewish institution for the study of traditional texts], I ended up going in 2005 or six, going to a class and it was the first time I was queer and Jewish in the same room and I loved it... It was a moment that said, “just because you’re queer, doesn’t mean you can’t have access to these texts.”⁶⁵

This experience was important for Jacob, it reaffirmed for him the possibility that being queer and Jewish can thrive on each other. In coming out as trans, an unmooring and new experience, Jacob felt rooted in his Jewish identity, something familiar that helped him make sense of the world. “I like the conversation between the ancient grounding of Judaism and liked the conversation between those [queer/trans and Jewish] identities.” Jacob’s theology is also connected to his trans identity: “My transition involved a lot of personal suffering, and a lot of my relationship to theology has grown out of my transition.” Jacob’s theology of suffering and liberation is rooted in his trans experience, and in this way he finds his Judaism to be inseparable from his queer/trans identity.

Similarly, Jacob’s Jewish practice celebrates the intersection of these identities. He described participating in a Hanukkah Hoedown in San Francisco before moving to Boston. This was a drag show in which he performed a recreation of the binding of Isaac to George Michael’s “Faith.” In other words, he took a traditional Jewish story from the

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Hebrew Bible and rendered it as queer performance featuring gender play, kink (the binding), and queer culture through the apropos choice of the song “Faith.” Jacob also carefully planned the *brit aruvin* [covenant of connection/intertwining] that he and his partner participated in. Explaining that the ritual was designed to reflect that they think of their covenant as, “deeply Jewish but also informed by our queerness and feminism.”⁶⁶ Jacob experienced tension around creating this ritual because for him his queer identity meant that he was critical of marriage as an institution, and he had thought that he would never have anything like a wedding. He saw this tension as one between his queer and Jewish values. In the end he felt he chose to elevate his Jewish values, but also that there was something radical in choosing to have this ceremony, which was queer and feminist, publically in front of his community. For his final project as a rabbinical student Jacob created a rabbi’s manual with three rituals, including a codified version of his *brit aruvin*. This project captures well where Jacob’s investment lies in terms of the way he hopes to influence Judaism. Jacob contrasts his interest in creating a queer Judaism, with the interests of organizations like Keshet, which he sees as focused on making mainstream Judaism more inclusive of LGBTQ Jews. However, Jacob does not see his interest in queer Judaism as misaligned with all Jewish organizations, rather he identified Mayyim Hayyim, an egalitarian *mikveh* (Jewish ritual bath), as an organization he likes and supports because he sees them as thinking creatively about American Jewish life, having a feminist organizational structure, and as queer and trans friendly.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

Even beyond what the case studies demonstrate above, the list of rituals created by/for LGBTQ Jews seems to continue to grow. Rituals discussed by participants included: rituals for gender transition, coming out, a same-sex wedding, a same-sex *get* (divorce), deciding to raise your child with a particular gender, and alternative insemination. There are also blessings said for an unexpected sexual encounter, before getting an HIV test, and a ritualized way of reading Song of Songs that addresses gender and desire. Additionally, queer Jewish events are part of the annual calendar for some; these celebrations include Pride Shabbat and Jewish services for Transgender Day of Remembrance.

Chapter 2

Off the Record: Israel/Palestine & Queer Jewish Politics, Ethics, and Activism

Introduction

This chapter considers recent events and original ethnographic research in order to explore the polarization between dominant Jewish and queer political ideologies with regard to Israel/Palestine. The chapter investigates rhetoric in response to two recent events: the protest of a reception sponsored by the organization A Wider Bridge by Palestine-solidarity activists at the Creating Change Conference in January 2016 and the response of queer Jewish activists to the condemnation of the Movement for Black Lives platform, which uses the terms “apartheid state,” and “genocide” to describe Israel’s actions, by some Jewish organizations and individuals. These two events represent the often dichotomous way that Jewish and queer politics and communities are represented in contemporary discussions of Israel/Palestine: Jews are often presented as possessing unflagging support for Israel, while queers are presented as anti-Semitic supporters of Palestine and Palestinians. In order to problematize this polarization, I consider minority voices in the media that challenge this normative narrative and use data collected in ethnographic research to explore the reality of the diverse and complex political positions held by LGBTQ identified Jews with regard to Israel/Palestine. I conclude with a discussion of the organization Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), an activist organization with a high proportion of queer individuals that works in solidarity with Palestine, and more broadly with marginalized communities in Palestine and Israel. JVP’s growing numbers reflect that Jews (both LGBTQ and not) are increasingly divided over Israel.

The fact that JVP is explicitly Jewish is also significant because research participants commonly cited two reasons for their specific involvement with JVP: the diminished potential for anti-Semitic rhetoric at JVP protests and events, and an affinity for the organization's interweaving of Judaism and activism.

Creating Change

In January of 2016 one of the largest national LGBTQ conferences in the country, Creating Change, had its 28th annual meeting in Chicago, Illinois. The Creating Change conference is sponsored and organized by the National LGBTQ Task Force. The 2016 meeting would end up drawing national attention as a result of conflict and protest amongst conference participants. However, the trouble started well before tensions came to a boil. In the lead up to the conference, Creating Change was criticized about two planned sessions in particular: a reception for an organization called A Wider Bridge, which is the focus of this chapter, and a panel by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The latter panel was criticized on the grounds that including ICE had the potential to make conference participants, especially immigrant justice activists, feel unsafe at the conference. Some activists also criticized the inclusion of ICE because they view the organization as “a massive source of violence in the lives of queer and trans people and an institution that queer and trans activists are trying to end.”⁶⁷ The organizers of Creating Change responded to this criticism by cancelling the ICE panel and issuing a public apology. While perhaps not all believed the apology to be genuine, the upset

⁶⁷ Dean Spade, “Creating Change: Pinkwashing ICE, Pinkwashing Israel,” available from <http://www.deanspade.net/2016/01/15/creating-change-pinkwashing-ice-pinkwashing-israel/>, accessed January 14, 2017.

surrounding the panel was nonetheless dampened by its cancellation. On the other hand, the leaders of the Creating Change conference were unable to resolve the tensions surrounding the reception scheduled to be held by A Wider Bridge, and as a result these tensions erupted at the conference on the evening of Friday January 22, 2016.

To understand the tension and upset surrounding the A Wider Bridge reception, one first needs to understand the organization and its mission. A Wider Bridge is a San Francisco-based organization that aims to connect LGBTQ individuals in the U.S. to Israel, especially through programming that focuses on LGBT life in Israel. The reception, titled "Beyond the Bridge: Chicago," featured leaders from Jerusalem Open House for Pride and Tolerance, the LGBT center in Jerusalem, Israel. This event was billed in the conference program as a “cocktail reception recognizing and celebrating the role of Israel's LGBTQ experience as an important component of our increasingly globalized and interconnected struggle for LGBTQ equality and social justice.”⁶⁸

In the lead up to the conference, Creating Change received pressure from groups on both sides of the issue, and they first cancelled and then reinstated the reception. Protestors raised objections to the reception on the grounds that it was a “pinkwashing” event. When employed with regard to Israel, the term “pinkwashing” refers to “Israel’s promotion of a LGTBQ-friendly image to reframe the occupation of Palestine in terms of

⁶⁸ Sunnive Brydum, “The Task Force's Rea Carey on the Protest That Rocked Her Conference,” *The Advocate*, available from <http://www.advocate.com/religion/2016/1/27/task-forces-rea-carey-protest-rocked-her-conference>, accessed January 14, 2017.

civilizational narratives measured by (sexual) modernity.”⁶⁹ In other words, “pinkwashing” refers to an attempt to present the country as democratic, civilized, and even liberal *because* of its treatment of LGBTQ individuals and *despite* its treatment of Palestinians. Those credited for the cancellation of the event in the press included: TarabNYC, Dean Spade, Alok Vaid-Menon, and Janani Balasubramanian.⁷⁰ TarabNYC describes itself as a “non-profit, [that] fosters an inclusive and safe community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and/or gender non-conforming Arab, Middle Eastern, and/or North African people in the greater New York City area.”⁷¹ TarabNYC was credited with starting a campaign to seek accountability from the Creating Change organizers for pinkwashing events, including the A Wider Bridge event. Dean Spade is a prominent queer and trans activist and a professor of law at Seattle University. Alok Vaid-Menon and Janani Balasubramanian together comprise “a trans south asian [sic] performance art duo” called *Dark Matter*.⁷² Part of the activism Alok Vaid-Menon and Janani Balasubramanian engage in is vocal opposition to occupation, colonialism, oppression, and violence at the hands of the state in all contexts. They argue that these values inform a position of solidarity with Palestinians. This position is exemplified in comments the duo has made in interviews. For example, Vaid-Menon has described using grant money

⁶⁹ Puar, Jasbir. “Rethinking Homonationalism,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45 (2013): 337.

⁷⁰ In some media, support from other individuals and groups is mentioned as well, such as Black Lives Matter: Chicago; activists Reina Gossett and Jennicet Gutiérrez; and the U.S. Palestinian Community Network.

⁷¹ “About,” *TarabNYC*, available from <http://tarabnyc.org/about/>, accessed January 14, 2017.

⁷² “About,” *DarkMatter*, available from <http://darkmatterrage.com/about/>, accessed January 14, 2017.

to fund a solidarity trip to Palestine, and Balasubramanian has expressed displeasure over the financial support India provides to Israel.⁷³ In summary, the involvement of Alok Vaid-Menon and Janani Balasubramanian in efforts to cancel the A Wider Bridge reception appears to be motivated by a broader interest in protesting colonial power and in defending those who they understand to be the victims of state violence.

These figures are iconic for some queer and trans people – Dean Spade in particular is an established figure in queer and trans political and activist work. He is perhaps most well-known for founding the Sylvia Rivera Law Project – a collective that provides free legal representation to low income transgender people and transgender people of color.⁷⁴ Spade is also a professor of law, and the author of a number of academic and popular publications. He has been vocal in his criticism of racism, mass incarceration, capitalism, colonialism, and the mainstream LGBT focus on “gay marriage” over other issues, especially those that affect the most marginalized in the LGBTQ community. Spade also has a history of vocally protesting “pinkwashing” events in the Seattle area where he lives. One example of this is provided in his own documentary, posted on the website Vimeo, called “Pinkwashing Exposed: Seattle Fights Back.”⁷⁵ This film documents Spade and other activists’ efforts to cancel events in

⁷³ Aria Thaker, “Interview With Darkmatter—Janani Balasubramanian and Alok Vaid-Menon,” *Broad Recognition*, available from <http://www.broadrecognitionyale.com/2014/07/02/interview-with-darkmatter-janani-balasubramanian-and-alok-void-menon/>, accessed January 14, 2017.

⁷⁴ “About Legal Services” *Sylvia Rivera Law Project*, available from <http://srlp.org/about/legal-services/>, accessed January 14, 2016.

⁷⁵ “Pinkwashing Exposed: Seattle Fights Back,” *Vimeo*, available from <https://vimeo.com/126391030>, accessed January 14, 2017.

Washington state that featured an LGBTQ Israeli delegation, funded by the Israeli consulate and the Israel advocacy organization StandWithUs. Activists who speak in the film explain that events funded by the Israeli consulate suggest pinkwashing because of the implied ties to the Brand Israel campaign. Sarah Shulman, the author of *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International* and a distinguished professor of the Humanities at the College of Staten Island, has described this campaign as “a highly orchestrated marketing campaign to sell Israel to tourists and cultural consumers, Brand Israel promotes Israel as a modern, liberal society with open values while whitewashing its human rights violations and dual citizenship systems.”⁷⁶ These activists argue that the Brand Israel campaign aims to switch the public perception of Israel from one focused on the conflict or occupation to one that presents Israel as a liberal and exciting tourist destination. They also describe their upset over the involvement of StandWithUs in organizing these events, describing it as a homophobic organization.⁷⁷ As evidence for this claim they cite the close relationship between StandWithUs and Christians United for Israel – the latter is an organization led by executive director John Hagee who is openly homophobic. After hurricane Katrina, Hagee claimed the hurricane was a pre-emptive punishment for the upcoming Gay Pride parade in New Orleans. On January 15, 2016 before the cancellation of the A Wider Bridge reception, Spade wrote a post on his website titled “Creating Change: Pinkwashing ICE, Pinkwashing Israel.” In the post he first explained why the act of inviting ICE was inappropriate, stating that the invitation

⁷⁶ Sarah Shulman, *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 24.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

implies: “that there is some kind of collaboration sought, or that ICE can show up and be ‘LGBT-friendly’ ... We are not fighting for a gay-friendly border, a gay-friendly immigration prison or immigration raid. The only way for queer and trans immigrants to be safe is if raids, detentions, deportations and everything else ICE does ends.”⁷⁸ For Spade there is no way to simultaneously support the safety of queer and trans immigrants and to welcome ICE; the two commitments are mutually exclusive.

Spade goes on to discuss the controversy surrounding the A Wider Bridge Reception at Creating Change, which he says reflects a “similar dynamic.”⁷⁹ Spade explains that A Wider Bridge aims to connect LGBT people in the U.S. with Israel, which it does through tours funded by the Israeli Consulate that bring LGBT Israelis to the U.S. to talk about their experiences of gay life and politics in Israel; conferences with U.S. LGBT leaders in Israel; the promotion of films funded by the Israeli government that portray Israel as gay-friendly; and bringing LGBT Americans to visit Israel.⁸⁰ Spade considers A Wider Bridge’s work to be “pinkwashing” propaganda. He sees it as part of an effort to promote Israel as a gay-friendly country, rather than as a colonial force. This propaganda focuses on, “the fact that gay people are allowed to serve in [Israel’s] brutal military” and on Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism: “Israel contrasts its supposed ‘gay-friendliness’ with stereotypes of its homophobic neighbors, particularly

⁷⁸ Dean Spade, “Creating Change: Pinkwashing ICE, Pinkwashing Israel,” *DeanSpade.net*, available from <http://www.deanspade.net/2016/01/15/creating-change-pinkwashing-ice-pinkwashing-israel/>, accessed August 10, 2016.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

portraying Palestinians as homophobic.”⁸¹ Spade takes particular issue with this last point, arguing that Israel inflicts extreme violence and harm on Palestinians, including queer and trans Palestinians. Jasbir Puar has similarly argued, “Delineating Palestine as the site of queer oppression—oppression that is equated with the occupation of Palestine by Israel—effaces Israeli state persecution of queer Palestinians.”⁸² Spade and Puar’s claims challenge the narrative that Israel is gay-friendly. As Nada Elia, who is identified in Spade’s documentary film as a Palestinian BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction) activist explains, “There is no magic pink door in the apartheid wall. We may be queer – I can show up at Ben Gurion [airport] and say I’m lesbian let me in; they’re not gonna do that because I’m Palestinian. So when you say gay-friendly, which gay person are you talking about?”⁸³ Selma, a queer Palestinian activist, also speaks to Seattle’s LGBT Commission in the film in order to protest a local “pinkwashing” event, explaining that she similarly feels her queer and Palestinian identities cannot be parsed. Selma explains,

Being queer and being Palestinian and being a daughter of a refugee and having a diasporic identity are deeply entrenched in my identity, they cannot be separated. So I want to start by saying that, because I think that a lot of queer people of color and a lot of queer people from non-western societies feel invisibilized. And when we have these conversations we’re told we can talk about occupation, we can talk about what’s happening, but we’re here to serve LGBT people so let’s just focus on that. So I just want to say I’m here I’m gay I live in Seattle and I’m Palestinian...⁸⁴

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Puar, Jasbir. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 17.

⁸³ Dean Spade, “Pinkwashing Exposed: Seattle Fights Back,” *Vimeo*, available from <https://vimeo.com/126391030>, accessed August 10, 2016.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

For Selma, her protest against the proposed event is linked to her personal identity. She argues that in cancelling the event, the Seattle LGBT Commission would be “standing in solidarity with so many other national and international groups that are saying we will not let our queer community be used as a ploy to cover war crimes against queer people, not just against Palestinians, against queer people like me.”⁸⁵ As queer Palestinians, Nada Elia and Selma both present personal narratives that disrupt the narrative that Israel is gay-friendly, and which demonstrate that the assertion that Israel is gay-friendly erases the experiences of queers like them. Aside from the obvious critique that there is in fact homophobia in Israel, as there is all over the world, Nada Elia and Selma point out that Palestinians as a group are not treated well by Israelis, and queer Palestinians cannot be overlooked as part of this group. Nada Elia and Selma argue that LGBTQ liberation means the liberation of *all* LGBTQ people – including LGBTQ Palestinians.

As stated above, the Creating Change conference cancelled the A Wider Bridge event in the face of pressure from activists who accused conference organizers of facilitating a pinkwashing event. In a statement to the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* Rea Carey, executive director of the National LGBTQ Task Force, said that “while we welcome robust discourse and political action, given the complexity and deep passions on all sides, we concluded the event wouldn’t be productive or meet the stated goals of its organizers. We also have the overarching responsibility to ensure that Creating Change is

⁸⁵ Ibid.

a safe space for attendees.”⁸⁶ However, the cancellation of the event in turn caused an uproar from those who defended the event, many of whom were from Jewish communities and organizations across the country. These individuals and groups condemned the cancelation of the reception and advocated that it be reinstated. Some launched accusations of antisemitism at the conference organizers. Rabbis, Jewish organizers, and others attached their names to a Change.org petition entitled “Call on the National LGBTQ Task Force to Uphold its Inclusive Values,” which argued against the cancelation.⁸⁷ The petition expressed that the Creating Change organizers need to demonstrate that “there is a safe space at Creating Change and the National LGBTQ Task Force for supporters of A Wider Bridge and LGBTQ people and allies who want a constructive relationship with Israel and LGBTQ Israelis.”⁸⁸ The petition gathered 1,460 signatures.⁸⁹ In response to the public outcry, Rea Carey publicly reversed the decision, explaining,

When faced with choices, we should move towards our core value of inclusion and opportunities for constructive dialogue and canceling the reception was a mistake... we want to make it quite clear that the Creating Change Conference will always be a safe space for inclusion and dialogue for people with often widely different views. It was not at all our intention to censor representatives of the Jerusalem Open House or A Wider Bridge

⁸⁶ Rea Carey quoted in Yair Rosenberg, “National LGBTQ Task Force Reinvites Jewish and Israeli Groups to Conference,” *Tablet Magazine*, available from, <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/196745/national-lgbtq-task-force-reinvites-jewish-and-israeli-groups-to-conference>, accessed August 10, 2016.

⁸⁷ “Call on the National LGBTQ Task Force to Uphold Its Inclusive Values,” *Change.org*, available from <https://www.change.org/p/the-national-lgbtq-task-force-call-on-the-national-lgbtq-task-force-to-uphold-its-inclusive-values>, accessed August 10, 2016.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ This was the number of supporters listed on the webpage as of September 4, 2016.

at Creating Change and I apologize that our actions left people feeling silenced.⁹⁰

The language of silencing is significant; it reflects discourse and debates of the moment happening on a larger scale, including on many college campuses, around “free speech,” protest, and the BDS campaign.⁹¹

In the end the A Wider Bridge event was held, but not without consequence – according to reports, over 200 protesters showed up to the event.⁹² They carried signs and chanted, a few entered the reception hall where the event was taking place and took control of the microphone. In the end the speakers from Jerusalem Open House left the event, with some claiming they felt unsafe. In video footage of the protest, which is available online, it is evident that tensions are high between the protesters, event staff/security, and attendees of the event. In moments of escalation there is yelling and pushing between protestors, event attendees, and event staff/security. In the aftermath of the reception and the protests many posts appeared on the Internet offering differing accounts of the details of what took place. A few accounts claimed that anti-Semitic slurs were used, although these accounts all seem to describe one event where a protester

⁹⁰ Rea Carey quoted in Mark Daley, “National LGBTQ Task Force Reverses Decision to Cancel Reception,” *National LGBTQ Task Force*, available from <http://www.thetaskforce.org/national-lgbtq-task-force-reverses-decision-to-cancel-reception/>, accessed May 1, 2017.

⁹¹ For example, Jasbir Puar gave a talk at Vassar on February 3, 2016 critiquing Israeli policy toward Palestinians. In response, she was critiqued and accused of eroding free speech in an op-ed in the *The Wall Street Journal* titled "Majoring in Anti-Semitism at Vassar" by Mark G. Yudof, former president of the University of California, and Ken Waltzer, professor emeritus of history at Michigan State University.

⁹² I was not present at the protest. I watched footage available on YouTube, read first-hand accounts available online, and spoke to a few participants who witnessed some portion of the events.

allegedly called an event attendee a “kike.” More claimed that protesters called for the destruction of Israel, citing the protestors’ chant “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” as a call for this destruction. At one point a protest organizer can be seen on the video footage declaring over a loudspeaker, “we’re going to stay here and challenge these Zionist racist motherfuckers.”⁹³ Some writers for online media outlets responded with upset to this characterization of A Wider Bridge and the reception attendees. Another set of writers, both Jewish and secular, defended the protesters’ rights to free speech and supported their message, which they argued drew attention to the political situation for Palestinians. Some argued the A Wider Bridge event was inappropriate, and the protest justified. The fact that police were called on the protesters, many of whom were people of color, was also characterized as especially insensitive given the climate of tension with regard to police violence against people of color. One of the major differences between the writings about the protest that appeared in independent blogs/alternative media as opposed to mainstream media, was that many of the independent/alternative media authors noted that Jews were among the protestors, a point virtually ignored in mainstream media that labeled the protest “anti-Semitic.” Many of the mainstream media narratives about the event portrayed the A Wider Bridge reception and its attendees as representing the interests of the greater American Jewish LGBTQ community, while the protestors were characterized as anti-Semitic “gay/queer radicals.” This dichotomy

⁹³ Both the chant “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” and the organizer who referred to event attendees as “Zionist racist motherfuckers” can be seen and heard in footage of the protest available online.

oversimplifies, flattening the diversity of positions on Israel/Palestine held by LGBTQ Jews in the U.S.

LGBTQ Jews in the U.S., like American Jews more broadly, possess a variety of opinions on Israel and Palestine, which are motivated by a number of factors, including: Jewish identity, LGBTQ identity, national/family or other personal connection to Israel, national/family or other personal connection to Palestine, and race. In this chapter, I address these positions as well as the rationales that motivate them. Before acknowledging the diverse reality of opinions on Israel/Palestine, it is worth noting that there are a number of tropes or stereotypes that are frequently reinforced in media about the views of LGBTQ people, LGBTQ Jews, and the greater Jewish community with regard to their presumed Israel/Palestine politics. These tropes are: 1) LGBTQ people, sometimes characterized as “radical gay activists,” are critical of Israel, or even anti-Semitic, because they perceive Israel as committing human rights violations against Palestinians. 2) LGBTQ people are pro-Israel because Israel/Tel Aviv is a bastion of gay life in the Middle East. 3) Jews are pro-Israel. This last trope is frequently taken to be self-evident but it could be elaborated as: Jews support Israel because it is the Jewish state, their homeland, or the one place in the world they know will accept them if they face anti-Semitism in diaspora. In writing this chapter I consider and complicate these tropes by exploring the reality of the investments of LGBTQ, Jewish, and LGBTQ Jewish people with regard to Israel/Palestine. The event at Creating Change illustrates both the growing tension at the intersection of LGBTQ and Jewish identities and political

investments, and the reality of diverse opinions held by LGBTQ Jews with regard to Israel and Palestine.

The A Wider Bridge event was scheduled to include not only the reception featuring speakers from Jerusalem Open House, but before that, a Shabbat dinner. Part of the controversy that arose in the aftermath of the protest surrounded reports that protesters had disrupted the Shabbat dinner, something that was considered a much more obvious violation than disrupting the reception. It is perhaps unsurprising that the disruption of a religious event, and the profaning of the religious with the secular and political, is understood to cross the line of permissible protest. Arguably, the protesters largely agreed with this assessment since a number of reports clarified this misconception, decrying it as part of the attempt to discredit the protesters by portraying them as anti-Semitic. Some were careful to point out that the protest was specifically intended to respect the Shabbat service, and instead to begin at the time the reception started. In fact, a number of the protesters were attending another Shabbat dinner held at the same time as the A Wider Bridge Shabbat. This Shabbat, co-sponsored by the Chicago branch of Jewish Voice for Peace and the Coalition for a Just Peace in Israel-Palestine (CJPIP), was held as a kind of counterpoint to the A Wider Bridge Shabbat. The event was described on Facebook by Jewish Voice for Peace - Chicago as a “Queer, Anti-Zionist Shabbat that resists the pinkwashing of Israeli oppression taking place at Creating Change, the National LGBTQ conference happening this weekend in Chicago! All faiths are welcome at this Shabbat celebration, in the spirit of speaking truth to power and

reclaiming a Judaism that stands for human rights and equality for all.”⁹⁴ The Facebook event was titled “An Alternative Anti-Zionist Shabbat,” and the use of the term “alternative” as well as the language of “reclaiming a Judaism that stands for human rights and equality for all” in the event description suggests that Zionism is the normative Jewish position and anti-Zionism the nonnormative or alternative one. The fact that this “alternative” anti-Zionist Shabbat was held simultaneously with the A Wider Bridge Shabbat service also underlines the reality that Jews were both amongst the protesters and the protested.

It is difficult to know what happened during the protest at Creating Change and unsurprisingly individual accounts of the events vary. Personal narratives were posted online where participants recounted their memories of the event, and video footage was also posted to YouTube that documented much of the portion of the protest that took place in the hallways outside the A Wider Bridge reception. An imperfect composite of the events of the evening can be reconstructed through this data, and I present a version of these compiled events here.

Protesters reportedly made their way through the halls of the hotel around 8:30pm after Shabbat services had ended. On the video footage protestors can be seen walking while chanting, “Hey hey, ho ho, pinkwashing has got to go.” Some are holding Palestinian flags, and others are holding signs that read “cancel pinkwashing,”

⁹⁴ Jewish Voice for Peace – Chicago, “Stop Pinkwashing at Creating Change - Alternative Anti-Zionist Shabbat,” *Facebook*, available at <https://www.facebook.com/events/1533295360332136/>, accessed May 1, 2017.

“pinkwashing isn’t pretty,” “can’t pinkwash away your guilt,” “stop U.S. aid to Israel,” “you can’t ‘dialogue’ with apartheid,” “Zionism sucks,” “no queer liberation w/o decolonization,” “no pride in apartheid,” “boycott apartheid,” and “I am a Jewish queer and I won’t stand for (in)justice in my name.” Once the protesters arrived outside the reception hall they continued to chant and drum, dancing and clapping along to their self-made music. The hall was full of protesters, making it difficult or impossible for others to move down the hall, and particularly for people to enter the A Wider Bridge reception. They chanted, “from the river to the sea Palestine will be free” and “no justice, no peace.” As the hall filled up there were visible altercations between individuals standing in front of the doors to the reception hall and protestors. Shortly after that a protester stood on a chair to yell, “two white men at the door pushed two of our protesters!” Tensions continued to be high as the protesters had nowhere to go – the event doors were blocked and they appeared to be prevented from entering or marching forward. Protesters chanted, “Let us march! Let us march!” To compound things there were would-be A Wider Bridge event attendees stuck in the midst of protesters. One man can be heard calling to protesters, “You’re taking away our rights! We have the right to go to the reception!” Shortly afterwards another voice said, “We’re trying to go too.” It’s not clear if this was another A Wider Bridge event attendee, but given the tone in which the person speaks it sounds as if this was a protester expressing the desire to get into the event and continue to protest inside. Security guards were visible on the footage, and a protester who has apparently just received word that the police have been called attempted to scream this news over the noise. In the midst of this attempted announcement a scuffle

erupted in the middle of the mass of protesters. This incident was prompted by a protester who placed a Palestinian flag in front of the face of a would-be A Wider Bridge reception attendee. The man angrily grabbed the Palestinian flag and pulled it out of the hands of the protester. A number of protesters began screaming at the man, while the man yelled, “Who did it?” trying to figure out who put the flag in his face. A number of protesters pointed and yelled at the man, and then chanted, “Shame on you!” repeatedly. A lot of pushing occurred as tensions boiled over in this moment. In the video footage it is clear that some protesters and would-be reception attendees were trying to work together to stay calm and minimize pushing. Meanwhile, a security guard spoke with the man who had grabbed the Palestinian flag while protesters yell, “He stole our flag,” “Get them out,” and, “Racists go home.” Slowly tensions simmered, and another series of announcements was made that the police had been called or had arrived and that those who could not, or did not want to, risk arrest should find refuge in conference rooms nearby. Shortly thereafter two police officers were visible in the hallway among the protesters, speaking with a woman who was identified by someone off camera as Sue Hyde, the director of the Creating Change conference. The stalemate continued with police present, the protesters expressed that pushing had made them concerned about the safety of those protesters who were inside the A Wider Bridge reception. Some protesters expressed that they wanted to make sure every protester was able to leave safely, and a small group of individuals who had been trying to get to the A Wider Bridge reception put their arms around each other and chanted melodically, “Shalom *achshav*,” the Hebrew for, “Peace now.” As police moved in to potentially make arrests, protesters

announced again that those who could not be arrested should enter another reception; they also announced the location of a safe space for protesters who were triggered by the police. After only a short amount of time another announcement was made that there was an accessibility and fire safety issue and so those who were going to continue to protest needed to go to either side of the hallway and leave the middle clear. At this point the protesters lined both sides of the hallway, many of them holding hands as they continued to chant “No justice, no peace,” “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” and “Hey hey, ho ho occupation has got to go.” Minutes later a protester announced that the police were going to start arresting people because it was the Hilton’s property and they asked the police to do so. Protesters were told they had the option of marching out of the hallway away from the reception or staying and being arrested. Two protesters spoke to each other and one asked “Are our people in there still?” He gestured towards the reception room, and then walked up to those standing outside of the A Wider Bridge reception and said, “let our people out.” The entirety of the response was not clearly audible, but those who responded stated that the protesters already went out. The protester responded, “that is so bad, we’re going to sue you... we’re going to sue A Wider Bridge. Keep supporting Bibi, keep supporting Bibi Netanyahu.” Bibi is the nickname commonly used for Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli president who has been criticized by some, in Israel and the U.S., for conservative policies. At this point the protesters filtered out of the hall and the unrest slowly died down.

The gathering in the hallway outside of the A Wider Bridge reception is, however, only part of the protest that occurred that evening. As a result of the protest, the reception

did not take place as scheduled, and the speakers from Jerusalem Open House reportedly left the reception hall citing fear in response to the protest. Protesters ended up inside of the A Wider Bridge reception, and only one video (to my knowledge) capturing part of the events inside the room is available online. This video was posted to YouTube by A Wider Bridge on January 24th, 2016. It displays text that explains who they are as an organization and who the intended speakers were at the event. It also shows footage of protesters in the hallway, and clips of Arthur Slepian, the Executive Director of A Wider Bridge, speaking inside the reception. Slepian spoke to the audience at the reception on the video, explaining why he felt it was important for A Wider Bridge to be at Creating Change.

As LGBT Jews many of us feel a dual connection to Israel. It is important to us as Jews as the homeland of our people, the place that is home to almost half of the world's Jewish population. And as queer people Israel is also home to a vibrant LGBT community that's up against big challenges as it's working to make the country a better place for LGBT people of all races and all religions...⁹⁵

Slepian described that the fact that some believe that A Wider Bridge should not be present at the conference as painful. The video text described the cancelling and reinstatement of the reception and stated that throughout the conference, and at the protest, "lies and gross distortions about A Wider Bridge and Israel" were repeated.⁹⁶ According to the film, more than 100 people came to the reception on January 22nd but protesters disrupted the event, took over the stage and the visitors from Jerusalem Open

⁹⁵ A Wider Bridge, "A Wider Bridge: Creating Change Not Hate," *You Tube*, available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rz4KkvvjBB8>, accessed January 22, 2017.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

House were unable to speak. The film concludes with a staff member from A Wider Bridge speaking inside the reception hall. He says:

I know that this has not been easy for anyone in this room and I want to acknowledge that, and I want to especially thank all of you for coming, for demonstrating that Israel has a place in the LGBT global community... and to help demonstrate that they deserve a voice... it is critical our friends at Jerusalem Open House that are no longer with us right now... I ask everyone in this room to consider supporting Jerusalem Open House, let's make that our statement. These are donation cards to Jerusalem Open House, this community has been under trauma this summer, there was a tragic stabbing, that is why they are here, that's the main reason why they're here, to connect with all of you and with the global LGBT community.⁹⁷

During these closing remarks three protesters, all black women, were seated on the stage behind the speaker and occasionally yelled over him. While the cross-talk makes it hard to determine what the protesters are saying, a few phrases are clear. For example, in response to the speaker's claims about Israel being part of the global LGBT community one protester yelled repeatedly, "how are you going to say anything about the queer community when you call the police on them?"⁹⁸ Later a protester yelled, "you don't want to be silent, say something" and "if you don't want to be on the wrong side of history say [something]."⁹⁹ It is also worth noting, although I do so tentatively because of the difficulty discerning whether I have heard correctly, that it sounds as if one protester yells, "we know you hate us... we know you hate black people."¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately, the independent statements made by the protesters who took over the reception are not

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

caught on video. I want to briefly address the role of solidarity on behalf of activists of color (particularly black activists) in the U.S. with Palestinians, which is an important aspect of the tension that erupted at Creating Change, and of larger conversations around Israel/Palestine in the U.S. While I do not treat these issues thoroughly here, I hope to give them proper attention in future work. For now, I point to Angela Y. Davis's book, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*. Davis argues for the necessity of solidarity with Palestinians on the part of those in the U.S. (and all over the world) affected by racism and violence enacted by, or on behalf of, the state. She references the armed police response to the demonstrators who took to the streets in reaction to the police killing of Michael Brown. The arrival of a militarized police force in response to the demonstrators "leads us to think about Israel and the militarization of the police there – if only the images of the police and not of the demonstrators had been shown, one might have assumed that Ferguson was Gaza."¹⁰¹ Davis also argues that the similarity between militarized police forces in Israel and the U.S. is not mere coincidence, since the Israeli military has been responsible for training some police in the U.S. Additionally the privately owned and operated transnational security corporation G4S is responsible for everything "from the Palestinian experience of political incarceration and torture to racist technologies of separation and apartheid; from the wall in Israel to prison-like schools in the US and the wall along the US-Mexico border."¹⁰² Davis lauds intersectional activism, encouraging marginalized groups with

¹⁰¹ Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 14.

¹⁰² Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, 55-56.

differing histories of oppression to see the similarities in how systems oppress them, and to act in solidarity with one another to upend these systems.

In the aftermath of Creating Change, Arthur Slepian emailed a response to the protest to the A Wider Bridge listserv on February 3, 2016 entitled, “Chicago Protest Reflections, and Forging Ahead.” The email states that the protest at Creating Change demonstrates the need for the organization’s work, especially in this historical moment. Slepian also highlights two ideas he labels “dangerous,” which he sees as central to the tensions that erupted at Creating Change: the first is the “notion that discussing LGBTQ life in Israel should be dismissed as ‘pinkwashing.’” And second, that the right way to deal with an event in the LGBTQ community that you object to is to ‘shut it down.’”¹⁰³ He explains that in the wake of the protest those who want to discredit the dangerous ideas he mentions are speaking up, and as evidence for this he cites a letter signed by more than 80 LGBT leaders.¹⁰⁴ The open letter to the National LGBTQ Task Force, which was spearheaded by LGBT rights attorney Roberta Kaplan condemned the protest and the shutdown of the reception, and demanded an independent investigation. The letter states the signatories’ “collective and deep concern,” about the event.¹⁰⁵ The LGBTQ leaders who signed it include representatives of Jewish LGBTQ organizations and synagogues. Kaplan begins the letter by acknowledging the differing positions in the

¹⁰³ Arthur Slepian, email correspondence, February 3, 2016.

¹⁰⁴ Roberta Kaplan, “Letter to the LGBTQ Task Force” *Medium*, available from https://medium.com/@rakaplan/letter-to-the-lgbtq-task-force-e7726f31e627?mc_cid=22064f0024&mc_eid=30ec1e0dec#.tgkuvilln, accessed February 3, 2016.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

LGBTQ community with regard to Israel/Palestine and the appropriate ways the conflict in the region might be resolved, but she also claims that LGBTQ individuals are linked in their history and experience of struggle for equality in the U.S. and internationally.

Kaplan expressed that the leaders' who signed the letter felt collective dismay at the protest in response to the A Wider Bridge reception featuring Jerusalem Open House. She wrote,

The events of January 22 in Chicago were unacceptable and not in accord with the Task Force's values of pluralism, inclusivity and thoughtful debate. The targeted organizations' reception was disrupted and shut down by protesters (including people not attending the conference) with such hostility and aggression that speakers and attendees at the event were justifiably terrified and felt physically threatened. We are united in our belief that what transpired at CC16 was dangerous, deeply disturbing, and given the use of epithets like "*kike*," clearly anti-Semitic.¹⁰⁶

In response to the cancellation, reinstatement, and protest there were countless op-eds that condemned the protest. What was slightly less visible were the voices of those who wanted to challenge the narrative presented in mainstream media and to argue that the protest was justified. One such piece was published on the Jewish Voice for Peace website. The piece was written by Jimmy Pasch, the JVP West Regional Organizer. Pasch argues that what is lost in the mainstream media response that largely supported the position expressed by A Wider Bridge is "a much-needed critical dialogue around pinkwashing and the complicity of LGBTQ institutions in structures that actively oppress members of their own communities, but particularly the lived experiences, urgent

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

realities, and political expressions of Palestinians, including queer Palestinians.”¹⁰⁷ Pasch explained that the Creating Change protesters were comprised of “a diverse coalition of groups, with LGBTQ Palestinian organizations and leaders at the center.”¹⁰⁸ Together these protesters argued that “support of Israel’s ‘military occupation, ethnic cleansing, racism, and colonialism [is] incompatible with queer liberation and with fundamental human rights.”¹⁰⁹ Pasch argues that it was the power of these organizers that led to the cancellation of the reception, and then the response from (presumably Jewish) institutions that resulted in the reception’s reinstatement by the LGBT Task Force. Pasch also dismisses the argument that the cancellation of events is inappropriate because it squashes conversation and excludes LGBTQ Israelis, an exclusion that is often interpreted as anti-Semitic. Instead Pasch asserts that this argument, “conceals the power dynamics at play, and attempts to distract from the real, ongoing violence Palestinians face.”¹¹⁰ In other words, if one defines Israel’s actions as violating human rights, or less radically, acknowledges that Israel has greater military, political, and social capital than Palestine it becomes difficult to argue that Israel should have a platform for its defense. Additionally, the unequal possession of power between Palestinians and Israelis means that there is similarly unequal access to platforms that let Palestinians express their narratives. Pasch argues that discussion and debate are not possible when the playing field is so drastically

¹⁰⁷ Jimmy Pasch. “Don’t Pinkwash Apartheid: A Tochecha for the National LGBTQ Task Force” *Jewish Voice for Peace*, available from <https://jewishvoiceforpeace.org/lgbtq-taskforce-pinkwashing/>, accessed February 3, 2016.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

uneven. He and others suggest that events that use narratives about queer liberation in Israel to promote it as progressive over and against its neighboring countries are intentional attempts to distract from its treatment of Palestinians. He explains “pinkwashing” as an integral part of the “Brand Israel” public relations campaign that appeals to the West by promoting Israel as a progressive bastion in the otherwise “backwards and intolerant” Middle East.¹¹¹ In the contemporary period, a particular Western notion of gay rights has become an important part of the litmus test Western countries use to determine whether other countries are liberal. Pasch writes that this “simplified notion of ‘gay rights’ has become one of the most effective ways to mark that Western identity, and is used by organizations like A Wider Bridge to build support for the Israeli state, and replace an ongoing history of apartheid, occupation, and settler colonialism with a feel-good story of liberal tolerance.”¹¹² Pasch and others argue that the problem with the “feel-good” narrative of Israeli support for LGBTQ individuals and communities, is that Israeli attitudes do not extend across the wall that divides Israel and Palestine. This is true both in that treatment of LGBTQ Palestinians is not markedly better than non-LGBTQ Palestinians, and in some cases it is worse as LGBTQ Palestinians may be targets (or perceived targets) of blackmail because of their LGBTQ identities and used as informants. “Because they are so vulnerable to blackmail, it is assumed by the families and neighbors of gay Palestinian men — sometimes correctly — that they have been blackmailed into becoming informers, either for Israeli intelligence or

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

for opposition Palestinian factions.”¹¹³ Additionally, LGBTQ Palestinians are sometimes evoked to demonstrate Israel’s liberalism as exceptional in the context of the Middle East. In such instances, Israel is presented as the country that saves LGBTQ Palestinians from their own homophobic societies and gives them a safe place to live within Israel.

Pasch argues based on the above that the exclusion of A Wider Bridge from the Creating Change conference is appropriate because their exclusion “is not about excluding Jews... but rather [aims] to make clear that our struggles for liberation are all interconnected, and that support for occupation, colonialism, and discrimination has no place in our community.”¹¹⁴ Pasch’s writing is from the day of the protest outside the A Wider Bridge reception and he mentions the alternative Shabbat held by JVP, which was led by queer Jews in solidarity with Palestinians. He writes, “as queer people, we need to continue developing our thinking and approaches to avoid the traps of pinkwashing, to resist single-issue politics that help LGBTQ people in positions of relative social power while ignoring the realities that affect the most marginalized in our communities.”¹¹⁵ Pasch, as Dean Spade did, draws a comparison between the A Wider Bridge Reception and the cancelation of the workshop led by ICE as a result of protests from migrant justice groups. Pasch explains that because ICE conducts raids to deport Central American refugees the workshop featuring ICE erases (or pinkwashes) these actions and

¹¹³ Kathleen Peratis, “For Gay Palestinians, Tel Aviv Is Mecca,” *The Forward*, <http://forward.com/opinion/1125/for-gay-palestinians-tel-aviv-is-mecca/>, quoted in Gil Z. Hochberg, “Introduction – Israelis, Palestinians, Queers: Points of Departure” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Volume 16, Number 4, (2010): 507.

¹¹⁴ Jimmy Pasch, “Don’t Pinkwash Apartheid.”

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

aims to present them in a more favorable light. He presents the movement and protests among migrant justice groups that resulted in the cancelation of the ICE workshop as a model for those in solidarity with Palestine, arguing that they must continue to hold institutions that speak for LGBTQ people like the LGBTQ Task Force accountable.

As I suggested earlier, there were a number of responses to the protest and the shutting down of the reception in online media. I consider here a response from a mainstream Jewish media outlet, *Tablet Magazine*. The article, written by James Kirchick and dated January 21, 2016, was called “How Intersectionality Makes You Stupid.”¹¹⁶ Kirchick, and others who wrote about the event, described the motivating factor behind the Creating Change protest as “intersectionality,” by which he means a progressive ideology that suggests marginalized individuals are aligned across identities and struggles.¹¹⁷ Kirchick’s writing reflects a clear perspective that Israel is the liberal beacon of the Middle East amidst countries that commit violence against LGBTQ people. Given these beliefs he sees the protest at Creating Change as misguided at best. Kirchick begins his piece as follows: “As I write this, ISIS is hunting gay men to toss from the rooftops of

¹¹⁶ James Kirchick, “How Intersectionality Makes You Stupid,” *Tablet Magazine*, available from <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/196754/intersectionality-makes-you-stupid>, accessed January 23, 2016.

¹¹⁷ In academic discourse “intersectionality” has typically referred to intersecting identities within individuals, and rhetoric that advocates for the import of understanding the nuances of how identities (for example race and gender) intersect to create particular kinds of social experiences. See Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, (1989) 139–167. “Intersectionality” in Kirchick’s piece refers to activists who argue that all struggles and injustices are intersecting or interrelated.

Raqaa, and nearly 80 countries proscribe homosexuality. Yet for a 36-hour period earlier this week, the National LGBTQ Task Force chose to ally itself not with the one country in the Middle East that guarantees and protects the human rights of LGBTQ people, but with those who hang them from construction cranes.”¹¹⁸ Kirchick continues, minimizing those who opposed the event by arguing that the opinion that the A Wider Bridge event would be divisive “appears to rest on the complaints registered by just three people”: Dean Spade and the two members of Dark Matter.”¹¹⁹ He argues that labeling the event, which no one was required to attend, divisive is similar to arguing that, “the presence of a gay man in a locker room is ‘divisive.’ It only ‘offends’ the sensibilities of bigots.”¹²⁰ He also calls the resistance to the event “discrimination.”¹²¹ Kirchick’s comments above suggest that he views the protest of the A Wider Bridge event as bigotry because he sees Israelis (and/or Jews?) as a minority group and the protest as about anti-Israel or anti-Semitic sentiment. Kirchick himself brings this point home, writing that the conference organizers seemed to be committed to fighting discrimination to the point of providing scent-free areas for those sensitive to smell and yet they “bowed to those wanting to make it Jew-free as well.”¹²² While those who supported the cancellation of the event or led protests generally appeared to see their goal as publicly objecting to the injustice Palestinians experience under the “Israeli occupation,” Kirchick saw these actions as motivated by hatred or bias towards Jews.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

Kirchick explains that progressive journalism, higher education, and the non-profit world house such “hecklers” who are proponents of “‘intersectionality,’ a voguish theory purporting that power is inextricably linked to aspects of identity like race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation, and that an individual’s ‘marginalization’ is thus determined by their accumulation of various traits.”¹²³ Kirchick is so upset by the championing of “intersectionality” because he understands such an embrace to mean that “whoever shouts the loudest and claims victimization on account of more facets of their identity can expect to get what they demand, regardless of the quality or even logic of what they have to say.”¹²⁴ Kirchick explains that to be guided by “intersectionality” means that one must accept that identity politics trumps all else, and that discussion becomes impossible, replaced by condemnation. He goes on to explain that in addition to providing this threat to the “rights of the individual,” “intersectionality” also motivates the adoption of “agendas that have nothing to do with his or her own” and alliances with other groups who are “actively hostile to one’s cause.”¹²⁵ Accepting “intersectionality” Kirchick concludes, “inevitably lets the most radical and unscrupulous elements of any community badger and threaten their way to the top.”¹²⁶ Kirchick also engages in ad hominem attacks in this piece, as more pointedly demonstrated by what he says about Dean Spade and the two members of Dark Matter. Kirchick refers to the trio as “a professor at a third-rate law school and a pair of androgynous poets with a Twitter

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

account.”¹²⁷ Perhaps the most disturbing element of this characterization is that he dismissively and transphobically refers to the duo of Dark Matter as “androgynous,” as if their gender identities are part of what delegitimizes them, along, apparently, with the fact that like many activists they have Twitter accounts that they use for activism. Kirchick also seems to be attempting to demonize Spade, flippantly describing him as someone who works to shut down “traditional Jewish Sabbath events,” despite the reports from people on both sides of the controversy that the protest took place after the Shabbat service.¹²⁸

Zac Mordechai Levovitz, who is the Executive Director of Jewish Queer Youth (JQY), an organization for LGBTQ Jews from Orthodox families and communities based in New York, responded on social media with his negative reactions to Kirchick’s *Tablet* piece.¹²⁹ Levovitz wrote, “Shame on the Tablet Magazine for publishing a diatribe full of personal attacks, transphobic language and rudimentary understanding of the facts (and outright lies) pertaining to the recent controversy at the Creating Change Conference.”¹³⁰ Levovitz himself was at the protest, and can be seen in some of the footage of the protest available online. Levovitz’s response is particularly interesting because by his own account he argued for the A Wider Bridge reception featuring Jerusalem Open House to be part of the conference. He goes on to express emphatically, “hate pieces like this article are part of the problem not the solution!”¹³¹ Levovitz names the elements of the

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ More information about JQY is available here: <http://www.jqyouth.org/history.shtml>

¹³⁰ Levovitz posted this to Facebook on January 21, 2016.

¹³¹ Ibid.

piece that he finds particularly appalling, including the ridiculing and belittling of genderqueer activists in particular through the use of the phrase “a couple of androgynous protesters.” Levovitz expressed frustration at the use of this rhetoric in response to the protests, pointing out the ways it responds to *perceived* antisemitism with *blatant* transphobia. In the end he concluded that this method for reporting lowers the standards of the discourse that can happen in response to such an event. The *Tablet* piece from Levovitz’s perspective was not a genuine attempt to enter the difficult discourse on Israel/Palestine, and to consider thoughtfully the complicated opinions and politics Jews, and LGBTQ Jews in particular, hold with regard to the region.

It is interesting in and of itself that so many of the pieces of writing that appeared after the protest were opinion pieces. In Jewish media sources such as *Tablet Magazine*, *The Forward*, and *Jew School*, it seemed that almost no one attempted to put aside their personal opinions with regard to the matter and to write a piece that attempted to give an even hearing to both sides. Instead these media outlets often posted separate opinion pieces that represented each side of the debate. This reifies the perception that not only is the conflict irresolvable but the debate it spawns among those in the diaspora is similarly divisive. Indeed, conversations on the region often become heated and emotional quickly, and the logic and argumentation in these discussions are often rooted in opinion, without the acknowledgement that bias and perspective shape what each side considers “fact.” With this in mind I examine in turn the themes in argumentation that appeared in the responses of individuals and groups who identify as “pro-Israel” or “Zionist” as well as of those who identify as “non/anti-Zionist” or “in solidarity with Palestine.”

Arthur Slepian (the Founder and Director of A Wider Bridge) argued that BDS targets complexity, flattening the narrative about Israel and removing the possibility for empathy with Israelis. Slepian also accused BDS supporters of silencing conversations on Israel they do not want to hear. He said that it is unacceptable to define what it is to be a good queer person and to silence those who are not in agreement. He sees what the protesters did as shutting down conversation and disallowing multiple viewpoints. Slepian claims that the protesters disenfranchised Israel's LGBT community because of actions of the government, a response he considers "disgraceful."¹³² Dana Beyer, a transgender rights activist, also responded to the event, rejecting the intersectionality that motivated some people of color to take part in the protest. She argued that people of color are misguided if they see themselves as having something in common with Palestinians, stating that Palestinians are no more "of color" than some of those in Israel.¹³³ Presumably Beyer means in terms of actual skin color or appearance, which ignores the ways Palestinian identity is constructed differently than Israeli identity as well as the corresponding differences in social location and access to power. While others did not focus as much on the perceived intersections between people of color and Palestinians, some suggested that protesters were motivated by their "misguided" ideas that being a

¹³² Matt Simonette, "Protesters shut down Israel-focused event at Creating Change," *Windy City Times*, available from <http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/lgbt/Protesters-shut-down-Israel-focused-event-at-Creating-Change-/54056.html>, accessed January 23, 2016.

¹³³ Dana Beyer, "We Are Not Your Enemies – Pinklying, Pinkwashing, and the Decline of the LGBTQ Left," *Huffpost – The Blog*, available from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dana-beyer/we-are-not-your-enemies_b_9128730.html?mc_cid=22064f0024&mc_eid=30ec1e0dec, accessed May 14, 2017.

member of a marginalized group means that one should act in solidarity with other marginalized groups.

Ben Murane (President and a Senior Editor at the online publication *Jewschool*) argues that A Wider Bridge gives a home to diverse Jews who believe Israel has a right to exist, and he explicitly identifies Israel's existence as the offense that protesters were responding to.¹³⁴ Murane also responds to accusations from protesters that A Wider Bridge has ties in the political right, with organizations such as StandWithUs, claiming that they were last connected "half a decade ago" and that the organization brings groups and individuals from Israel to the U.S. who are vocally anti-occupation.

In addition to the responses collected above, I want to add one more voice, an account from someone who was present at the A Wider Bridge reception, who makes specific mention to race in the conflict at Creating Change, and who touches on the critique of intersectionality mentioned above. Hannah Elise Simpson is a transgender Jew, and she wrote about what she witnessed inside the reception hall with confusion. She explains that the protesters who made it inside the reception stormed the stage and took over the microphone and yelled. Much of the yelling was apparently inaudible over the music, but when the protesters chanted they said, "Black lives matter!" Simpson describes this choice of chant as feeling "oddly misplaced in a room where their captive

¹³⁴ Ben Murane, "Creating Change was Right to Reinstate A Wider Bridge: Ill-Informed Activists Hurt Two Movements at Once," *Jewschool*, available from <https://jewschool.com/2016/01/39041/creating-change-was-right-to-not-cancel-on-a-wider-bridge/>, accessed February 3, 2016.

audience overwhelmingly agreed.”¹³⁵ From Simpson’s perspective the chant had nothing to do with the reception, and she thought of herself and the others present as liberal Jews in agreement with the protesters that the lives of black people matter. She emphasizes her point by stating, “At least 130,000 black Jews are Israeli citizens, mostly rescued from Ethiopia in the 1980’s to 90’s, and A Wider Bridge works with the LGBTQ Ethiopian Jews.”¹³⁶ Simpson also argues that Israel does more than its neighbors to affirm the value of black lives and LGBTQ lives. As others did, Simpson argues against the logic of intersectionality, arguing that LGBTQ people are being exploited through the portrayal of Israel “as a racist and religious-extremist regime with a robust military.”¹³⁷ She calls this portrayal “a deliberately constructed fantasy playing at our collective heartstrings.”¹³⁸ Simpson suggests that “pinkwashing” provides a nonsensical kind of logic that would mean that “we would have no right to celebrate marriage equality here in the U.S., while Guantanamo Bay still holds detainees without due process.”¹³⁹ Her interpretation of the mission of the protesters and the logic of pinkwashing appears to be that no successes for LGBTQ rights can be celebrated in any country that also commits human rights violations. Simpson also comments on the controversy that erupted when the police were called to the protest. The fact that many conference goers were people of color, queer, trans, undocumented, and combinations of the above resulted in many expressing that the

¹³⁵ Hannah Elyse Simpson, “Chicago’s Creating Change Conference Was a Mess,” *The Advocate*, available from <http://www.advocate.com/commentary/2016/2/05/chicago-creating-change-conference-was-mess>, accessed February 25, 2016.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

police should not have been called. Simpson acknowledges the reality that there are “historically heightened risks that our populations face in any interaction with officers themselves or the justice system,” but, she argues, “this must not be twisted into impunity.”¹⁴⁰ Simpson suggests that the protesters may themselves recognize the unlikelihood of police being called and that could embolden a more “menacing demonstration.”¹⁴¹ She justifies such a claim in part by describing how when she tried to take a selfie with protesters who had taken over the stage in the reception she was assaulted by people who intentionally bumped her and physically stopped her from walking away. Simpson concludes her argument by again affirming that calling the police was the only choice and in fact that it should have happened sooner. She describes the roughly twenty officers she saw in the lobby as “courteous and professional,” and expresses believing “their presence prevented a potentially violent escalation within this private establishment, trumping protesters’ concerns about police abuse, detainment, or even deportation.”¹⁴²

Responses were also posted online from a “non/anti-Zionist” and/or “Palestine solidarity” perspective that defended the protesters. In general these arguments articulated that the protesters saw the reception held by A Wider Bridge as problematic for a variety of reasons including A Wider Bridge’s work getting LGBTQ Americans interested in Israel, the fact that they felt personally implicated as LGBTQ and Jewish people, and that they saw their mission as people concerned with social justice as

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

including a commitment to social justice for all. In other words, they resisted the notion that it is possible to talk about the state of LGBTQ rights in Israel without mention of Israel's treatment of Palestinians – especially LGBTQ Palestinians. An anonymous blogger posted based on their experience at the conference in response to those who claimed A Wider Bridge was targeted because of anti-Semitism. They explained, “The conference featured workshops on community engagement for LGBTQ+ Jewish organizations, queer Jewish/Muslim dialogue, Jews fighting right-wing exploitation of anti-Semitism, and a queer Jewish caucus, none of which attracted protests.”¹⁴³ The writer acknowledges that many people have looked at A Wider Bridge and Jerusalem Open House and been unclear about what they represent that is so objectionable, and so have concluded that the protests could only be rooted in anti-Semitism. However, they argue that A Wider Bridge fosters relationships with Israel among LGBTQ Americans, both Jewish and not. The organization is not right-wing, but they have partnered with “pro-settler hard-right organizations like StandWithUs to build support for Israel on the basis of (a subset of) its LGBTQ+ life” and “they write glowing profiles of Israeli hasbara (propaganda) practitioners.”¹⁴⁴ As they point out, the claim that Israel engages in propaganda should not be considered controversial considering that the Israeli government has openly admitted engaging in branding campaigns to reinvent its global image – aiming to alter its public image as a war torn country. In an op-ed in the *New*

¹⁴³ “If I am Not for Myself: Addressing Misconceptions About Creating Change and #CancelPinkwashing,” *Now Face North*, available from <http://nowfacenorth.com/2016/01/26/if-i-am-not-for-myself-addressing-misconceptions-about-creating-change-and-cancelpinkwashing/>, accessed May 14, 2017.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

York Times Sarah Shulman commented that in 2013, “the Israeli news site Ynet reported that the Tel Aviv tourism board had begun a campaign of around \$90 million to brand the city as ‘an international gay vacation destination.’”¹⁴⁵ A post on *Jew School* similarly argues that A Wider Bridge helps to “distribute anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab propaganda masquerading as support for LGBTQ rights. A recent example, from December 2014: they uncritically republished an execrable ad in the *New York Times* that demanded readers ‘support Israel’ because only there are LGBTQ people safe from oppression.”¹⁴⁶ The ad they reposted includes a picture and text of a man who identifies himself as a gay American who supports Israel. The text says, “If I lived in Gaza or Israel’s neighboring states, I would be thrown in jail, mutilated or killed.” The ad was taken out (and reposted) in 2014 during the Gaza war, ostensibly to rebuff criticism of Israel. The author(s) behind the *Jew School* posting note that Israel’s unpopularity during this time was connected to the perception that the war “looked a lot more like a massacre, costing more than 2000 Palestinian lives, including more than 500 children.”¹⁴⁷ This campaign is upsetting to Palestine solidarity activists who identify it as a component of pinkwashing. They note that pinkwashing campaigns often include an element that “appeals to racist and colonial notions of Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims as backwards

¹⁴⁵ Sarah Shulman, “Israel and ‘Pinkwashing,’” *The New York Times*, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/23/opinion/pinkwashing-and-israels-use-of-gays-as-a-messaging-tool.html>, accessed January 14, 2016.

¹⁴⁶ “Creating Change Was Right to Cancel on A Wider Bridge: They Should Never Have Been Invited in the First Place,” available from, <https://jewschool.com/2016/01/38991/creating-change-was-right-to-cancel-on-a-wider-bridge/>, accessed January 23, 2016.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

and intolerant in contrast to the supposedly enlightened Western liberalism of Israel.”¹⁴⁸

From this perspective the protests provided an opportunity for individuals and groups at Creating Change, some of which are Palestinian, to show their discontent about participating in a conference alongside an organization that participates in the oppression of Arabs living in Israel/Palestine. Shulman also points out that homosexuality was decriminalized in the West Bank in the 1950s, “when anti-sodomy laws imposed under British colonial influence were removed from the Jordanian penal code, which Palestinians follow.”¹⁴⁹ Though Shulman does not elaborate, there is irony here in that the legacy of views towards homosexuality in Palestine is tied to colonialism, both in that Palestine inherited British laws criminalizing homosexuality and in that as some Western colonial entities have championed LGBTQ identity and rights some colonized countries have responded by seeing homosexuality as a Western and/or white “disease.” Shulman also argues that “pinkwashing” has a lose-lose effect where the gains in Israel’s LGBTQ community are manipulated disingenuously for the purpose of the state, and the reality that there are Palestinian LGBTQ rights organizations is ignored. There are, in fact, multiple prominent LGBTQ Palestinian organizations including Aswat, AlQaws, and Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions.

Though some “pro-Israel” organizations and individuals were critical or dubious of what they saw as an imagined connection between Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the

¹⁴⁸ Jimmy Pasch, “Don’t Pinkwash Apartheid.”

¹⁴⁹ Sarah Shulman, “Israel and ‘Pinkwashing,’” *The New York Times*, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/23/opinion/pinkwashing-and-israels-use-of-gays-as-a-messaging-tool.html>, accessed January 14, 2016.

protest of the A Wider Bridge reception, BLM Chicago drew correlations between the experiences of black individuals in the U.S. and Palestinians. They released a statement on the subject stating,

They/We navigate heavily surveilled and detained realities on tightropes. They/We are expected to be grateful to those that itemize their/our pain to strengthen existing norms... As They/We all struggle to achieve healing, safety and autonomy in our own lives, families and communities, let us commit to mobilize ourselves and honor the self-determined struggles of Palestine so as to divest from the violence of the Occupation.¹⁵⁰

The Movement for Black Lives also included in the policy statement they released a statement in support of Palestine and critical of the actions of Israel, which the movement labeled with terms such as “apartheid” and “genocide.” The backlash was substantial, and some Jewish organizations – including the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) in Boston – responded by publicly removed their support from the Movement for Black Lives. However, some progressive Jews were outraged by the JCRC’s response, and an article appeared in *The Forward* titled “Don’t like Black Lives Matter? Get Ready to Lose Young Jews Like Us.”¹⁵¹

In an op-ed on *Truthout* Wendy Elisheva Somerson, writes about how many activists involved in protests like the one at Creating Change subscribe to an intersectional analysis of power and oppression, which motivates them to see “LGBTQ

¹⁵⁰ “Stop Pinkwashing at Creating Change,” *Black Lives Matter: Chicago – Tumblr*. <http://blacklivesmatterchicago.tumblr.com/post/137700629560/black-lives-matter-chicago-website-facebook>, accessed February 23, 2017.

¹⁵¹ Ally Little and Michelle Weiser, “Don’t Like Black Lives Matter? Get Ready to Lose Young Jews Like Us,” *The Forward*, available from <http://forward.com/opinion/346901/dont-like-black-lives-matter-get-ready-to-lose-young-jews-like-us/>, accessed August 8, 2016.

identities as inextricably intertwined with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality.”¹⁵² Somerson also disputes the notion that the protest was anti-Semitic, specifically pointing to the chant “From the river to the sea Palestine will be free” and suggesting that it “simply promotes a vision of a liberated Palestine.”¹⁵³ Somerson further accuses those who equate Palestinian freedom and Israeli annihilation of revealing “their view of the relationship between Israel and Palestine as a zero-sum game in which only one group of people, Israeli Jews, deserves liberation.”¹⁵⁴

Similarly, Jimmy Pasch, the JVP West Regional organizer, argues that solidarity with LGBTQ people means solidarity with LGBTQ Palestinians, and the greatest threat they face – like all Palestinians – is from the Israeli state. Pasch echoes Nada Elia, noting that “anti-pinkwashing activists have long observed, there’s no pink door in the apartheid wall.”¹⁵⁵ Pasch elaborates, arguing that pinkwashing rhetoric erases queer Palestinians or uses them as props, promoting Israel as the savior of LGBTQ people who are persecuted in Palestine. Shiri Eisner, a bisexual, genderqueer, feminist, anarchist, activist and writer who lives in Tel Aviv, Israel has written on *Pulse Media* about the complexities of Israeli treatment of queer Palestinians, explaining for LGBTQ Palestinians,

living in Gaza and the occupied territories, the government offers the benefit of an illegal immigrant status, imprisoning and subsequently deporting the ones caught by Israeli police and military forces. As for Palestinian LGBT’s who live within Israeli borders, the government

¹⁵² Wendy Elisheva Somerson, “Widening the Frame: The connections Between Queer and Palestinian Liberation,” *Truthout*, available from <http://www.truthout.org/opinion/item/34655-widening-the-frame-the-connections-between-queer-and-palestinian-liberation>, accessed February 23, 2016.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Jimmy Pasch. “Don’t Pinkwash Apartheid.”

remains indifferent to their condition and lends no resources, help, nor sanctuary for those in need of its assistance. Thus the Israeli government is free to ignore the needs of Palestinian LGBT's seeking help, while capitalizing on Palestinian society's alleged conservatism and LGBT-phobia for its own needs of propaganda... even those Palestinian LGBT's residing in Israel, accepted by their families and living a peaceful life, are still forced to face copious amounts of racism and apartheid policies in their everyday lives, including within the Jewish LGBT community [in Israel].¹⁵⁶

The Jewish Queer Youth (JQY) team also posted a response to the protest and the aftermath on their website blog. In the post they present their viewpoints, as individuals who were present both outside in the hallway where the bulk of the protest occurred as well as inside the reception room where protesters took over the stage. The JQY team describes the protesters who entered the room as vocal but not physical, and explains that at one point they tried to leave but were stopped by the hotel's security.¹⁵⁷ This point is interesting because it describes a less hostile environment than the one Hannah Elise Simpson describes. It is not clear how violent (or not) the protest was, but there are accounts of pushing, aggression, and name-calling on both sides. The JQY team also expresses their disappointment with the LGBTQ Task Force for not creating a safe way for people to both enter the A Wider Bridge event and to protest without the risk of arrest. The JQY statement concludes with a call for dialogue and listening, suggesting that "just like one can only learn about someone's gender identity and sexual orientation by

¹⁵⁶ Shiri Eisner, "BDS, LGBT, and Why You Should Care About Pinkwashing," *Pulse Media*, available from <https://pulsemedia.org/2011/07/20/bds-lgbt-and-why-you-should-care-about-pinkwashing/>, accessed February 23, 2016.

¹⁵⁷ "JQY at the National LGBTQ Creating Change Conference: What really happened," *Jewish Queer Youth Blog*, available from <http://jqyouth.blogspot.com/2016/01/jqy-at-national-lgbtq-creating-change.html>, accessed January 27, 2016.

listening to how that person self identifies, we cannot make assumptions about what loving or criticizing Israel means to someone until we allow them to express the full complexities of this relationship.”¹⁵⁸ However, some are critical of the calls for dialogue that followed the protest. Jimmy Pasch argues that dialogue that includes everyone sounds good in theory but “conceals the power dynamics at play,” distracting from the violence faced by Palestinians and “appealing to a simplistic, power-erasing notion of tolerance.”¹⁵⁹

As we’ve seen, the political situation in Israel-Palestine is a topic that can be polarizing in both LGBTQ and Jewish communities. The LGBTQ community is not unified regarding Israel; some denounce Israel as a perpetrator of human rights violations and racist and colonialist policies, while others argue its record on LGBTQ rights warrants support. However, some Palestine-solidarity activism finds its roots in the LGBTQ community. This is demonstrated by the substantial LGBTQ presence within Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), an activist organization that works in solidarity with marginalized individuals and groups in Israel/Palestine. JVP’s growing numbers also reflect that Jews (both LGBTQ and not) are increasingly divided over Israel. Here I explore the diversity of opinions within LGBTQ Jewish community regarding Israel. I consider the complex factors that inform participants’ politics with regard to the conflict, including ties to Israel/Palestine, queer politics, and Jewish ethics. I further consider the significance of JVP’s Jewish affiliation for participants in the organization. Research

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Jimmy Pasch. “Don’t Pinkwash Apartheid.”

participants commonly cited two reasons for their specific involvement with a Jewish activist organization addressing Israel/Palestine: the diminished potential for anti-Semitic rhetoric at protests and events, and the interweaving of Judaism and activism. JVP makes Judaism central to its activism, including Jewish ritual and symbolism in its protests which focus on justice and liberation for all peoples.

One example of such an event was a JVP protest of Israel's planned expulsion of Bedouin people and the demolition of their homes. The Bedouin are Arab citizens of Israel who are indigenous to the region. As part of this protest JVP members constructed a sukkah (temporary shelter) outside of the Israeli Consulate. This was not only meant as a timely marker of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, but also as a point of connection with the Bedouin who live in impermanent dwellings and whose homes were under threat of demolition. Sukkot is a holiday that marks the period of time when the Hebrews wandered in the desert, as well as the harvest period. On the side of the sukkah was a sign that said, "On Sukkot, Jews welcome people in our homes. Israel Expels the Bedouin from theirs. Stop the Praver Plan!" The event itself was advertised through a press release from JVP with the headline "Boston Jews Mark Holiday by Protesting the Praver Plan, Israel's Expulsion of Bedouin People." Jewish Voice for Peace constructed a sukkah outside the Israeli Consulate in response to the "Israeli Praver Plan, which would expel 40,000 Bedouin people from their homes."¹⁶⁰ In terms of the anticipated impact of

¹⁶⁰ "Boston Jews Mark Holiday by Protesting the Praver Plan, Israel's Expulsion of Bedouin People," *Jewish Voice for Peace: Boston*, available from <http://jvp-boston.org/press-release-boston-jews-mark-holiday-protesting-praver-plan-israels-expulsion-bedouin-people/>, accessed January 30, 2016.

the bill should it pass, “United Nations Human Rights Chief, Navi Pillay stated that ‘if this bill becomes law, it will accelerate the demolition of entire Bedouin communities, forcing them to give up their homes, denying them their rights to land ownership, and decimating their traditional cultural and social life in the name of development.’”¹⁶¹ The protest involved roughly forty individuals gathering outside the Consulate, chanting “Bedouin land in Bedouin hands” and attempting to inform passersby about the Praver plan, the threat to Bedouins, and what they can do to prevent the plan from passing. People were encouraged to post on social media, call the consulate, write letters to the local news, and to attend other related events in the area.

The sukkah was not chosen as the focal point for this protest simply because it parallels the impermanent dwellings that the Bedouin call home, it was also present because the protest overlapped with Sukkot, occurring on the final day of the holiday. A member of Jewish Voice for Peace who had recently been in Israel and had been welcomed into Bedouin homes while there, “led protesters in the Sukkot ritual of shaking the Lulav and Etrog.”¹⁶² These are ritual items; the former refers to palm fronds but often is used to collectively describe palm fronds, myrtle, and willow branches, and the latter is a citron fruit. Jews observing Sukkot hold the two items together and wave or shake them symbolically as part of the holiday ritual. After the ritual shaking of the Lulav and Etrog the protesters marched through the Boston Common. Another JVP member argued that the plan is unjust because Israel would provide protection for the Bedouin villages if they

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

were Jewish, which constitutes the indefensible use of “different laws and policy for different citizens, based only on ethnicity.”¹⁶³

The issue of Israel/Palestine is complicated for many LGBTQ Jews who often feel activated around the issue as a result of one or both of these identities. Some Jews feel implicated by and/or invested in what happens in Israel and Palestine because Israel is the so-called “Jewish state” or because they otherwise understand Israel’s actions as done in their names as Jews. LGBTQ identity can also be significant for shaping the opinions of LGBTQ Jews on Israel/Palestine, both negatively and positively. LGBTQ Jews may be angered by what they see as “pinkwashing,” or Israel’s strategic use of LGBTQ people to improve its image; or they may feel proud that Israel possesses a positive record on LGBTQ rights. Of course, many participants’ responses about Israel and Palestine reflect a combination of these thoughts, feelings, and reactions, leading many to experience intense ambivalence on the question of Israel and Palestine. In the following section of this chapter, I consider how participants’ Jewish and LGBTQ identities influence their opinions on Israel/Palestine, as well as how their political positions with regard to the region affect their experiences in Jewish and LGBTQ community in the U.S.

My participants’ perceptions about Israel and Palestine were colored not only by their current experiences and social groups, but also by their experiences growing up. In particular, participants cited the Jewish communities and institutions they were part of as children and youths as shaping their ideas about Israel, and what their relationship to the country should be. Some participants described this as a kind of mythology or

¹⁶³ Ibid.

propaganda perpetuated in Jewish community. As Lauren told me in our interview, “I think that modern Judaism is too caught up with Israel... and that turns away a lot of people of my generation who... who are put through a lot of Hazbarah (propaganda) about Israel and didn’t have the ability to speak up about it and then got completely turned off to the whole idea of the Zionist enterprise... we asked a generation of young Jews to be both political liberals and social justice people and Zionists and now they’re deciding not to be Zionists because they don’t see them as compatible...”¹⁶⁴

Vanessa told me about the complications of growing up with a Zionist father. She said,

I didn’t realize [Zionism] was something I could disagree with until much later in life. I didn’t realize that it’s not normal to be indiscriminately pro-Israel and it’s not normal to have this intense fear and hatred of Arabs. And so once I figured that out things changed but for many many years of my life that’s all I knew and that’s all I understood, which is kind of fascinating.¹⁶⁵

Vanessa saw her father’s influence as part of the picture of why she did not have clearly developed Israel politics as an adult. These politics have “either been something that have been spoon-fed to me and I’ve just sort of assumed as truth or things I’ve felt sort of... confused because I didn’t know where to start. I felt like I had a lot of misinformation... I guess I don’t align myself with where my dad is at but also... I don’t know what else there is.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Lauren, interview by author, 25 November 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

¹⁶⁵ Vanessa, interview by author, 22 November 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

For some participants, the narratives they acquired in their youth about Israel and Palestine were challenged by experiences they had in college and their adult lives. Diana explained how she grew up in a reform Jewish community where Jewish rituals and culture united her family, and going to synagogue and being a Bat Mitzvah were part of her pre-college experience. She described Israel as not explicitly a big deal in her family or congregation, but that it rose to the surface in times of conflict. She learned from her community that “there were people who wanted to kill Jews” and she explained, “I felt... excitement around Israel, there were not many Jews it was an extremely white and non-Jewish area... so Israel was exciting because everyone was Jewish like me...”¹⁶⁷ When Diana went to college Judaism became more central in her life and so did Israel, along with her development of other political opinions like those about domestic US issues and about the Iraq war. Diana said,

I learned about this thing called the occupation and that like that was bad. So then I went on a birthright trip which I knew to be a little bit skeptical of ... And my trip happened to coincide with Operation Cast Lead in 2008/2009... if I hadn't had such a terrible birthright trip I don't know if Israel/Palestine would have become such a big thing for me.¹⁶⁸

Diana explained that the lack of space to process the war on her Birthright trip was upsetting to her, as was the narrative that “the army was killing the terrorists and that was consistent with Israel’s history in which the terrorists would try to kill us and we would defend ourselves.”¹⁶⁹ As part of the Birthright trip they went to a Mega Event, where multiple Birthright trips get together to watch a celebratory performance featuring Israeli

¹⁶⁷ Diana, interview by author, 27 September 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

pop singers, which was particularly disturbing to Diana. “It was so upsetting like we’re bombing Gaza right now, why are we waving Israeli flags and cheering and talking about how Israel is the best place and not mourning the civilian deaths?”¹⁷⁰ Although these events were upsetting to Diana, more than these experiences it was perhaps the responses of the tour guide that had the greatest impact on her desire to engage in activism around Israel and Palestine. She described being met with close-minded responses when she questioned the tour guide’s narratives. Diana told me,

the guide pointed out the separation wall, the apartheid wall, and said look at this it keeps us safe it’s not hurting anybody you might have heard bad things but without it we’d all be dead or something like that and I raised my hand and asked what was here before the wall, I see towns and houses around the wall and he was like nothing was here before and... he was like that’s bullshit about all my questions and I was really annoyed that no one else on my trip seemed bothered by the blatant racist propaganda...¹⁷¹

Diana took the guide’s responses personally and as a challenge to some of the core values that she had understood about Judaism growing up. “It just made me really angry because I felt like Birthright was built up as this important rite of passage and... I was just feeling disrespected and it made me upset, it made me doubt much of what I’d heard about Israel, it made me doubt much of what I’d heard about the Jewish community and the importance of asking questions and studying and discussing things.”¹⁷² Diana concluded that what made her really want to be outspoken about Israel/Palestine was that she “felt belittled by the propaganda” she heard on her trip.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

Another participant, Annie, described a familiar experience for many Jewish school children: planting trees, or supporting the planting of trees, in Israel. She explained that while this was an action that she thought of as positive social justice work when she was young she later came to interpret this planting of trees as part of Israel's attempt, "to cover up what had been Palestinian land, homes, or olive trees, or whatever."¹⁷⁴ As an adult Annie works with Jewish Voice for Peace, educating young people about Israel and Palestine as a seemingly intentional move to counteract what she experienced as one-sided pro-Israel rhetoric at her Jewish school growing up. Annie also expressed that something drew her to this work, which was not the only choice for her career nor the easiest since it created some tension between her and her parents. While she struggled to say what exactly compelled her to do this work despite the difficulties, she was clear that she is able to do the work because she does it with queer people. She said, "If it was just a straight community that was doing Palestine solidarity work I don't think I would have gotten involved as intensely. I think it's because it's my friends and my lovers doing this work, but I think if it were missing that component I wouldn't have gotten so involved because it's hard, it's hard work."¹⁷⁵ The work is hard according to Annie both because the end goal is a lofty one: ending the occupation, and because doing Palestine solidarity work can create tensions with some Jewish friends and family.

Mark, who works with Jewish Voice for Peace, told me that as a young man he was a vocal Zionist, and what started him questioning this position was an experience

¹⁷⁴ Annie, interview by author, 21 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

with a member of the Israeli government during a mock interview. The interview was required for gaining entry to a trip in Israel, and the interview was with an elite member of the Israeli government who asked Mark about the Oslo Accords. He asked whether Mark thought there should be a Palestinian state. Mark told me, “I quoted the stuff I had been fed, there are 20-whatever Arab countries, why don’t they go there? And he was like, ‘I think that’s really uncompassionate of you, the Palestinians deserve a state just like the Jews do.’ And that really threw me and made me think.”¹⁷⁶

Participants were also influenced by experiences in Israel and with Israeli family and friends. James explained that because Israelis helped raise him and because his parents spent time in Israel, he is sensitive to criticisms of Israel that seem to generalize about Israel or Israelis. He sees the oversimplification of both Israel and Palestine, as well as Israelis and Palestinians, as a disservice. He told me that, “When people talk about Israel/Palestine on both sides people forget that these are complex people with complex needs.”¹⁷⁷ Using language that casts either side as monsters or Palestinians as terrorists, or letting whole countries be defined by their governments, loses the nuance that James believes is essential for productive conversation: “I don’t like political conversations that are just about vilifying people.”¹⁷⁸ Zoey expressed a similar sentiment, explaining that since she lived in Israel for a year and a half she has a strong emotional tie to it. She also said that living in Israel with a gay roommate who had grown up in the American south was an amazing experience, because she got to watch him blossom. She also articulated

¹⁷⁶ Mark, interview by author, 20 January 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

¹⁷⁷ James, interview by author, 29 April 2015, Los Angeles, CA, tape recording.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

her frustration with monolithic narratives about Israel and Palestine. Zoey told me that for her, the communities that “are so pro-Israel that any questioning is seen as anti-Jewish... [are] just as wrong as [those that say] Israel is an evil colonizing apartheid state.”¹⁷⁹

Though Zoey expressed discomfort about vilification aimed at either Israel or Palestine, she clarified that as someone who largely exists in liberal circles she is very aware of the particular discomfort she experiences in these liberal circles, which “lean towards the more anti-Israel side.”¹⁸⁰ She said, “I get uncomfortable... I find that a lot of the anti-Israel sentiment also shuts down conversation. I recognize many with pro-Israel sentiments also shut down conversation too but I think that’s the most dangerous thing we could do, to stop talking about it.”¹⁸¹

Gabriela described a scene she witnessed while in Israel with her partner, Heather, that stuck with her and continues to affect her perception of Israel.

I remember the first time we went to Israel, Heather and I were in a cab going to the airport and I saw these men. It was like four o’clock in the morning, I saw these men with their hands behind their head and these soldiers kind of checking them out and one of them was standing with a gun and I can’t remember exactly what the taxi driver said but he saw my face as I watched them and I think it was made clear that they were Palestinians and he was telling Heather, “tell your friend not to worry about what’s happening there.”¹⁸²

This was Gabriela’s first time traveling to Israel, and at the time she was living in New York. She told me that before she visited she did not know much about the conflict, but seeing that scene as they drove to the airport she drew a clear connection between racist

¹⁷⁹ Zoey, interview by author, 13 May 2015, Los Angeles, CA, tape recording.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Gabriela, interview by author, 15 February 2014, Boston, MA, tape recording.

and oppressive policies in the U.S., and New York specifically, and what she witnessed in Israel. “Especially now in relevant news the idea of ‘stop and frisk’... and policing based on color and economic opportunity and kind of starving certain people of certain land, using structures of power, that while this place felt so far away, the discussion, what was happening was actually very much something I could recognize in NYC.”¹⁸³

Gabriela also spoke about how her experiences and expectations when she travels abroad are shaped by the experience of being a person of color.

I often think when I visit certain countries, how am I read? Who is the local brown person here? If you go to, you know, Paris or largely within France am I read as a person of either Arab or Muslim [descent]? You know going to Israel, am I read as Ethiopian or Palestinian, or another person from the broader Arabian diaspora? And I think that’s something I also carry with me, and it also affects my lens and how I process certain things that happen.¹⁸⁴

Heather described her experience in LGBTQ and Jewish communities as someone who grew up in Zionist community and is surrounded as an adult by both Jewish and queer community. As a result, she feels sympathy for a variety of positions but is ultimately resistant to the far-left position she sees as common in queer community: to show solidarity for Palestine and to be a proponent of BDS. Heather explained that being in queer community has influenced her to be more left, and that she is thankful for critical voices on Israel, but she asserted that she is not in favor of BDS. She explained the tension between queer support for Palestine and her resistance towards BDS: “Earlier this year someone sent out an email about buying candles to support [Palestine] and I really

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

wanted to send an email being like I'm glad you're doing this but I'm not really at the place... I'm not at the point of boycott..."¹⁸⁵ Heather also expressed a desire to question the assumptions that may be present in queer community that all other members of the queer community are in support of Palestinians and/or BDS. While Heather described herself as feeling solidarity with Palestinians she also explained that she has family that lives in the settlements and pointed out that there are "economic reasons people live there, not just because of their religious or political beliefs."¹⁸⁶ Heather also mentioned that while Palestinian voices have historically not been as loud as Israeli ones, in Jamaica Plain there is "some contextual privileging of those voices," she said, "that's so precious and I don't want to squelch that but I also want to figure out where my voice is... I do support Palestinian rights and I do want [Israel], just a really different one."¹⁸⁷

A number of participants articulated a complicated relationship on the part of LGBTQ Jews toward Israel. David told me that he sees Tel Aviv as a location elevated in the minds of some LGBTQ people: "It's interesting, I think the queer community in general has started to develop an awareness of Tel Aviv pride and has almost romanticized it... they don't have day to day understanding of what's happening politically on the ground there."¹⁸⁸ Two participants also made the connection between patriarchal or misogynistic attitudes towards women in Israel in comparison with

¹⁸⁵ Heather, interview by author, 15 January 2014, Boston, MA, tape recording.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ David, interview by author, 30 January 2015, Los Angeles, MA, tape recording.

LGBTQ Jewish experiences. Though Rebecca described Israel as a very liberal and accepting place, she told me about a memory she had of a trip she took there in her teens:

I remember we were going to walk through this ultra-Orthodox area... and you know the girls had to wear skirts... and I remember it really bothered me... And we were warned people might throw stones or spit on us. I remember thinking that was so absurd that ultra-Orthodox Jews wouldn't accept us... So that is very similar I would imagine to the hatred that a lot of people in the queer community fear.¹⁸⁹

Eli compared his experiences in Israel, explaining that he was put off both by synagogues where women and men were separated and by an encounter with an Orthodox woman who wouldn't shake his hand for religious reasons. Eli said, "I was so put off by that because where is the equality?"¹⁹⁰ Luis and Eitan, who are partners, described a situation where they were uninvited to a Passover meal while in Israel. Luis told me, the woman who extended the invite "believed that because I was gay I could not have legitimately undergone conversion... and therefore I wasn't a Jew and couldn't be at a Passover Seder."¹⁹¹ Eitan added, "What I've experienced is like you can be gay and secular but the idea of being gay and caring about religious Judaism that's a lot less open."¹⁹² This was echoed by Jon, who as a gay, single, rabbinical student temporarily living in Tel Aviv, described missing the experience of being part of a practicing Jewish community as well as having a lot of difficulty dating. Jon said,

I didn't have a Shabbat community, I was single at the time and was going on dates with people and... had to accept that every time I told them what I did that was the last date. It was a totally different Jewish identity like all these people were just like we're Israeli that's it we're not Jewish we don't

¹⁸⁹ Rebecca, interview by author, 14 November 2014, Los Angeles, CA, tape recording.

¹⁹⁰ Eli, interview by author, 19 December 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

¹⁹¹ Luis, interview by author, 14 January 2014, Boston, MA, tape recording.

¹⁹² Eitan, interview by author, 14 January 2014, Boston, MA, tape recording.

understand why you'd want anything to do with this terrible oppressive religion.¹⁹³

Participants also told me about their experiences of homophobia in Israel. Tess explained that her partner, Jenny, who is gender nonconforming, was harassed in public on multiple occasions. In Tess's own words Jenny, "got called 'dyke' in four different languages."¹⁹⁴ Another participant described worrying about how taxi drivers were perceiving his gender, being harassed in the *Shuk* (open air market) in Jerusalem and on the streets and clubs in Tel Aviv, and being asked by adult strangers on multiple occasions, "are you a boy or a girl?"¹⁹⁵

When I asked participants about the stances of Jewish institutions with regard to Israel many participants explained that the synagogues and Jewish organizations they were a part of were often silent on Israel. Jacob, a rabbinical student in Boston, told me that at the liberal suburban Reform temple where he worked, "it's mostly not talked about at all."¹⁹⁶ He explained that the silence on Israel was also because the clergy isn't interested in talking about it. "One of the clergy is not a Zionist and one of them doesn't know how they feel.... Some of the congregants would like it to be more of an issue. We did a forum about it last year. But it's like you know if the rabbi doesn't want to talk about it from the *bimah*, then he's not going to talk about it from the *bimah*."¹⁹⁷ Craig, a

¹⁹³ Jon, interview by author, 9 January 2014, Boston, MA, tape recording.

¹⁹⁴ Tess, interview by author, 6 November 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

¹⁹⁵ Because Hebrew is a gendered language even the asking of this question reveals the asker's assumptions about the gender of the person they pose the question to.

¹⁹⁶ Jacob, interview by author, 21 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. The "bimah" is the stage in the synagogue where the rabbi conducts services and gives sermons.

rabbinical student at a Reconstructionist rabbinical school in another state who was living in Boston at the time of my research compared his school with the rabbinical school many of his friends attended in Boston. Craig said,

At [the school in Boston] there doesn't feel like there's a lot of space for critique of Israel. There are obviously students who are actively engaged in that work and I don't think the school makes space for it as opposed to [my school] which last year had a JVP, Jewish Voice for Peace, info session with the rabbinical students who were on the rabbinical council and this year they were doing a series of reconstructionist rabbis who do different Israel political work and they brought Alissa Wise who's the Director of Organizing, a rabbi, to be like one of the examples of how reconstructionist rabbis engage in political work around Israel/Palestine.¹⁹⁸

Diana, who works for Jewish Voice for Peace, described the alienation many of her friends feel because of the way Jewish institutions and organizations handle Israel/Palestine. She told me,

I think the Jewish queer community would be much stronger and bigger and more welcoming and comforting if Jewish organizations would stop censoring open conversation around Israel because I think many of the same people who are turned off by Jewish organizations because of the queer politics are also turned off because of the Israel politics and there's a huge population for whom you can't just address one of those and not the other.¹⁹⁹

Israel/Palestine is a topic not only avoided in synagogues, but also often absent from Jewish organizations as well. Liora told me that at the Boston Moshe Kavod House (also called MKH or Kavod), Israel/Palestine was not often discussed. She said, "I just think we don't really talk about it that much, especially at Kavod, I mean we talk about it more in the mainstream I mean I know it's important to the mainstream Jewish

¹⁹⁸ Craig, interview by author, 16 December 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

¹⁹⁹ Diana, interview by author, 27 September 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

communities but I'm not a part of that discussion."²⁰⁰ Liora's distinction between the conversation about Israel in the Jewish mainstream and the political conversations at MKH, which do not address Israel, is informative because it highlights a disparity between the frequency of conversation about Israel in mainstream Jewish institutions and progressive Jewish communities.

Noga told me about her experiences with Nehirim, a now defunct organization that conducted retreats for LGBTQ Jews for a number of years. While she appreciated the absence of explicit Zionism at the Nehirim retreats, she said that she knew the organization was affiliated with Zionism. Noga told me, "People who've worked for the organization have been very outspoken Zionists. So I haven't experienced any explicit Zionism or pinkwashing as part of Nehirim but more and more I really do not feel comfortable being in Jewish spaces that don't explicitly at the very least take some critical perspective on Israel."²⁰¹ For Noga, if an organization had proclaimed Zionist leanings that was enough for her to opt out of participation in that organization or synagogue. When it comes to synagogues she said, if "there's an Israeli flag on the *bimah* or something, I wouldn't go to a place like that."²⁰² Israel politics are also sometimes perceived to limit the kinds of conversations that are possible within Jewish community. Nikki lamented that,

Because of the funding that [Jewish organizations] get, they are very restricted in how they can have conversations about Israel. So, that is very hard, again it brings up this question of like if we're taking Jewish money can we really do all of the work that we need to do. Can we exist as Jewish

²⁰⁰ Liora, interview by author, 12 February 2014, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²⁰¹ Noga, interview by author, 28 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²⁰² Ibid.

institutions without funding? There are tradeoffs and there are things we're doing in the world now with this so called tainted money.²⁰³

Nikki points out that even organizations that do not have explicit stances on Israel/Palestine are sometimes limited in the programming they can offer or the political work they can do because of where their funding comes from. For example, my participants informed me that many Jewish organizations receive funding from Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP), a pro-Israel organization. As a result, this creates pressure on Jewish organizations that receive funding from CJP not to challenge Zionism or engage in dialogue on Israel/Palestine (other than pro-Israel discourse). As Diana told me, "I think a lot of people in the Boston Jewish community are curious to see how far organizations that get funding through CJP can push the envelope when it comes to Israel/Palestine..."²⁰⁴ She also explained that some organizations that could be obvious allies for the work of Jewish Voice for Peace are not viable choices because of accepting funds from CJP and/or because of work with the Israeli consulate.

Some participants complained that they felt like they did not know enough about the political situation in Israel/Palestine to feel comfortable loudly proclaiming their position or debating it with others. Nadine, a rabbinical student, said that the framework of being either for or against on the topic of Israel/Palestine left her feeling unsafe to vocalize her questions.²⁰⁵ A common refrain is that the conflict is "too complicated" and as a result many wash their hands of trying to understand it. Jewish Voice for Peace has

²⁰³ Nikki, interview by author, 31 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²⁰⁴ Diana, interview by author, 27 September 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²⁰⁵ Nadine, interview by author, 6 December 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

made efforts to address this directly, providing education on Israel/Palestine for those who want it. However, their educational platform has not been welcomed in all organizations within the Jewish community. These attitudes were not limited to Boston. Deborah in Los Angeles works for a mainstream Jewish organization, and explained that working for a pro-Israel organization may mean pressure is exerted “on employees to have that same politic or to remain quiet.”²⁰⁶ Deborah said that because she cannot necessarily be transparent about her Israel/Palestine politics, in her work with young Jews she frames herself as a humanitarian, implying that she has an interest in treating all people humanely. Stacey leads an LGBT teen group at a synagogue in Los Angeles, which she describes as “StandWithUs and AIPAC supporters...” she says of talking about Israel/Palestine with those at the synagogue: “we’re just not going to have that conversation I guess.”²⁰⁷

From the perspective of Jewish institutions themselves Israel is a tricky topic, since it has the power to be divisive and alienating. Arguably this is why so many institutions avoid the topic of Israel altogether. Rabbi Lisa Edwards at BCC told me, “I think that most members lean left on Israel but not exclusively by any means and that’s probably the place that we sort of more run the gamut than any other.”²⁰⁸ She also explained how Israel had been divisive at one time, and in response to the rift she saw forming she chose to move away from discussion of Israel/Palestine and to “keep

²⁰⁶ Deborah, interview by author, 30 April 2015, Los Angeles, CA, tape recording.

²⁰⁷ Stacey, interview by author, 16 January 2015, Los Angeles, CA, tape recording.

²⁰⁸ Rabbi Lisa, interview by author, 27 April 2015, Los Angeles, CA, tape recording.

services a healing place.”²⁰⁹ This pressure is also experienced by those who work within

LGBTQ Jewish organizations. Idit Klein at Keshet said,

It’s been stressful for me professionally... to kind of sit at the helm of an organization whose constituents span the gamut from radical queer anti-Zionists to right wing AIPAC supporters and you know most people are somewhere in between but obviously it’s the people on the extremes who are most vociferous and you know I was born in Israel and my family’s Israeli and I grew up identifying as Israeli and have a very strong connection to Israel, which you know is also a painful connection because Israel is far from the country that I want it to be. But I am committed to it kind of being the country that I want it to be as opposed to working for its dismantlement. And so it’s definitely been challenging to over the years, I have found myself in settings where, I think in certain lefty settings there’s an assumption that if you’re queer that you identify as anti-Zionist you know, and certain other settings there’s a perception that if you’re queer you want to just talk about how being gay in Israel is so great all the time.²¹⁰

Participants also shared with me how their Israel politics impacted their lives, even outside of Jewish institutions and organizations. Jocelyn told me about her experience writing for the school paper in college, where an article was submitted for publication about rape culture on her campus specifically focused on sexual harassment experienced by staff. According to Jocelyn this article was rejected by men on the editorial staff who dismissed rape culture as an invented term. Around the same time another article was submitted by two Palestinian students on campus “about how the Israeli government had detained... SAT exams” from reaching students in Ramallah.²¹¹ Jocelyn explained that there were two Palestinian students from Ramallah who had attended the Ramallah Friends School, which sends people to her university almost every

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Idit, interview by author, 21 February 2014, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²¹¹ Jocelyn, interview by author, 8 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

year. Since the school is in the West Bank “Israeli officials detained all the SAT exams that were supposed to be administered in October so they couldn’t go through and so it was like the day before and they were canceling [the exam] because they didn’t have physical exams.”²¹² This meant that the students would not be able to apply to college that application cycle. As a result the students at her university wrote an op-ed about these events, and because they knew Jocelyn they sent it to her. After she sent it on it was heavily challenged, the Palestinian students who wrote it had to “call the college board, call the Israeli mail service, call officials at the school... they also had the word apartheid [in the article]... and he made them take it out.”²¹³ Jocelyn explained that she had to choose between fighting for the publication of the piece on rape culture, or fighting for the piece about the exams. She chose the story on the exams and after a week the Associated Press picked up on the story, “the U.S. State Department catches on, the tests are released, they sit for another sitting of the exam, the U.S. State Department writes a report about it, it was awesome.”²¹⁴ While Jocelyn’s efforts were successful in helping raise awareness about the struggle of these Palestinian students, she faced repercussions from the editors. She explained,

My editors [were] all white dudes and two of them were Jewish and the two articles they didn’t like that were submitted back to back... it was never explicit like you shouldn’t be a board chair because of this but they were like if this happens again you might have to leave your position I had a month left but it was clear to me that I wasn’t going to get a job the next year.²¹⁵

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

Alternatively, Nadine told me that her position on Israel/Palestine was used as a litmus test in her interviews for housing in Boston. She said,

When I was looking for roommates in the Bay Area it was like what's your [astrological] sign? And when I moved to Boston and was first looking for roommate situations the question I got asked three times was: what are your Israel/Palestine politics? And I think that was in response to me looking for queer-friendly housing, but saying I was a rabbinical student.²¹⁶

In Nadine's words this question was part of the calculus potential roommates used in order to decide whether or not she was "radical enough." Nadine linked these experiences looking for housing to her preference for doing Israel/Palestine activism with other Jews, explaining that she is not always sure what the motivations are for non-Jewish LGBTQ folks' positions on Israel/Palestine. Nadine was not alone in expressing a concern that antisemitism may play a role in the positions of non-Jewish LGBTQ folks, and thus it is more comfortable for Jews to pursue activism on Israel/Palestine among other Jews.

A number of participants in Boston said they felt their LGBTQ Jewish communities were generally critical of Israel and supportive of Palestine. Tal described a situation in her house in Boston where a roommate had wanted to put up a pro-Palestine poster. In the end Tal asked that the poster not be put in shared space. Tal said, "I knew if like say my mom came to visit my house or some of my friends they would feel really uncomfortable with that being there, including myself."²¹⁷ Tal also explained that she has thought about moving to Israel, and while she grew up in a community where that decision would be accepted or celebrated, she did not think the reception would be

²¹⁶ Nadine, interview by author, 6 December 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²¹⁷ Tal, interview by author, 9 November 2014, Boston, MA, tape recording.

positive among her local LGBTQ Jewish friends. Tal and other participants also mentioned an email that was sent around among friends at Hanukkah time about Narrow Bridge Candles. These candles are handmade by an LGBTQ Jewish individual in California, and on the website it states, “Narrow Bridge Candles is a Jewish ritual candlemaking project in support of the full Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions of Israel (BDS).”²¹⁸ While some participants were happy to receive this email or even to order candles, others were put off by the assumption that because they are LGBTQ, they support BDS.

For some their critique of Israel is connected to a larger critique of what they see as the main concerns of mainstream American Jewish community. Diana described the mainstream American Jewish community as “freaking out” about Jewish continuity, or the continuation of the Jewish people/faith. According to Diana, as a way of supporting Jewish continuity the American Jewish mainstream pours its resources into things that speak to the interests and identities of young Jews, such as: LGBT identity, free vacations to Israel, hip activities that allow them to mingle, progressive causes, and community organizing. However, Diana says, “a lot of these efforts ignore the structural problems in Jewish institutions of fundamentally not being inclusive and welcoming communities as a whole in this country.”²¹⁹ While Diana referred specifically to the work the American Jewish community needs to do to become more inclusive of LGBTQ Jews and to Jews of color, she also drew the connection back to Israel/Palestine, arguing that American

²¹⁸ More information available at <http://www.narrowbridgecandles.com/>

²¹⁹ Diana, interview by author, 27 September 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

Judaism needs to be more inclusive of a variety of opinions on the topic. For those LGBTQ Jews who feel their queer politics, or beliefs about equity and justice, are intertwined with their politics related to Israel/Palestine they may perceive Jewish community as unjust and end up disconnecting from Judaism altogether. Jordan expressed a similar sentiment, explaining his desire for Jewish communities to genuinely make themselves welcoming and affirming of LGBTQ Jews. He said, “Being gay-friendly doesn’t mean saying you are. It means actually engaging with people and queer culture as part of what you do. Even if it’s hard and politically divisive, and it needs to not be a time of year or an election when you’re deciding between someone anti-gay or someone who has a platform that supports gay marriage.”²²⁰ Jordan was explicit that without Jewish communities doing this work, Jews like him will not be engaged with them. He explained that a synagogue that doesn’t speak to his queer identity is not appealing to him because, “it’s not going to be spiritually quenching or enlightening or good for me.”²²¹ Just as Diana did, he specifically called out the disconnect between his own concerns and what he perceives to be the interests of Jewish community in the U.S. He argued that the Jewish community should

Stop worrying about putting money into Birthright to get people to hook up in straight ways, and all the money that’s invested into that... we want to be engaged critically and honestly. And we want to be not tolerated but included and accepted, even if you’re uncomfortable... you’re missing out on a lot of people who are going to go other places and who are going to lose the traditions and are going to lose the beautiful pieces that have linked us together for so many years because of your inability to change... I was taught to critically engage, I was taught to do text studies, I was taught that there’s not one right way but that the beauty of Jewish tradition

²²⁰ Jordan, interview by author, 8 November 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²²¹ Ibid.

is to wrestle with Jewish texts and come to my own understanding... you don't need to worry about continuity if people are engaged meaningfully – it's going to happen...

Mark described the ways he has felt welcomed or not in Jewish community over time as a result of “unlearning Zionism” and also identifying as LGBTQ. Mark said that when he was unlearning Zionism he was able to maintain the feeling of ownership over his Jewish identity because of the privileged elements of his identity, which are affirmed in Judaism. He told me, “I see a lot of people who just leave Judaism because of Israel and Zionism once they see what’s happening and part of it was that I felt so much ownership over the tradition and it was mine and I didn’t feel that anyone could take that away from me and part of that is probably about me being a cisgender man and you know that’s who wrote and authorized all the texts.”²²² However, Mark’s religious identity was not totally unshaken. At the time Mark identified as a Conservative Jew, but once he realized that Conservative Judaism was still struggling with whether homosexuality was permissible he decided that he could not be part of a Judaism that was asking that question. Instead, he said, “the Judaism that I want to be a part of is the Judaism that’s on the forefront of LGBTQ justice issues and part of those movements.”²²³

Some participants were resistant to the issue of Israel/Palestine simply because they favored spending their political energy on local issues rather than more geographically distant ones. Tess told me that she would much rather focus on her job, which involved working as an educator in the local community, and on efforts to stop

²²² Mark, interview by author, 20 January 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²²³ Ibid.

apartheid within Boston. Similarly, Gabriela expressed discomfort with the idea that some find it easier to engage in activism related to Israel/Palestine than in activism focused on dismantling hierarchies of oppression within Boston. She suggested that it is important to ask oneself, “why are we choosing to do and put certain efforts into certain places and not others?”²²⁴

Jordan told me that he saw a clear connection between his queer and transgender identities and the development of his Israel/Palestine politics.

Being gender nonconforming, my norm for fitting in was disrupted, I mean most of my life, but particularly with my gender from 15 on so what does that mean to not ever feel fully comfortable and also to understand oppression as happening on multiple levels? I feel oppressed by the US government, I feel oppressed by the ideologies that exist. I feel oppressed by the stares I would get on campus... I got to a place where it became such a regular thing to be honest with myself... But I wonder if I had not already been, I use the term politicized, but if I had not been used to switching the framework for how I deal with life if I wouldn't have been as willing to take this on.²²⁵

Nikki's gender and sexuality made the fallibility of Israel easier to accept, and critique of the state easier to engage in. She said, “I think as a woman and a queer person it's very clear to me all the time that Jews perpetrate oppression. It doesn't seem dissonant to say that Israel as a Jewish state is participating in the oppression of Palestinians because Judaism and Jewish institutions participate in the oppression of women and queer folk in America all the time and I see it, I've experienced it, it's not a stretch and I think a lot of the trouble with being able to have honest conversations about the state violence in Israel

²²⁴ Gabriela, interview by author, 15 February 2014, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²²⁵ Jordan, interview by author, 8 November 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

is this idea that Jews are the oppressed minority and that just hasn't been the only truth in my experience of Judaism."²²⁶

Some participants saw a relationship between the criticality that may come from a queer identity and critique of Israel. As Nadine told me, "I think there is sort of a parallel process of the compulsory sexuality and coming out and poking holes in the Zionist narrative and kind of seeing a different... it's a similar experience of being able to see outside of that narrative."²²⁷ Nadine does not embrace the label of anti-Zionist, which she sees as inflammatory, but sees non-Zionist as a term that fits better. She is not "out" about her non-Zionist identity and was uncomfortable with her feeling that she needed to hide this identity. "I feel like I sort of vowed honesty in my coming out. I never wanted to be lying as someone who is queer and I find myself in a kind of closeted position around my Israel/Palestine politics."²²⁸ Jordan described a similar feeling. He said, "coming out to my parents I felt like I made a choice to be genuine to myself... I've retained a close relationship with them, and in fact I don't take down my U.S., Israel out of Gaza poster, or my Matzpen history of anti-Zionist Jews organizing with Palestinians poster."²²⁹ In particular, Jordan identified a parallel he perceived between his transgender identity and his Israel/Palestine politics; because of his experience denying his gender non-conformity and the hardship that created for him, he was not willing to disengage around Israel simply because it felt difficult to tackle.

²²⁶ Nikki, interview by author, 31 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²²⁷ Nadine, interview by author, 6 December 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Jordan, interview by author, 8 November 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

Nadine explained that her politics are complicated in that she feels conflicted and as though she has not fully found her voice on the topic. Like others, she described feeling concerned that perhaps she does not know enough on the topic to be vocal about it, but in the same breath she dismisses this feeling at least slightly, characterizing it as a kind of insecurity among many Jews, that they feel they do not know enough about politics in the region and therefore cannot speak. Noach echoed the feeling of being silenced, though his political stance was more moderate than Nadine's. He described meeting queer Jews in New York and Boston who had what he first perceived as very anti-Israel politics. He told me, "I was very scared off by it because Israel feels like a place that's extremely important to me and... clearly something needs to change, the situation is awful for the Palestinians who are there, and at the same time I'm more politically inclined to say that Israel shouldn't open its borders because you know of a bazillion issues."²³⁰ He said that even the fact that he is for a two-state solution, he clashes with people who do not agree. "But," he continued, "more and more I'm able to hear there's a middle ground to queer Jews I meet. When I first moved to NY I was like oh my gosh everyone is so anti-Israel and here [in Boston]... I don't know that much about modern Israel politics, but what I do know is that I'm not completely against Israel, and what does that mean for me? And for a while it's meant that I don't say anything in conversation so when it comes up I'm just going to stay quiet."²³¹ Noach described a similar feeling as Nadine, explaining that the sense of not knowing enough to enter

²³⁰ Noach, interview by author, 19 February 2014, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²³¹ Ibid.

conversations keeps him silent on the issues. “I always feel like I don’t know enough to enter conversation about IL... I definitely feel like there’s all these queer Jews running around who aren’t very religious and who have really strong opinions around Israel/Palestine and I just totally stay quiet. And I think, I had a lot of Israeli friends growing up who’ve all since moved back to Israel and I think that’s why I have the hardest time trying to formulate an opinion about Israel.”²³² Noach was not alone in feeling that a connection to Israel shaped his position towards the region. Liora told me that she also felt differentiated from other LGBTQ Jews because of her politics, which she thought were more pro-Israel than most of her friends. She said, “[Israel is] really a complicated issue that I struggle with constantly because my family, you know, we lived in Israel, I was born there, my parents in the 70s were ardent Zionists who moved to Israel and made *aliyah*, but even they have changed their views.”²³³ Both pro-Israel LGBTQ Jews and non- or anti-Zionist Jews have the experience of hiding their Israel politics, but the contexts which prompt them to do so are different. Pro-Israel LGBTQ Jews express feeling reticent to express these views in the larger LGBTQ Jewish context, whereas non- or anti-Zionist Jews may be reluctant to express their views in the larger mainstream Jewish community. Some participants described this hiding as another kind of being closeted. Alexandra explained, “I’m way more closeted about my relationship to Israel than I am about being queer, which is an interesting thing to notice as I talk about being out, I am simultaneously closeted and feeling actually or potentially alienated from

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Liora, interview by author, 12 February 2014, Boston, MA, tape recording.

Jewish community because of my Israel politics.”²³⁴ Additionally, conversations about Israel/Palestine can be alienating for both pro-Israel and non/anti-Zionist Jews when they occur in the context of the larger (secular) LGBTQ community. Alexandra continued,

My relationship to Israel is complicated and I often feel... as a Jew I feel like I have to be all the more vigilant about my Israel critique in secular spaces because I’m being scrutinized for it and that there isn’t very much space to name that complexity without being written off as a tool of Zionism hell bent on destroying Palestinians.... that’s hyperbolic... I guess what it is, it feels like that’s a certain kind of litmus test that’s applied to Jews that’s not applied to other people.... I think a Jew who has an ambivalent relationship to Israel/Palestine is [taken as] suspect.²³⁵

When I asked participants how their LGBTQ identities shaped their positions on Israel/Palestine, some reported that it had great effect. As Noga explained, being queer is not just a sexual or gender identity but can also have a political component. For her, being queer means having critical thinking skills that encourage one to question the most foundational things, such as gender. Noga said, “even to think about [gender] in any critical way is in itself totally radical because it’s just so fundamental, like you’re a boy or you’re a girl... you don’t question that. So I think that part of being queer is developing those skills and the desire to question things... like the Jewish connection to the state of Israel.”²³⁶ Noga also saw a connection between the liberation of queer people and the liberation of other oppressed groups, such as Palestinians.

I see queer liberation as self-determination... the right to self-determination to move about freely, to have access to basic resources, just to be able to live your life like a frickin’ human and not like a prisoner. To be able to practice your religion freely, to be able to practice parts of your culture freely, all of these things that I see as similar to queer liberation

²³⁴ Alexandra, interview by author, 29 November 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²³⁵ Alexandra, interview by author, 29 November 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²³⁶ Noga, interview by author, 28 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

really just to be able to be your full self in every space and to feel safe doing so.²³⁷

For Sharon, being LGBTQ informed her investment in activism. She explained, “I don’t feel like I can just sit back and not do something... I feel both very aware of certain privileges that I have and very aware of those that I don’t, and I can’t just be idly hanging out and being like oh well these issues are too complicated for me to involve myself in.”²³⁸ In other words, being invested in justice for LGBTQ people galvanized her interest in creating a more just world for marginalized people broadly.

Nadine’s experience of her Jewish and LGBTQ identities was different in that she came to her queerness, her feminism, and her social activism through her Judaism rather than in spite of it. She said this is something she thinks is increasingly possible as LGBTQ identity and feminism have become more welcome within Judaism. However, she acknowledged that other have “had traumatizing Jewish upbringings in those regards and had to figure out a way to reconcile their Judaism with [queer identity and feminism].”²³⁹ For Nadine, this is one of the driving forces for her own rabbinate, that people do not feel those are things they have to reconcile, but rather are integrated in their Jewish communities. She said, that the experience of being an outsider has made her sensitive to other outsiders, and has made her want to bring outsiders in. Beyond simply wanting to bring outsiders in, Nadine explains that she “value[s] the role of the outsider, both in feeling like the people that are on the outside have a lot to offer our tradition, and

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Sharon, interview by author, 26 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²³⁹ Nadine, interview by author, 6 December 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

vice versa.”²⁴⁰ This is also something that has an impact on her view of Israel/Palestine. She said, “by the very nature of being queer I’m already outside a dominant Jewish narrative and because of that... [there’s] that sensitivity for outsiders and the dominant Jewish narrative doesn’t work for us in terms of our queerness, and so it puts me in a position of poking holes in the narrative in general.”²⁴¹ She also pointed to the narrative of Jewish continuity, or the idea that Jews must continue to procreate (particularly with one another) in order to sustain the Jewish people, and its relationship to Zionism. “I feel like in Jewish continuity... it’s like we have more Jewish babies... make more shidduchs [romantic matches], send kids on Birthright... and the kind of compulsory heterosexuality that exists on those trips to Israel... it’s all bundled up together.”²⁴² She continued, “So once you’re poking a hole in the hetero narrative I think some other stuff starts to unravel too and the Zionist stuff starts to unravel and the sense of who is oppressed and outsider there, and it’s Palestinians... and there’s no coincidence that so many queers are involved in activism around Israel and Palestine.”²⁴³ Nadine was clear though that it is not as if all LGBTQ Jews support Palestine, she explained that there are also those for whom Israel is seen as an ideal destination for LGBTQ Jews, given that it is the Jewish state and the perception that it is gay friendly. However, she criticized an uncomplicated read of Israel that only sees it as pro-LGBTQ, arguing that “Israel’s acceptance around gays and lesbians [is used] as a kind of veil, like as an example of

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

their democracy, to obscure the other injustices that are going on there.”²⁴⁴ She also suggested that some gays and lesbians are themselves complicit in perpetuating that narrative, presenting Israel as exclusively gay friendly sometimes in explicit contrast to neighboring countries, and without complicating Israel’s image by addressing Palestinians.

Noga sees her Israel/Palestine politics as being shaped both by her LGBTQ identity and by her experience working with an LGBTQ-specific domestic violence prevention organization. Noga said that her experience as a queer person has shown her that separatism has its place, meaning there is value for marginalized groups to have a space that is for them only. However, she continued, “once you give state power to a separatist space, it’s unacceptable.”²⁴⁵ In other words, the designation of Israel as a Jewish state by definition privileges and empowers one group of people, Jews, over non-Jews. Her work in the LGBTQ domestic violence prevention organization, The Network La Red, also played a huge role in forming her understanding. She told me about the organization’s screening tool, which is used to determine where power lies in any relationship. She said, “I was basically doing that the whole time I was on the delegation in Palestine a few years ago... Just to draw a parallel if somebody calls the hotline and says my partner just pushed me... you have to look at what was the context... Did they push you as a means of controlling you or as a means of defending themselves?”²⁴⁶ Noga said she witnessed a similar dynamic in Israel and Palestine when Israel defends its

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Noga, interview by author, 28 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

actions toward Palestinians as a defense against them shooting rockets at Israel. Noga said that in looking at the tactics abusers use in controlling their partners, there are a variety of ways that abusers gain and maintain power, restrict access to emotional and spiritual support, culture, education, and movement. According to Noga, abusers make the lives of their partners smaller and isolated. She said, “I just saw the exact same things happening on a larger scale, the wall that’s being built, the restriction of access to resources, erasing the Arabic from road signs, erasing culture, not allowing people to live their full lives.”²⁴⁷

Some of the participants I spoke with who are involved in Palestine solidarity activism do this work through an explicitly Jewish organization called Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). A number of participants pointed to the Jewish aspects of JVP as being particularly important to them. Diana explained that Jewish observance is often alienating to her due to “the implicit and explicit loyalty to Israel.”²⁴⁸ She cited Zionist fixtures of mainstream synagogues one might encounter on Shabbat that are off-putting to her, like “the prayer for Israel, or the [Israeli] flag on the *bimmah*, or the uncritical discussion of the holy land.”²⁴⁹ Diana explained that she prefers religious spaces where the assumption of Zionism is not present. “I’m able to let my guard down spiritually a lot better in religious Jewish spaces that are explicitly in solidarity with Palestinians.”²⁵⁰ She continued, “Some people are more comfortable doing Israel/Palestine work when it’s

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Diana, interview by author, 27 September 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

rooted in Jewish ritual, I'm more comfortable doing Jewish ritual when it's rooted in Israel/Palestine work."²⁵¹ Diana believes that having alternative spaces to engage with religion outside of mainstream Judaism is particularly important given that the mainstream Jewish community in the U.S. plays a significant role in supporting Israel, both rhetorically and financially. She said, "it's really important that there are movements within Jewish institutions pushing back against this."²⁵² Additionally, JVP provides education in Jewish spaces about Israel/Palestine that is an alternative to the education on the region that comes from Zionist institutions. In this way, Diana says, "JVP fills a necessary role of doing education work in Jewish spaces."²⁵³

JVP was also praised by participants for the ways that it allows Jewish ritual to feel safe to some who might otherwise abandon it. According to Alexandra, "There are queers who have felt alienated from Jewish community, and there are a lot of leftists who have felt alienated from Jewish community, and so being in a specifically leftist political space that is also queer affirming with lots of queer people sometimes makes it possible to have Jewish ritual that feels safe."²⁵⁴ For example, in participating in a Shabbat service or a blessing with JVP, one "can trust it's not going to carry with it some of the oppressive legacies or traditions."²⁵⁵ The oppressive legacies or traditions avoided by JVP include those perceived as sexist, heterosexist, cissexist, and Zionist. Alexandra explained that there is also power in claiming *Jewish* anti/non-Zionist identity, she told

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Alexandra, interview by author, 29 November 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

me that “because non-Jews who are ambivalent or are unsure or feel conflicted take Jewish voices to have more authority than non-Jewish voices... it’s much harder for someone to walk up behind me and say well she doesn’t know what she’s talking about because she’s not Jewish and she can’t possibly understand why Jews need Israel.”²⁵⁶

However, not all who participate in JVP are religious. Sharon explained, “from my own experience it feels like there’s a really nice respectful balance between those that want to have a spiritual experience, have Jewish ritual available and those that really don’t want to have anything to do with the religious, spiritual side of Judaism at JVP.”²⁵⁷ For example, at a JVP meeting they held a *Havdallah* ceremony, which marks the closing of Shabbat; the ceremony was open to all. Sharon said, “the way that we presented [the ceremony] was anyone who wants to be a part of it can stand in the circle and sing the prayers and the songs and those that don’t please don’t feel left out you can either still stand in the circle and not sing or you can go sit down and we make it very clear that there’s no judgment.”²⁵⁸

Noga also saw JVP’s efforts to address Jewish values, Jewish ritual, and Jewish texts as unique and a strategy, which she thought was both strategic and powerful. She told me about JVP’s action against the Praver Plan, which would displace Bedouins from their homes in Israel. Noga spoke on behalf of JVP, saying, “we used sukkot specifically because it’s a holiday where Jews build temporary shelters and it focuses on the temporary-ness and fragility of shelter and also one of the themes of sukkot is

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Sharon, interview by author, 26 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

hospitality... you're supposed to welcome people into your sukkah, and the Bedouins, one of their most foundational features of their culture is hospitality."²⁵⁹ So the *sukkah* was used to represent the idea that while Jews are building temporary shelters (*sukkahs*) all over the world, "the Israeli government, which is a Jewish government of a Jewish state is displacing people from their homes as we speak."²⁶⁰ JVP also provides a *Haggadah* for Passover, a holiday centered around the concept of liberation. According to Noga, the JVP *Haggadah*, "highlights the themes of Passover, of liberation, resistance, exodus... [it] highlight[s] Palestinian liberation and the role of the oppressor, which in this situation is the Jews, and how our liberation is tied into the liberation of other peoples, and no one is free until everyone is free."²⁶¹ The Jewish holiday *Tu b'Shvat* is another festival that JVP organizes specific actions around, since it is a holiday sometimes celebrated through the planting of trees in Israel. Noga explained that JVP provides materials that address the destruction of Palestinian olive trees, and the funding of planting non-indigenous trees on Palestinian land by Jewish organizations.

Sharon appreciates the way JVP handles religion, explaining, "I personally am agnostic, but I love Jewish tradition and I approach my Jewish identity from a cultural and ethnic standpoint, so having that really nice balance [for the] people that I know are approaching Judaism from a myriad of different aspects is really nice."²⁶² Craig elaborated on the pluralism present in JVP explaining that there are a "disproportionate

²⁵⁹ Noga, interview by author, 28 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Sharon, interview by author, 26 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

number of reconstructionist rabbis and rabbinical students on the rabbinical council of JVP.”²⁶³ According to Craig, the presence of Reconstructionist rabbis in the organization means that the pluralism that characterizes Reconstructionism filters into the organization itself. He said, Reconstructionism “actually provides a model process and system for pluralism and democratic processes... Reconstructionism in its nature is about that tension... of how to be in community with people who are different from you.”²⁶⁴ In other words, you do not have to have the same theology as those you pray with or who you are in community with, instead Reconstructionism allows “people to come together and participate and share and engage on how to make decisions as a community.”²⁶⁵ Reconstructionism also has a reputation for progressivism; it was the first rabbinical seminary to ordain gay and lesbian rabbis or to have an out gay person or woman be president of the rabbinical association. Reconstructionism has not shied away from questions of how Judaism can engage feminist ritual and innovation as well as other challenging theological questions.

²⁶³ Craig, interview by author, 16 December 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

Chapter 3

Normative Judaism and the Assimilation/Affirmation of Transgender Jews

Much of the data available on the lives of transgender Jews comes from memoirs, where individuals recount their personal experiences of navigating Judaism. Some were born Jewish, others are “Jews by choice,” or converts to Judaism. Regardless, there is a theme in these narratives: the confrontation of a strict gender binary. This gender binary is asserted in traditional Judaism, which dictates religious law and duties by gender. Gendered expectations are also prevalent in contemporary mainstream Jewish institutions and organizations, which like those in the broader American context are only just beginning to attempt to address the concerns and needs of transgender people. Jewish institutions and communities tend to assume adherence to the gender binary as well as cisgender identity.²⁶⁶ This means that transgender and gender variant people are often thought to be cisgender unless they state otherwise, and non-binary gender identities are not always understood. For example, I have a short haircut, I mostly wear “men’s” or “unisex” clothing, I identify as a non-binary trans person and I think of my gender expression as leaning masculine, but in my research I often had the experience of meeting people who did not ask what pronoun I preferred and instead used my name, the pitch of my voice, the contours of my body, and other gender markers to conclude I was a woman and to use “she” and “her” pronouns to refer to me. People sometimes assumed that I was a lesbian because of my gender expression, but my non-binary identity, and the varied

²⁶⁶ “Cisgender” refers to individuals whose sex assigned at birth “matches” their gender identity; i.e. non-transgender.

genders of those I am attracted to, have influenced me to identify as queer. I do not identify as a woman, and neither do all individuals I am attracted to, so I do not see myself as a woman who loves women. In other words, “transgender phenomena call into question both the stability of the material referent ‘sex’ and the relationship of that unstable category to the linguistic, social, and physical categories of ‘gender.’”²⁶⁷ This destabilization of binary gender makes the categories homosexual and heterosexual unintelligible.

Transgender Jews confront challenges in their Jewish lives as a result of transgender identity, and many of these challenges are discussed in Noach Dzmura’s edited volume, *Balancing on the Mechitza*. The title of the book is drawn from Orthodox (or other traditional) worship spaces where a *mechitza*, or partition, separates the room by gender. In entering the room to pray one must declare one’s gender, picking either the women’s or men’s side. The physical *mechitza* is not the only difficulty for trans and gender non-conforming Jews, there is also the “metaphorical *mechitza*,” or the collection of gendered norms and divisions that pervade Jewish communities and institutions, even in mixed-gender spaces. As Dzmura says,

There is no awareness in the mainstream of Jewish life that some people might resemble the people on one side of the *mechitza*, but *belong* with the people on the other side. There is no category of recognition within Jewish culture for a woman who arrives at the women’s side of the *mechitza* while still claiming the right to tell the story of his triumphant bar mitzvah. Except in the most progressive coastal areas of the United States there is

²⁶⁷ Stryker, Susan, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9.

no ‘*trichitza*’ or ‘third space’ in an Orthodox shul for a boi or a transvestite to daven.²⁶⁸

Transgender and gender non-conforming Jews may experience uncomfortable reintroductions to their Jewish communities after changes in their gender, the pain of being misgendered, pressure not to come out as transgender, alienation as a result of cissexism and heteronormativity, or even excommunication from their religious communities. Some feel alienated to the point of choosing to leave Judaism.

In my conversations with participants, they reflected on the various ways their genders and Jewish identities have not always been seamlessly integrated. James explained to me that he developed a strong dislike for Judaism in his youth as a result of a parental requirement that he wear a dress to synagogue, something discordant with his gender identity and which he never did any other time. In going to Jewish day school, which at the time had Modern Orthodox leadership, he confronted another Jewish environment unwelcoming to queer and trans people. In school James was a member of the Gay Straight Alliance, although he clarified, “we weren’t allowed to call it that because the headmaster of the school told us there was no place for gay people within Judaism.”²⁶⁹ Another participant, Jordan, described feeling judged for his clothing choices at synagogue as a gender nonconforming teen. He also told me of an incident where he was taken to be a young boy by a fellow congregant who awkwardly tried to set

²⁶⁸ Noach Dzmura, “Introduction,” *Balancing on the Mechitza*, xvii. “Boi” is a term that references gender generally used by some in the LGBTQ community to denote a person assigned female at birth who identifies as masculine. It may or may not accompany trans identity.

²⁶⁹ James, interview by author, 29 April 2015, Los Angeles, CA, tape recording.

him up with his twelve-year-old granddaughter, leaving Jordan feeling “so out of place” in his synagogue.²⁷⁰ Jordan remembers attending a Jewish camp in his youth where he sought out counselors he thought might also be queer. He later discovered “that a lot of camp counselors had been instructed to explicitly not be out,” obstructing the possibility for queer connection Jordan so desperately sought.²⁷¹ In college he felt he had to choose between engaging his Judaism, which had been a central piece of his life up to that point, or fostering his queer identity. He told me:

I felt like I had to make the decision to be in Jewish community and continue to suppress my queer identity or that I could fully engage my queer identity I needed to let go of my Judaism. And so I did that I went to [college] and I didn't do anything Jewish aside from visiting my parents every once in a while, for six years.²⁷²

For Jordan, giving up his attachment to Judaism was a necessary precondition to finding queer community and exploring his own queer identity. Another participant, Jacob, expressed the difficulties he faced during his time in rabbinical school.

I think 5 years ago it was hard to get hired as an out trans person at a mainstream congregation or even just in the Jewish world. I couldn't get any jobs when I started, even a tutoring job. To give you a sense of how it has ballooned basically most of the people I started school with hadn't met a trans person... The first two years they wouldn't let people in a community circle say their preferred pronouns for fear it would make people uncomfortable... It took 9 months of being in school and probably a year before I arrived to get there to be a gender-neutral bathroom.²⁷³

²⁷⁰ Jordan, interview by author, 8 November 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Jacob, interview by author, 21 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

Jacob, along with other trans and gender nonconforming rabbinical students in Boston expressed that their experiences in rabbinical school reflected a dearth of LGBTQ and feminist course content, and an absence of LGBTQ identified faculty.

Amy, who identifies as genderqueer and uses “they/them/their” pronouns, sought out a therapist at Jewish Family Services. They were surprised and disappointed to find that the therapist was untrained in LGBTQ issues. The therapist eventually referred Amy to someone else, citing discomfort in talking about queer issues. Jason, who describes himself as a straight guy who happens to be trans, tried to participate in a Jewish LGBT speed-dating event through a Meetup.com group and was told he could not attend because he does not date men. When he pointed out the group’s name should not include the “B” and “T” if they are not interested in serving those parts of the community the group dismissed his concerns suggesting he try the dating website OkCupid. These are just some of the many anecdotes that demonstrate that trans Jews are marginalized in much of the Jewish world.

While individuals’ experiences reflect both increased inclusivity and barriers to full inclusion, the presence of growing numbers of “out” LGBTQ Jews might seem to suggest that LGBTQ-inclusion within mainstream Judaism is inevitable. This seems all the more likely given the similarly growing population of “out” LGBTQ rabbinical students. The existence of openly transgender rabbis is still a fairly recent occurrence, within roughly the last ten years, and there are many more trans rabbinical students who will soon be graduating. As Jacob told me in our interview: “...the Jewish world is going to look completely different in twenty years. There will be dozens and dozens of queer

and trans rabbis. I mean, that will change Judaism... Liturgy and prayer books, it's just going to be completely blown open by everyone. This whole community of queer rabbis that's going to graduate from JP [Jamaica Plain], it's going to transform American Judaism there's no question in my mind."²⁷⁴ So while social change in many ways has already been set in motion, mainstream Judaism continues to grapple with questions about the place of transgender people in Jewish tradition and the preparedness of institutional Judaism to welcome and affirm transgender Jews.

Dialogue Within Institutional Judaism

In this chapter I discuss two events I attended in Los Angeles in the spring of 2015 run by mainstream Jewish organizations. While these events do not represent all of institutional Judaism, they reveal mainstream Judaism's interest in, and approach to, dialogue about inclusion for transgender Jews. Both of the events had primarily non-LGBTQ audiences.²⁷⁵ One was a cross-denominational meeting of rabbis who met to discuss how to better meet the needs of transgender converts to Judaism, and the other was a workshop about creating inclusion for transgender families, especially children, in the Jewish world. In examining each of these events in turn I consider the conversations institutional Judaism is leading with regard to LGBTQ people.

Rabbi Sachs, who organized the meeting of rabbis, opened with a discussion of Genesis 1:27, aiming to position transgender Jews within Jewish tradition. The translation he provided, from *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation*

²⁷⁴ Jacob, interview by author, 21 October 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

²⁷⁵ At one event this was discussed openly, at the other a research participant who knew most of the attendees confirmed this.

of the JPS Translation, reads: “And God created humankind in the divine image, creating it in the image of God – creating them male and female.” Rabbi Sachs suggested to the audience that we might arrive at two possible understandings from the text. The first conclusion, the “bold conclusion” as he described it, is that transgender Jews are created *B’tzelem Elohim*, or “in the image of God.” However, he clarified that he actually wanted to propose something more conservative: that gender is more complex than what is put forward in the Torah – that it goes beyond just *zahar* (man) and *nekevah* (woman). Because rabbis from all denominations but Orthodoxy were present perhaps Rabbi Sachs erred on the side of conservatism with the hope he would not alienate some in the room from a conversation that was ultimately for the benefit of transgender converts to Judaism.

The next speaker, Rabbi Lehrman, is a medical doctor. He similarly discussed the rabbinic rulings on sex and gender, which he understood as biological and physical categories. Rabbi Lehrman spoke about the genders described in the Talmud as mirroring what he has seen as a doctor working with patients who have certain hormone conditions and with intersex children. He concluded these rulings on sex are not relevant except that they show us that the rabbis did not recreate a binary or make judgments consistently for non-binary individuals. For example, they did not say that a *saris* (a person who is identified as “male” at birth and develops “female” characteristics at puberty and/or does not have a penis) should *always* do what is *halachically* male/female – instead judgment on something like a case-by-case basis was preferable. He argued that this inconsistency

on behalf of the rabbis should serve as a guide, and we should not aim to be back within a gender binary with regard to the conversion of trans folks.

Rabbi Lehrman also raised a number of *halachic* (Jewish law) concerns with regard to trans people: preparation of the body for burial, pregnancy of a trans man, permissibility of SRS and hormones, *taharat mishpachah* (family purity) and the question of *niddah* (monthly immersion after menstruation), conversion, marriage, and divorce. He noted that different states also have different laws, which raises questions about what kinds of responsibilities and knowledge rabbis, as agents of the state, need to have. Additionally there are non-*halachic* issues that are relevant to Jewish communities as well, including who serves as a witnesses for a conversion, and public accommodations for trans folks in restrooms, schools, communities, camps, and synagogues.

The next speaker, Rabbi Rosenblum, who works at a Conservative synagogue, was one of two transgender-identified people who spoke at the event. Rabbi Rosenblum explained that he understood the newness of our awareness of “trans rabbis” and did not take for granted that people understood him or his status. He affirmed that he was more than a trans man and asked the audience to remember that he serves a broader Jewish community outside of the LGBTQ community. Rabbi Rosenblum mentioned the recent decision by some women’s colleges to accept those who self-identify as women – something he said he is proud of. He also explained that he himself is still learning. In an article in the Jewish Journal on trans people the phrase “trans male” was used and he expressed to friends that he was not sure about the cisgender journalist’s use of this term. Someone responded by asking how Rabbi Rosenblum thought the journalist felt about

being called “a cisgender journalist,” which he said was a reminder that many of us do not mean to hurt with terminology. Rabbi Rosenblum explained that he is on the side of holding up sex and gender, but also taking it away. I understood Rabbi Rosenblum’s assertion here to convey that sex and gender are meaningful in the world and for the people who claim them, but that we should also work to avoid the danger of emphasizing or reifying “correct” ways of being gendered/sexed, which coercively limit the diverse realities of gender and sex. Rabbi Rosenblum concluded by explaining to the audience what the letters in the LGBTQIA acronym mean, as well as other elements that some think should be included or not included under the “queer” umbrella. In response to a question from the audience Rabbi Rosenblum also drew a connection between Jewish identity and trans identity. He explained that just as one becomes Jewish in community, gender becoming is also more powerful when reinforced through community recognition.

After these introductory speakers the audience was presented with a role-play scenario to listen and respond to. In the scenario a hypothetical was given in which an individual named Avram, who is in the process of transitioning from female to male while converting to Judaism, was coming to his rabbi with a question. Avram explained to the rabbi that he was transitioning, and the rabbi asked for more information about the process, Avram said he had changed his name and was on testosterone. The rabbi said that he knew some people have surgery, and Avram responded that he was planning to have top surgery and explained what that entailed. Avram’s question for the rabbi was about what the right timing is to appear before the *beit din* so that he can be called “*ben*”

(son) not “*bat*” (daughter). The question posed to the audience after this role-play was: When is Avram “*ben*” according to Judaism? And what is your own answer to him?

The audience was split into groups and I walked amongst them as they discussed their responses. The groups raised questions about how Avram was presenting his gender in the secular world, and whether that had relevance or not for his treatment in the Jewish world. Rabbi Rosenblum spoke with his group about how in a different kind of ceremony “*m’beit*” (“from the house of”) was used to refer to him, instead of gendered language such as “*ben*” or “*bat*.” He had also chosen for himself a gender affirming Hebrew name, and said he had his mom’s name read first because he is a feminist. Another group was engaged in a similar conversation about using non-gendered language but also thought they should ask why the language choice “*ben*” was important to Avram, and that they should consider when the community sees him as male. Another group discussed what happens to the body during the ritual, in terms of circumcision, which is frequently a part of conversion for uncircumcised men. One rabbi spoke with her group about “feeling” gender – playing devil’s advocate as the anti-trans voice which says, “can’t you just feel that way but not claim to be that?” Another member of her group, Dan, was the other trans speaker at the event. He explained his frustration with questions about who has the authority to validate or legitimize the trans experience, and especially how much reliance there tends to be on (cisgender) medical professionals. Having medical professionals speak about trans people, instead of presenting the voices of trans people as experts on their own lived experiences, runs the risk of furthering a paradigm where trans people and experiences can only be validated by the medical community and reifies their

role as gatekeepers to components of transition such as hormones or surgery. There is a history of queer and trans suspicion of medical and psychological professionals because of the past (and present) pathologizing of queer and trans people within the medical and psychological fields.²⁷⁶

When the room of rabbis came back together for discussion a number of concerns were raised. One rabbi explained that her group was caught up on considering how much *halakhah* is relevant in these cases. Another person thought perhaps in the conversion it would be appropriate to list all the names the trans person has been called. Yet another explained he would want to talk to the *bet din* and get a communal *hechsher*, or approval that the conversion was sound according to Jewish law. Others were concerned that it was important to let the convert know that even if one *bet din* (rabbinic court) affirmed the conversion another might not treat them the same way. Just as they had in their smaller groups a number of rabbis suggested using a gender-neutral term, such as *m'beit* (from the house of) when referring to the convert instead of *bat* or *ben*. Rabbi Rosenblum added to this discussion that trans folks have already been creating the language to meet their own needs, which should not be forgotten by those folks who are only now joining the conversation. Another rabbi later suggested that interfaith families too are responsible for these alterations in language that have been made in order to recognize non-Jewish family during Jewish ceremonies, another influence that is not often acknowledged.

²⁷⁶ Richard Von Kraft-Ebing and David O. Cauldwell's writings, which claim that non-heterosexual sexuality and nonnormative gender are emotional, biological, and/or physical diseases are excerpted in Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle's *The Transgender Studies Reader*.

The convert's body was also discussed during this larger conversation, and it was suggested that *hatafat dam brit* should occur in cases where the trans person is male to female. Rabbi Rosenblum asked the group whether name choice puts converts into a category of *hatafat dam brit* or what the implications are for the body in conversion with regard to certain gender choices. A final question was posed about bottom surgery and *hatafat dam brit*, as well as what the needs of Avram are besides what is on the surface. As the session wrapped up Rabbi Rosenblum spoke with those nearest to him about the economics of privilege, which can inform medical transition, and what can reasonably be expected from the individual. This is a concern because making bottom surgery a requirement in order for a convert to be considered in accordance with their gender identity according to Jewish law sets an unreasonable expectation where a surgery that is cost-prohibitive or otherwise not desirable or possible becomes imperative for those searching for *halachic* recognition.

The next speaker, Sarah, told a personal story describing how she and her ex, a transgender man, had begun the process of conversion with a rabbi. She explained that when they began the conversion he was “stealth” – meaning he was not out as transgender and was passing as a man. During the process of conversion Sarah and her ex broke up, but she wanted to continue with the conversion even though her ex did not. She decided she did not feel that she was bringing her whole self to the conversion unless she told the rabbi about her queer identity so she sent him an email. She joked to the audience that she thought she would get him to like queers. Sarah says the rabbi never responded, and though she has completed her conversion now (under the supervision of a different

rabbi) the experience was clearly painful for her. One audience member responded to her story by explaining that for rabbis there are things that trump personal connection, and someone else posed the question: how should rabbis handle that when it happens? Another rabbi asked how Sarah should have helped her rabbi. Others responded to this question by interjecting emphatically that it was not Sarah's responsibility to help the rabbi, and moreover that it is amazing that she did not reject Judaism as a result of this experience. Dan, the other trans identified speaker, addressed Sarah and the rabbis in the room in order to ask what would have been better considering the very real possibility that some rabbis present might leave the meeting and still feel uncomfortable working with trans and queer people. Sarah said a referral, closure, or resources would have been helpful. The statements from the audience reflected a variety of responses to Sarah's story, but the overwhelming sentiment in the room seemed to be that how things transpired between Sarah and her former rabbi is not ideal. While not every rabbi may feel comfortable continuing the conversion, a strategy should be in place for rabbis who feel they cannot continue so that they do not do harm to the potential convert or turn them away from Judaism.

Traditional conversion to Judaism has multiple gendered elements that raise questions about what ritual components are appropriate during conversion for transgender people. These gendered elements of the ritual create a double imperative to ask both what is required according to Jewish law, and what is required to address trans converts' needs. One example of this is immersion in a *mikveh*, or ritual bath. *Mikveh* immersion is traditionally a standard part of religious conversion, and many *mikvaot* are under the

control of Orthodox or otherwise traditionally observant leadership. These *mikvaot* are typically gender divided. All of these factors make *mikvaot* that are comfortable or desirable for trans people relatively rare. Another aspect of the conversion ritual is circumcision or *hatafat dam brit*. Men who have not been circumcised are traditionally expected to undergo circumcision as part of conversion, and if they are already circumcised, to undergo a symbolic ritual: *hatafat dam brit*. *Hatafat dam brit* involves the removal of a drop of blood from the penis, or more specifically, from the site of the circumcision scar. This element of the ritual can be particularly problematic for trans people because it is not clear what the ritual expectations are for men and women with nonnormative bodies. One might ask: Is this religious requirement about sex/physical bodies or about gender? Or, how much are trans converts' desires considered in these rabbinic decisions? Talking about trans bodies is also not always straightforward for the uninitiated. Trans people have diverse ways of referring to their bodies – including their genitals.

Rabbi Aronson also spoke on the basis of her experience working with around 30 trans converts to Judaism in the San Francisco Bay Area. She explained first that in welcoming trans, multicultural, Jews of color, queer, interfaith, and disabled Jews it is important to really *be* welcoming. She said one way she tries to mark herself as welcoming is in having various books about these communities available and visible for those who come to her office. She also suggested that the rabbis try not to presume heteronormativity. In speaking about trans identity she compared it to Judaism, stating that a trans person seeking out their gender may find they always were the gender they

become, just as some find Judaism and realize they were always Jewish. Rabbi Aronson explained that trans people have issues of abuse and oppression because of bad treatment, but that this does not mean trans people are pathological. She also described working with many non-binary genderqueer people, or individuals who do not identify as male or female. According to Rabbi Aronson trans conversions have been taking place since at least the early 80s. As she explained trans identity and transition have already changed a lot since then. In the “old days” there were many trans people who had a strong desire to transition but today there are many who are experimenting with gender – for example, who may decide to take testosterone or not. She explained that this change is influenced at least in part by changes within the medical establishment in terms of what is required from trans people in order to gain access to certain kinds of medical gender affirming aids (e.g. surgery, hormones). Rabbi Aronson also explained that gender transition may also be a more subtle phenomenon than most are familiar with, for example someone came to her wanting help marking the transition from female to femme. Because she works in the San Francisco area, which she calls “queer university,” Rabbi Aronson acknowledged that southern California rabbis are more likely to encounter a population that is more mainstream.

Talking about pronouns and bodies with trans populations can also be unintuitive to cisgender people. While many professionals who work with trans folks recommend asking about pronouns directly, Rabbi Aronson said that she does not ask about pronouns directly but that she will find them out in being a good listener. This may work for Rabbi Aronson, but this strategy poses problems because poor listening is not the only barrier to

learning about a trans person's gender identity. A convert may be unlikely to tell a rabbi what language they prefer because of the power dynamic between them or because they are not sure the rabbi will understand. This is especially likely for rabbis who do not have a reputation for working with queer and trans populations and/or who are not located in the San Francisco area. Asking about pronouns directly takes the onus off the convert who may already be feeling vulnerable or intimidated.

In discussing bodies Rabbi Aronson raised a question that comes up for some trans converts at the *mikveh*. Some transmasculine individuals who have not had bottom surgery may have an implement external to their bodies which they understand to function as their genitals or penis, and as integral to their personhood. These converts may want to know if they can bring these to the *mikveh* when they immerse. According to Jewish law, prosthetics, such as prosthetic legs, are not allowed. Rabbi Aronson explained that converts she has worked with have argued that what they are talking about is not like prosthetic leg, instead it is about selfhood. Of course, some might perceive this determination as a challenge to traditional *mikveh*, since a dildo or other implement that serves as genitals/a penis to the trans person might be classified as profane. Such a classification might be based not only on the fact that (like the prosthetic leg) it can be disconnected from the body, but also because of the symbolic representation of sex and particularly nonnormative sex. This and other individualized and innovated lived religious practice challenge the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane. In this case participants insist on bringing profane items, which they furthermore see as central to their senses of self, into sacred space. This highlights a need in some cases for the

integration of the sacred and profane, or a refiguring of the sacred and profane altogether, in order to provide a ritual that meaningfully honors trans Jews.

She also asserted that bottom surgery should not be required of any trans converts. Rabbi Aronson emphasized that rabbis should be sensitive in their conversations about genitals – especially when male rabbis are talking to women about their genitals. She explained that women are generally taught privacy about genitals and that she never had the experience of a male identified person who pushed back in these conversations. While I agree that rabbis should be sensitive in their conversations about genitals, as well as mindful of the power dynamic between themselves and their converts, this strategy should also be extended to all conversations with converts regardless of gender. Rabbi Aronson overlooks both that some trans men may be deeply affected by the experience of being socialized female and also that men should not be expected to “push back” (something they might be less likely to do because of gendered expectations) in order to invalidate a less sensitive, and potentially invasive, approach. Rabbi Aronson continued, explaining that trans women usually referred to their genitals as vaginas regardless of morphology. This created a tense moment in the room where some rabbis did not understand her, and one asked directly if Rabbi Aronson meant that a penis would be called a vagina. Rabbi Aronson explained that if a rabbi is working with a trans woman who does not refer to her genitals as a penis, it would be very rude for the rabbi to do so. Rabbi Aronson affirmed what is often a constant refrain in trans communities: that gender self-determination is central and that others need to learn from the individual what pronouns to use and what language is appropriate for talking about the person’s body.

For trans people, circumcision and *hatafat dam brit* entail multiple layers of vulnerability that can create an extremely sensitive situation. At the basic level these rituals involve cutting or pricking a person's genitals, but for trans people this event may be further complicated by a dysphoric relationship to their bodies or difficulty finding someone to complete the ritual who is savvy about working with trans people. There is also the issue that circumcision and *hatafat dam brit* are gendered rituals intended only for men, so to imply that a trans woman needs to undergo either implies that Jewishly she is a man. For many trans women this assertion would be a traumatic erasure of identity, or an act of violence that not only aims to destroy gender self-determination but also to alter or mark her body against her will. Again, Rabbi Aronson suggested that the appropriate course is to listen to what gendered elements of the ritual are important to each convert. It is clearly essential for trans converts to work with rabbis who are educated, or at least willing to let the convert take the lead, in order to avoid trauma for the trans person. Though it was evident that not all the rabbis in the room were necessarily comfortable with this discussion or understood the necessary sensitivities, over the course of the day the opinions of some shifted as they began to understand the problems with ruling that all persons with penises must undergo circumcision. Rabbi Aronson acknowledged that because trans identity is still emerging and changing in many ways it is difficult at present to make *halachic* decisions.

The following speaker, Dan, was the second of the two transgender-identified speakers at the event. Dan began by sharing that it was heartening for him to see so many in the room talking about this topic. He explained that there is relatively little available in

books or online about conversion and transition. Dan shared his story beginning with his choice to undergo *hatafat dam brit*, which he heard about for the first time in his conversion class. This decision was a process he had to think through because in the first 8-9 years of engaging with Judaism he did not know about the circumcision or *hatafat dam brit* aspect of conversion. He said because *halachic* ritual is gendered the question is what to do for the non-traditionally gendered body. For Dan his Jewish and male identities are not things he can separate and he wanted both to be seen simultaneously in the process of conversion. He asserted that the fundamental thing is that rabbis are equipped and prepared to have conversations with converts, and emphasized the creation of a safe space for the convert. After nearly ten years of being involved in a synagogue Dan felt confident that the sponsoring rabbi was open, but he commented that if he had not felt seen as Jewish and male he would have found someone else. Dan reiterated that trans folks may each have different feelings about whether circumcision or *hatafat dam brit* is appropriate, and that rabbis should ask the converts about this as well as about how they want their bodies and selves to be referred to. He also suggested that rabbis ask what topics are off limits.

Dan explained that for him the idea that Abraham wasn't considered complete until he was circumcised made it personally important for him to undergo *hatafat dam brit*. He also said that in going through the conversion it was important that the language used reflected him as male. Dan explained that finding a *mohel* (a person trained in Jewish ritual circumcision) for trans converts, in cases where one is desired, should be the responsibility of the rabbinic sponsor and that in his case the person being sought out was

someone who had experience and was willing to work with a trans person. Dan was clear about the fear and vulnerability undergoing *hatafat dam brit* entailed, explaining that it was ultimately scary to take his pants down in front of someone. He expressed that it is important the *mohel* honors the language choices of participants, and that they should be trained to work with trans people and avoid using medicalized language to refer to the convert's genitals. Dan described appreciating a story his *mohel* told during the *hatafat dam brit* ritual about people who are born already circumcised, which was powerful for him.

The next speakers, Tiffany and Nicole, spoke as representatives of an egalitarian *mikveh* in southern California. They spoke about their experiences, which have included at least 4 transgender conversions; all of these converts were female to male. In three cases either Tiffany or Nicole was asked to witness. In the other instance the convert's male rabbi was the witness. They explained that the convert is given the freedom to decide what witness, of what gender, they want, as long as the witness knows what proper *mikveh* immersion looks like. In doing immersions this way the *mikveh* is able to respond to the trans convert's self-identified needs of dignity and modesty. However, at the *mikveh* they run this option is not open to cisgender converts, only transgender ones. This raised questions from the audience, and one rabbi responded that she found this distinction between which witnesses cisgender and transgender converts could choose baffling. Creating different standards for transgender converts raises questions about the extent to which changes can be made to a given ritual while still preserving its intention, and also about why certain standards are enforced in rituals in the first place. In

determining for trans conversions whether there should be gender requirements for witnesses, as well as whether or not circumcision or *hatafat dam brit* should be required, these considerations raise questions broadly about the logic, viability, and value of gendered ritual requirements for all Jews whether trans or cisgender.

Rabbi Rosenblum closed the session with a follow up to his earlier introduction to transgender topics. He expressed that he was grateful to everyone who attended for their vulnerability. He also explained that while each individual's transition may look different, a transgender lens can provide the unique opportunity to relate to Judaism from an in-between place. He asked how rabbis in the room did the work of being welcoming. Did they use books or sermons? He encouraged them to think about the LGBTQ inclusion continuum, which includes multiple states of acceptance: hostile, indifferent, tolerant, inclusive, and embracing.²⁷⁷ He explained that rabbis have privilege and when they work with a trans person they need to figure out what role the person's trans identity plays – is it central or in the background? He encouraged rabbis to think about the ways they are privileged and to learn more about the medical gate keeping that trans people are faced with. Rabbi Rosenblum asked the audience to consider his own body and sartorial choices in order to emphasize the realities of trans experience that cisgender people may not be aware of. He said he chose the button-down shirt he wore to the meeting carefully, selecting one that is less likely to let him “pass” as a cisgender man and his decision not

²⁷⁷ Dr. Joel Kushner discusses this continuum in his work, “Assessing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Inclusion in the Reform Movement: a Promise Fulfilled or a Promise in Progress?” in *Sacred Encounter: Jewish perspectives on Sexuality*, ed. Rabbi Lisa J. Grushcow (New York: CCAR Press, 2014), 244-245.

to wear a binder was influenced in part by bad allergies. Binders and allergies may both negatively affect comfort, put pressure on the chest, and restrict the ability to breathe easily. He chose to wear a tie but not a suit because suits are often made for cisgender men and such suits do not fit him properly. Rabbi Rosenblum brought into the conversation the intersection of feminism, egalitarianism, and trans identity. He asked the audience to consider how they treat women and to think about why they can't ask women about genitalia – something he suggested is about misogyny and power. He explained that there is also more opprobrium to becoming a woman because of the subjugation and discrimination women face in general. Rabbi Rosenblum concluded by naming what he feels is his role within Judaism: to communicate to queer Jews that Judaism is welcoming and not oppressive. He asserted that being able to tell queer Jews about this meeting would go a long way.

The meeting of rabbis marked a sign of progress in terms of LGBTQ inclusion and affirmation, and many in the room commented that even five years ago this meeting would not have happened. Because the existence of transgender Jews is new and unfamiliar to many, the aim of the meeting was not to resolve questions but rather to raise and discuss them. In looking at the room full of experienced rabbis, many of whom were between the ages of 40 and 60 years old, it occurred to me that these conversations require humility. Many otherwise knowledgeable and experienced rabbis, may be entirely unfamiliar with this particular subject matter and may need to be corrected, sometimes by their much younger colleagues. Age and power differentials can create difficulties in navigating such conversations. For example, Deborah, a participant in her twenties

employed in the Jewish professional world, told me about an encounter with a more experienced colleague who rebuffed Deborah for making a correction to the colleague's use of the wrong pronoun for a trans person.²⁷⁸

The rabbinic meeting ended without clear conclusions. There was not agreement amongst rabbis as to whether circumcision or *hatafat dam brit* should be required for trans converts, nor were all rabbis clearly comfortable working with trans Jews. Although the needs of converts were emphasized throughout, and speakers asserted that it is the role of rabbis to take cues from the convert in order to help them comfortably become a part of community, it was clear that some were wrestling with putting (trans) people first in light of their understanding of Jewish law. One rabbi in the audience agreed that circumcision or *hatafat dam brit* should not be required for trans converts but expressed her worry that this would put pressure on ending *brit milah* (circumcision) in general. Another rabbi responded to her concern, suggesting that the move away from circumcision already taking place amongst Jews more broadly will likely have greater influence on whether the practice continues than decisions about requirements for transgender converts. Relatedly, a rabbi affiliated with the Reconstructionist movement offered that his practice already is not to require men (whether cisgender or transgender) to undergo circumcision or *hatafat dam brit* when converting. He suggested this element of the ritual can be dismissed precisely because it is gendered – setting an unequal standard where surgery is a requirement for men but not women.

²⁷⁸ Deborah, interview by author, 30 April 2015, Los Angeles, CA, tape recording.

Throughout the meeting cisgender speakers frequently noted the courage of trans people, including those speaking at the meeting. While the sentiment is understandable the narrative that trans people are courageous for telling their stories (or even for simply being trans) can be problematic when it is employed superficially by cisgender people to assert support for trans people without taking action to effect positive change on their behalf. Rabbi Rosenblum pointed out something different that trans people take on in these conversations: vulnerability. Education about queer people for a straight and cisgender audience often happens at the expense of the vulnerability of queer individuals, and in this meeting Rabbi Rosenblum and Dan exposed themselves for the sake of education. While education is important and necessary it is clear that this kind of self-sacrifice, even when voluntary, can take an emotional toll on those doing the educating. This emotional toll was exemplified by what happened as we left the room. As we exited the meeting room a rabbi turned to Rabbi Rosenblum and asked, “so, you’re a man now?” while another mis-pronounced him to me. Education may be imperative for increasing inclusion and affirmation but educational models themselves should be examined with an awareness to what extent they require trans folks to make themselves vulnerable or to suffer through micro and macro aggressions. There is still work to be done in ensuring that education is a collective project that does not rely so heavily on the large and small sacrifices of trans people.

The other event about transgender Jews, which I attended only a couple of days before, was billed as a conversation about transgender Jewish families. Rabbi Bergman, a religiously traditional gay rabbi, was one of the leaders of the event. The other leader

identified himself as a cisgender and straight-identified filmmaker who makes films about transgender children for educational purposes, especially for viewings in schools. Rabbi Bergman began, as Rabbi Sachs had at the other event, with a discussion of Genesis 1:27, similarly grounding the conversation in Jewish text. Rabbi Bergman had a different interpretation of the passage: he understood it to refer to God in the moment of human creation as a multi-gendered being. In his interpretation of the passage Rabbi Bergman translated the final portion of the Hebrew as “male and female created them,” suggesting that “male *and* female” here refers to the entity that does the creating: God. Rabbi Bergman bolstered this claim by connecting his interpretation to a *midrash* (or exegesis of the Torah) that teaches that Adam, the first human being, was an *androgynos*.²⁷⁹

Androgynos is a gender category used in the Talmud (a rabbinic text containing the Oral Torah and exegesis) to refer to people who possess female and male characteristics, or the characteristics of a woman and a man. There are different opinions amongst rabbis and scholars as to whether these categories refer to socially constructed gender categories or the physical characteristics of sex. Pointing to the preceding phrase stating that humans are made in the image of God, Rabbi Bergman argued that one can conclude that a being with both male and female characteristics would have been created by a God who is both male and female. He also discussed another excerpt from the

²⁷⁹ Rabbi Elliot Kukla, “Aggadah (The Way We Tell Our Stories): Text Study on Bereshit Rabbah 8:1,” *TransTorah*, available from http://www.transtorah.org/PDFs/Text_Study_Bereshit_Rabbah.pdf, accessed May 7, 2017. According to Rabbi Elliot Kukla, who also discusses this midrash, it is found in Bereshit Rabah 8:1.

Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 64a. In this tractate the ancestors of the Jewish people, Abraham and Sarah, are described as having been *tumtumim* who later changed genders to become male and female. *Tumtumim* is the plural of *tumtum*, another rabbinic gender category used for those whose genitals are not easily discernible as either male or female, or whose gender is indiscernible. In beginning with these passages Rabbi Bergman ensured that his audience was aware of these interpretations, or more radically, he demonstrated that gender variance is deeply embedded in traditional Judaism. Focusing on texts that describe God as well as Abraham and Sarah as sex/gender non-conformers casts this non-conformity as central within Jewish tradition.

Rabbi Bergman suggested that the Torah is a powerful place to turn because there are instances of resistance to the normative within this sacred text. He encouraged the audience to think about where difference scares them and why, as well as what it is about difference that they find scary. He had the audience read a passage from the Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 53:b. This passage tells the story of a man whose wife dies and who cannot afford a wet nurse for his infant. The text says “a miracle occurred and he grew breasts like a woman’s... and he nursed his child.” In response to this event Rabbi Yosef affirms this occurrence as a miracle, while Abaye says, “On the contrary. How bad is this man that the orders of nature were changed for him.” Rabbi Bergman asked the audience to express the fears that come up as they respond to this man with breasts either as a wonder or a monster. After some discussion as a group, James, the transgender-identified speaker on the panel, interjected that men have a lot of the power in this context, and so it is useful to consider the rabbis’ reactions but that it is not correct to frame them as most

important. He said that we, as an audience to this text, do not have to validate Abaye's terror, even though it is a reasonable reaction to having one's power threatened – but rather we can understand their reaction as being *about* power, and the fear that it may be lost. James' comment points to the reality that the rabbis discussed in this passage benefitted from, and were largely invested in maintaining, a gender hierarchy that positioned straight cisgender men at the top, a consideration that is relevant when examining rabbinic rulings and opinions on gender nonnormative people and women. An analysis of gendered power dynamics is likewise important for understanding transphobia and cissexism in the present.

After a discussion of texts, speakers on the panel addressed the audience. James spoke about his mom who had recently asked him if it would have been easier if he were not trans. He explained that while he thinks this is sometimes hard for straight cisgender people to understand, being queer and trans has added a great richness to his life. The pressures of masculinity and femininity can be extremely constricting and he felt it was liberating to have gotten to choose from “everything possible.” While his mother's comment assumed loss, he advocated for celebration of the joy trans people get to experience as self-made people.

The parents of a trans child spoke next, describing parenting her as a beautiful learning experience for them. For them the biggest challenge is that the child is stealth – in her mind she's “just a girl.” Her stealth identity refers to the fact that she does not consider herself trans and she does not want others to know about this portion of her life. One of her parents explained that it is uncomfortable when they have to tell someone that

she is trans, and it is exhausting to maintain her stealth status. For trans kids being out or stealth can be a difficult choice; out kids may be confronted with bigotry and stealth kids may suffer under the constant burden that someone will find out. This fear becomes especially potent for these parents whenever a substitute teacher takes over in their child's class, because the substitute may use the incorrect name or pronoun for the child. Rabbi Bergman added to this conversation that he knows of a trans man in a religiously traditional synagogue who wants to be seen as male within the congregation. He explained that some in the congregation need to know about the man's trans identity, like the rabbi of the synagogue, because it is permissible for him to sit on the male side of the *mechitza* but he cannot be counted as part of the *minyan* (the quorum of ten Jews, traditionally men) required for prayer.

Richard, the filmmaker, spoke next. He felt he should begin by answering the question: why should he be allowed to make films on this subject given that he is cisgender and heterosexual? He explained that he grew up as a gender nonconforming kid who was harshly teased at school and who made the choice to put away girly things and identify as a boy. Richard said that he thought that gender policing would have diminished by now, but it has not, and so his goal is to help make the world safe for all children no matter what their gender. He screened clips from his films, which follow the lives and gender explorations of multiple trans children and their parents.

The event concluded with a group discussion about strategies for increasing trans inclusion. One attendee's suggestion emphasized the importance of including multiple trans voices and narratives about transgender identity in order to demonstrate the

diversity of trans experience. This portrayal of diverse narratives was meant to highlight humanity, combating monolithic and stereotypical representations of trans people as the “other.” The event leaders suggested that education that discourages the policing of gender should start with children, who may be more accepting. Rabbi Bergman suggested that as more people know someone who is trans, inclusion will improve. He explained his reasoning, stating that the high numbers of people who know someone gay increased inclusion for gay people, and so by the same logic exposure to trans folks will manifest trans inclusion. In the context of religiously traditional Judaism Rabbi Bergman argued that for those trans people who can stay and be out, to do so is a gift. He asserted that the only reason these rabbis are moving on inclusion is because enough LGBTQ people are staying in traditional Judaism and making themselves heard, creating change through these face-to-face connections. Rabbi Bergman asserted that everyone has an obligation to take on the risk, or to call people to courage. He acknowledged that, of course, no one *has* to do anything, but that this is the strategy for how one can make a difference in community. He asked rhetorically whether those present could call people to be resilient even when there may be costs to pay. To bolster his point Rabbi Bergman made comparison to a study where gay people were sent to districts that had a reputation for being anti-gay in order to speak with individuals there. After engaging people in conversation the gay person would reveal their gay identity, and the study purported to show that as a result of these encounters the opinions of the anti-gay people about gays were improved. According to Rabbi Bergman this example provides a model for creating change and empowering those with privilege to make those without it safe.

Coincidentally, within weeks of this event the study about gay canvassers the Rabbi referenced was retracted from *Science* by its secondary author, Donald P. Green, after the findings were called into question and the primary author, Michael J. LaCour, (who was Green's graduate student) declined requests to provide the raw data used in the study.²⁸⁰ A subsequent study, which has tried to duplicate the first's findings, has thus far been unable to do so. Amanda Udis-Kessler and Dawne moon, in separate sociological research on LGBTQ Christians have also argued that knowing an LGBTQ person is in fact ineffectual for changing minds.²⁸¹ But even if exposure or contact *is* effective for changing opinions, this strategy is flawed in that it puts immense pressure on transgender individuals to create change, which may also put them at serious risk. As James told me, the rabbi's opinion "reminded me that... liberal Jews are, more often than not, white and upper middle class and highly educated, [which] often shelters them from the reality of violence in the world for trans folks."²⁸² He explained that pushing trans people to be "courageous" and "come out" can stem from "naïveté about the nature of the danger faced by trans folks. [Rabbi Bergman] was making a point that assumed those risks to be ones of discomfort... [but] those risks include the real threat of violence faced by trans

²⁸⁰ LaCour, Michael J. and Donald P. Green, "When Contact Changes Minds: An Experiment on Transmission of Support for Gay Equality," *Science* 346, no. 6215 (2014): 1366-1369. The article was retracted in May 2015. More information on the retraction can be found here: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/29/science/journal-science-retracts-study-on-gay-canvassers-and-same-sex-marriage.html?_r=0

²⁸¹ Dawne Moon, "Difficult Dialogues," in *Religion on the Edge: De-centering and Re-centering the Sociology of Religion*, eds. Courtney Bender, Wendy Cadge, Peggy Levitt, and David Smilde (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Amanda Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church*, (New York: Routledge, 2008).

²⁸² James, email correspondence.

folks on a regular basis.”²⁸³ James also expressed disappointment with the panel over all. The panel title suggested it was aimed at making the Jewish community more transgender inclusive but according to James, who knew many in the room, only a few transgender people were in attendance and very few queer people were there. He wondered about how outreach for the event was conducted and whether or not the event’s affiliation with the Jewish Federation might have negatively impacted the willingness of queer and trans people to attend.²⁸⁴ James also expressed that despite events that ostensibly support increasing trans inclusion and involvement in Jewish communities, the programming offered “ends up being stuff like this, that is ‘for the benefit of’ trans folks, but is actually directed by cis folks, at cis folks, with no (or very few) trans voices included.”²⁸⁵ He said what the Jewish community, like the larger society, needs to adapt to is that “the people who are ‘experts’ in gay/lesbian Jewish thinking aren't necessarily the same people who will be experts on trans Jewish thinking... It's particularly alarming that one of the leading voices on trans Jewish text study is a cis man given that there are trans folks who absolutely are doing this work.”²⁸⁶ In particular James remarked that Rabbi Bergman did not seem to understand basic trans concepts such as the difference between sex and gender, or the existence of intersex people as a category separate but related to non-intersex trans people. So while Rabbi Bergman has expertise on the texts “his presentation of them might have been more effective if he got trans concepts more.”²⁸⁷

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid. “Cis” is short for cisgender.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

There are trans rabbis, scholars, and activists who are both experts in trans issues and who engage with Jewish texts in order to consider the place of trans people within Judaism, and yet these individuals do not always appear at trans events. Los Angeles may suffer from a dearth of local trans Jewish leaders doing this kind of educational work, but there are a number of such individuals in California broadly and in other cities throughout the U.S. James, Dan, and Rabbi Rosenblum, appear to be sought out by Jewish organizations in Los Angeles as three of the few or only visible local trans Jewish educators, but none of them pursue this work full time. It is certainly possible that non-local trans Jewish educators were asked to lead this event and declined – in which case the question becomes whether it is better to hold such an event without trans leadership, or minimally cisgender leaders who are highly educated in trans issues, rather than not holding the event at all? Although some event attendees may have had their eyes opened to issues facing trans Jews, from the perspective of trans people an event conducted this way can end up looking self-congratulatory rather than genuine. Another trans participant who did not attend the event but who had seen it advertised described this type of programming as “sanitizing” trans Jews for palatable consumption by the larger Jewish community. He said this kind of programming is the only kind he has seen with regard to trans Jews in Los Angeles. There is a difference between an event held “on behalf of” trans Jews for a cisgender audience, and one that is held by trans Jews for trans Jews and allies. If the Jewish community is interested in moving towards the latter, organizations and institutions that hold such events will need to connect more deeply and meaningfully with the queer and transgender Jewish communities they hope to serve.

Appeals to the Text & Alternative Modes of Appeal

Both of the events I attended on transgender inclusion in Judaism took Jewish texts as the starting point for addressing the topic. This is characteristic of a larger trend on the part of some liberal religious individuals to position homosexual and gender nonconforming people as centrally important within Judaism, or as created “in the image of God,” as a way of justifying their place within Judaism. The “created this way” narrative bears similarities to the secular “born this way” one, which has figured largely in mainstream LGBT activism. In the “born this way” narrative, LGBTQ people should be accepted because their sexuality or gender identity is not a choice. For some, believing that one is born or created homosexual or transgender may be helpful for self-acceptance. It may also be a compelling tactic for winning rights or societal acceptance. However, the “born this way” narrative is problematic in its assumption that if sexuality or gender identity were a choice, as some LGBTQ people believe it is, then it would be reasonable to bar LGBTQ people from obtaining rights. Similarly, arguing that LGBTQ people are “created this way” relies on God’s intentional creation of queer and trans people or, more abstractly, on evidence of the centrality or inclusion of LGBTQ people in traditional texts in order to argue that contemporary Judaism should accept LGBTQ Jews. Making such an argument implies that without this evidence LGBTQ Jews are not deserving of inclusion and affirmation within Jewish community. This strategy is additionally problematic because it typically lacks a critique of the cultural contexts and power structures that influence the construction and interpretation of Jewish texts, which have historically, and presently, situated gender nonnormative people (as well as queer people,

women, etc.) as "others" denied access to various Jewish spaces and practices. In other words, appealing to the text to affirm inclusion risks implicitly reifying, rather than addressing and challenging, the normalization of hetero-patriarchy and cissexism that has been normatively established as part of Jewish tradition. In summary, while Jewish texts are undeniably important to many Jews, this level of reliance on ancient texts to help us make sense of modern identities can be dangerous when it is not balanced with an understanding of structures of power and oppression, as well as a consideration of how these forces impact transgender Jews in the present.

Because traditional Jews tend to adhere to normative interpretations of the text, which are rightly or wrongly seen as the reason for their homophobic and transphobic views, textual appeals are sometimes assumed to be an effective strategy for shifting their opinions about homosexuality and nonnormative gender. While I cannot say whether such appeals are effective, I want to suggest there is another important strategy to consider for those invested in appealing to religiously traditional communities: psychological data. There is some evidence to suggest that data from the mental health community has helped to shift opinions on the treatment of LGBTQ Jews, even amongst Orthodox Jews. Two events in particular help to illustrate my point: a conference on April 19, 2015 called "Faith, Desire and Psychotherapy" at Columbia University, which "marked the first time rabbis and mental health researchers engaged in a public discussion about homosexuality and Orthodoxy,"²⁸⁸ and the June 2015 trial against Jews

²⁸⁸ "Rabbis Speak at Conference on Gays in Orthodoxy" *The Forward*, available from <http://forward.com/news/breaking-news/306811/rabbis-speak-at-conference-on-gays-in-orthodoxy/>, accessed May 1, 2017.

Offering New Alternatives for Healing (JONAH). JONAH is a New Jersey based organization that performs “conversion therapy” intended to “heal” people who have same-sex attraction. The Rabbinical Council of America, which is the largest Orthodox rabbinical group in the country, endorsed JONAH online until 2012, and some Ultra-Orthodox rabbis still send referrals there.²⁸⁹ In the trial four former clients and two parents sued the organization citing the emotional and psychological harm they suffered as a result of conversion therapy.

Orthodox Judaism maintains that homosexuality is prohibited according to Jewish law, but as stated above, not all Orthodox Jews agree about what this means for the treatment of LGBTQ Orthodox Jews. Importantly, mental health professionals at the conference condemned conversion therapy. One conference participant, Modern Orthodox Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot, cited the data provided by mental health professionals as pivotal to revising his stance on conversion therapy over the course of the past year. About conversion therapy he stated, ““Today we would’ve sharpened our approach to it... The psychology community has proven the negative effects.””²⁹⁰ Additionally, Rabbi Mark Dratch, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Council of America, cited “the damage conversion therapy can inflict... In this one rabbi’s opinion ... it’s wrong, and it’s not something that should be done.””²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ Rachel Benaim, “As a New Jersey Court Considers Conversion Therapy, Many Orthodox Jews Have Moved on” *Religion News Service*, available from <http://religionnews.com/2015/06/03/new-jersey-court-considers-conversion-therapy-many-orthodox-jews-moved/>, accessed May 1, 2017.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

The discussion above raises questions about whether the same logic that is now swaying some Orthodox leaders to support the banning of “conversion therapy” for gay Jews could also persuade them to accept and affirm all LGBTQ Jews? If psychological evidence about harm to lesbian and gay Jews has been compelling in changing the minds of some Orthodox Jews about conversion therapy, then perhaps psychological data documenting the harm to LGBTQ people that comes from the rejection and oppression they face can also be compelling in arguing for their inclusion and affirmation in Jewish community. LGBTQ (and especially trans) people face rejection from their families, friends, and religious communities, as well as elevated rates of violence, homelessness, substance abuse, and suicide. If opinions within Orthodox Judaism are shifting because they are rooted in the value of preventing harm inflicted by the Jewish community upon LGBTQ people then perhaps this has resonance beyond conversion therapy to inclusion and affirmation of LGBTQ Jews broadly. Mordechai Levovitz who is the founder and director of Jewish Queer Youth (JQY), an organization which supports LGBTQ youth in the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox community, said of these recent changes in the Orthodox community: “Now you have really well-respected rabbis coming out and taking a stand that we [the rabbinical establishment] have to be welcoming and we have to shift our perspective from rejection to acceptance... They’re not talking about changing *halakha* [traditional Jewish law], but rather, about shifting communal perspective.”²⁹² Levovitz’s comment highlights that shifting the opinions of Orthodox

²⁹² Judy Maltz, “Orthodox LGBT activist: More of us are coming out – and earlier, too,” *Ha’aretz*, available from <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-news/.premium-1.661488>, accessed June 6, 2015.

Jews is not necessarily linked to reinterpreting or changing Jewish law. In light of this, exposure to psychological data, especially in contexts where there is building pro-LGBTQ social pressure, may be an efficacious strategy for increasing LGBTQ inclusion in religiously traditional communities.

Chapter 4

Transition and Transformation: Creating a Transgender Affirming Judaism

In this final chapter, I consider how transgender Jews have been grappling with transgender inclusion within Judaism. I consider scholarship by two Jewish and transgender identified scholars about the usefulness of non-binary gender categories in rabbinic literature for discussions of the place of transgender people in Judaism today, and the lived religion of transgender Jews – including some of the liturgy, ritual, and theology that mark uniquely transgender and queer ways of worshipping within Judaism.

Insider Considerations of Nonnormative Rabbinic Gender Categories

While much of what I've considered previously represents outsiders' perspectives on transgender people in Judaism, transgender Jews have long been grappling with these issues themselves. Some transgender Jews have been excited and empowered to discover that genders outside of woman and man appear in Jewish texts, while others have argued that these nonnormative gender categories were only discussed to reify the gender binary. In this section I consider how two transgender scholars of Judaism have delved deeply into Talmudic passages on the *androgynos* and the *tumtum* in order to examine their implications for contemporary transgender Jews.

In one analysis, Rabbi Elliot Kukla, who in 2006 was the first out transgender rabbi to be ordained by the Reform movement, looks specifically at Mishnah Bikurim 4:1-2:

An *androgynos* is in some respects legally equivalent to men, and in some respects legally equivalent to women, in some respects legally equivalent to men and women, and in some respects legally equivalent to neither men nor women.... How is the *androgynos* legally equivalent to men? The

androgynos conveys impurity with white [penile discharge] like men, dresses like men, marries but is not taken in marriage like men.²⁹³

Rabbi Kukla acknowledges that the *tumtum* and *androgynos* are usually used by the Rabbis “to bolster a fairly rigid and hierarchical binary gender system” but he adds, “they are also always seen as fully human and integrated into the social life of the Rabbis.”²⁹⁴ So, while it is true that the *androgynos* is in some ways a subjugated figure, Kukla argues that the unquestioned status of the *androgynos* as human in Jewish texts is radical in itself. Kukla writes, “sadly, the humanity of people who do not fit into binary genders is not nearly so clear in our time.”²⁹⁵ Kukla juxtaposes the violence against trans people today with the protections afforded the *androgynos* in the text. “Not only is the *androgynos* protected from violence in Jewish texts, but the *androgynos* is presumed to be a part of loving family and community life.”²⁹⁶ Kukla also praises these rabbinic conceptions of gender, which allow for non-binary gender possibilities, contrasting them with our contemporary society that constricts gender to a binary.

Given that we read bodies through the lens of binary gender an infant can only be labeled female or male at birth. And when infants and young people have chromosomes, hormones, and anatomy that do not comply with this normative binary system, the medical establishment attempts to make these bodies comport. Our society’s devotion to binary gender is powerfully demonstrated by the use of surgeries on intersex infants

²⁹³ Elliot Kukla. “Created by the Hand of Heaven: Sex, Love, and the *androgynos*,” in *Sacred Encounter: Jewish Perspectives on Sexuality*, ed. Rabbi Lisa J. Grushcow (New York: CCAR Press, 2014), 141.

²⁹⁴ Elliot Kukla, 142.

²⁹⁵ Elliot Kukla, 143.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

intended to make their ambiguous bodies intelligible as either female or male. Once an infant is determined to be either a boy or girl this results in gender socialization as such. As Kukla puts it: “The less than two centimeters of body tissue that lies between a medically ‘acceptable’ clitoris and a passable penis will still consign you to a life of earning less on the dollar, a one in three possibility of being sexually abused, as well as a very rational fear of walking home alone at night.”²⁹⁷ Kukla returns to the text to state in an ambivalent fashion that while Jewish law simultaneously prohibits homosexuality between men, and asserts hierarchical gender that places men at the top, the presence of the *androgynos* as a figure who can marry and engage in sex problematizes both compulsory heterosexuality and the subjugation of women.²⁹⁸ Just as homosexuality is made incoherent by non-binary gender identity, the *androgynos* similarly complicates the ability to categorize sexuality, and thus to regulate it. Ultimately Kukla finds hope in Jewish texts. He concludes that despite the maintenance of hierarchies of gender and sexuality, the Rabbis never “question whether gender diversity really exists or whether gender nonconforming people should be included in romantic and social life,” which opens up space in Judaism for people of all genders.²⁹⁹

Max Strassfeld is a Jewish Studies scholar who has written about his experiences as a transgender Jew, created Jewish ritual for gender transition, and examined rabbinic

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Eliot Kukla, 145.

²⁹⁹ Eliot Kukla, 147.

opinions on the *androgynos* in Tosefta Bikurim, part of Jewish oral law.³⁰⁰ With regard to the *androgynos* Strassfeld considers the same passage as Kukla, as well as the passage below, where he uses the gender neutral pronoun “ze”/”hir” for the *androgynos*:

[How is the] *androgynos* like both men and women: [the person who injures the *androgynos*] is liable for injuring hir like [they had injured] either men or women, the deliberate murder of the *androgynos* [incurs the capital punishment] of decapitation, [and if the *androgynos* were murdered] accidentally, [the murderer must] exile themselves to the cities of refuge.³⁰¹

Strassfeld’s interpretation of these passages on the *androgynos* is informed by Charlotte Fonrobert who writes, “There is a stark juxtaposition between the variability of bodies, admitted into legal consideration, and the absolute insistence of the gender duality of law. Sex is variable but gender is not.”³⁰² According to Fonrobert’s reading while the *androgynos* person possess sex outside of the male/female binary, they only become intelligible to rabbinic Judaism through being categorized as either a woman or man. Fonrobert also argues that the Rabbis tend to weigh the *androgynos* towards the masculine, a conclusion she comes to based on the Rabbis’ determination that the *androgynos* can marry like a man, but not *be married* in the passive sense – as a woman

³⁰⁰ Max Strassfeld, “Categorizing the Human: The androgynos in Tosefta Bikurim,” presented at the San Diego AAR in 2014. As Strassfeld puts it: “the most programmatic text on the *androgynos* is found in the second chapter of Tosefta Bikurim.” In his paper, he provides a much fuller analysis than what I have excerpted here for my purposes.

³⁰¹ Max Strassfeld, “Categorizing the Human: The *androgynos* in Tosefta Bikurim,” 5. Strassfeld elects to use the pronouns “ze”/”hir” for the *androgynos* throughout his paper.

³⁰² Charlotte Fonrobert, “Regulating the Human Body: Rabbinic Legal Discourse and the Making of Jewish Gender,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte Fonrobert and Martin Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 289, quoted in Strassfeld, “Categorizing the Human: The *androgynos* in Tosefta Bikurim.”

would be to a man. “Fonrobert uses this legal ruling to argue that the rabbis privilege the presence of male genitalia, indicating an overall preference towards weighting the *androgynos* as male.”³⁰³ Strassfeld suggests that if we assume Fonrobert is correct then we can conclude that there are three rabbinic approaches towards the androgynous represented in Tosefta Bikurim. “The first approach emphasizes masculinity, although this masculinity is sometimes circumscribed in the law.”³⁰⁴ The emphasis on masculinity is visible in the rabbinic decision that the *androgynos* is male with regard to marriage, a move that demonstrates how “even differently sexed bodies can be enlisted in the aid of the project of androcentric law.”³⁰⁵ He continues, “the second approach emphasizes the hybridity of the *androgynos*, by positioning the *androgynos* to legally function like both men and women.”³⁰⁶ This approach situates the *androgynos* as a hybrid figure who functions like both men and women – or perhaps simply as human – with regard to the punishment for a person who attempts to injure or murder them. In other words, the punishment for injury or murder of an *androgynos* is the same as that for a woman or man.

It is important to note, as Strassfeld does, that although the *androgynos* is characterized as human, this characterization still occurs through gender, not despite it. That is, the *androgynos* person is only intelligible to the rabbis in so far as they can be understood and categorized as “like” women and men. Strassfeld continues, “The final

³⁰³ Max Strassfeld, “Categorizing the Human: The *androgynos* in Tosefta Bikurim,” 4.

³⁰⁴ Max Strassfeld, “Categorizing the Human: The *androgynos* in Tosefta Bikurim,” 9.

³⁰⁵ Max Strassfeld, “Categorizing the Human: The *androgynos* in Tosefta Bikurim,” 5.

³⁰⁶ Max Strassfeld, “Categorizing the Human: The *androgynos* in Tosefta Bikurim,” 9.

approach is that of Rabbi Yose, who exiles the *androgynos* in his assumption that the sages must choose a sex and could not. Rabbi Yose's position seems to question the very premise that hybridity is functional.³⁰⁷ In this last approach Rabbi Yose concludes that “*androgynos*” is a category unto itself outside of man or woman, and therefore the *androgynos* person is unintelligible and must be excluded from rabbinic Judaism. Strassfeld argues that the list of ways the *androgynos* is like women, like men, like both, or like neither functions to fix gender as essential to rabbinic law. In linking gender with rabbinic law, he argues, all three approaches “are in fact in collusion.”³⁰⁸ In other words, through these three approaches – (1) weighing the *androgynos* towards the masculine, (2) constituting the *androgynos*' humanity through gender, (3) and rejecting the *androgynos* because they fail to comport to binary sex – “the dichotomy of sex is established as fundamental to the law.”³⁰⁹

Strassfeld's paper is bookended with a narrative that positions these questions of categorization and intelligibility as imperative in the present. Strassfeld begins his talk by posing two questions: “what are the processes by which some people are designated as disposable, or as not-quite-human?” and “what are transgender lives worth?” He concludes by providing statistics about violence against transgender people, including a report released in May of 2014 by “The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs... documenting cases of hate violence against LGBT people in the previous year. Of

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Max Strassfeld, “Categorizing the Human: The *androgynos* in Tosefta Bikurim,” 10.

homicide victims, 67% were transgender women of color.”³¹⁰ Here Strassfeld seems to echo Kukla’s warning that transgender and gender nonconforming people are not always seen as human in our society, which puts them at great risk. Strassfeld is careful to assert that there is no “simple connection between the contemporary category of transgender and the rabbinic *androgynos*.”³¹¹ His intention is not to collapse the two but rather to demonstrate that “the unintelligibility of the bodies of gender variant people (within law, among other structures) can enable violence... Questions of intelligibility are not abstract, and the constitution of the legible human can come at great cost.”³¹²

As Strassfeld says, intelligibility is not abstract, but central to the treatment of transgender (and queer) people in Judaism. As discussed, conversations in contemporary Jewish contexts intended to educate broad audiences about transgender Jews tend to engage the *androgynos* as a starting point for talking about the trans person in Judaism. While this figure may be used to open up conversations about gender identity, the *androgynos* should not be taken as a direct analog for contemporary trans people. This is because these categories arise out of two radically different historical and cultural contexts. Additionally, conversations about the *androgynos* should never come at the expense of the voices of contemporary trans Jews. Unlike detached textual analysis of disembodied gender nonconforming figures, contemporary trans Jews serve as experts on

³¹⁰ National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-affected Hate Violence in 2013,” available from http://avp.org/storage/documents/2013_ncavp_hvreport_final.pdf, accessed May 7, 2017, quoted in Strassfeld, “Categorizing the Human: The *androgynos* in Tosefta Bikurim,” 10.

³¹¹ Max Strassfeld, “Categorizing the Human: The *androgynos* in Tosefta Bikurim,” 11.

³¹² Ibid.

the realities of their lives and have profound insights on how inclusion and affirmation can be improved.

So the question remains, what bearing *does* this abstract rabbinic conversation about gender categories have on the lives of transgender Jews today? Thus far I have considered two kinds of dialogue happening in Jewish communities about transgender Jews. The first is dialogue within institutional Judaism aimed at the (mostly cisgender) Jewish masses, with the goal of advocating for education and increased inclusion with regard to trans Jews. The second kind of dialogue I have discussed is happening amongst transgender Jewish scholars who examine traditional Jewish texts in order to debate the relevance non-binary rabbinic gender categories have for conversations about transgender inclusion and experience today. Lastly, I want to consider innovations by and for transgender Jews themselves that aim to create a Judaism that meets their religious and spiritual needs. Institutional Judaism may just be beginning to learn about transgender Jews, but conversations about inclusion and affirmation have been ongoing amongst transgender Jews. While my considerations are far from complete, I devote the remainder of this chapter to an examination of theology and ritual innovated and employed by transgender Jews.

Theology: Created by God, Created by Self

In a social context, both within Judaism and outside of it, where transgender people are still frequently misunderstood, “othered,” or even pathologized as having an “illness” that needs to be fixed, trans theologies radically upend such assumptions, affirming the existence of transgender Jews and positioning them as central within Jewish

tradition. Elliott Kukla's trans theology champions the inclusion of nonnormative gender categories in rabbinic texts. He concludes that the inclusion of categories like *androgynos* is,

A theological statement—it is a proclamation that God creates a diversity of bodies and an abundance of desires that is far too complex for human beings to understand. It conveys an understanding that all people are created *al y'dei shamayim*... by the hand of heaven; and that every divine creation is entitled to be seen, loved, and desired.³¹³

Kukla's claim situates transgender and gender nonconforming people as created "by the hand of heaven" just as all other people. Because this assertion of the divine creation of humanity includes trans people, Kukla argues they are entitled to the same recognition, love, and desire as others. Given that trans people do not receive treatment on par with cisgender people, Kukla grounds a defense of such equal treatment in the rabbinic discussion of the *androgynos*, which he reads as an assertion that nonnormative gender does not negate humanity.

Other trans theologies similarly present trans people as divine creations, or as created "in the image of God," but they also highlight the trans person's self-creation. In Max Strassfeld's interpretation of Rabbi Yose discussed above, he understands the Rabbi's conclusion to be that *androgynos* is a category unto itself outside of man or woman and thus excluded from rabbinic Judaism. However, Rabbi Elliott Kukla gives a different interpretation of Rabbi Yose's conclusion. Kukla writes, "Rabbi Yossi offers the startling opinion that the *androgynos* is: '*B'riah bifnei atzmah hu.*' This phrase is hard to

³¹³ Elliot Kukla, "Created by the Hand of Heaven," 148. Kukla cites this Hebrew phrase as coming from the *Maggid Mishneh's* commentary on Rambam's *Hilchot Shofar*.

translate into English, but the best equivalent is probably ‘*he* is a created being of *her* own.’”³¹⁴ However, this self-creation is not undertaken alone, it occurs in partnership with God rather than against, or separate from, God. Kukla views gender as a creative work in progress not solely for trans Jews, but for people of all genders. Kukla writes,

The injunction to see one another as “created beings of our own” is the basis of a liberation theology for men, women, transgender people and everyone else. According to this theology, God wants and needs difference. Holiness comes from diversity, as opposed to sameness. This theology can liberate all of us from the boundaries that circumscribe our lives. It asks us to throw away the expectations that our bodies or our souls are containable within two categories. It allows us to see each and every other person as a uniquely created being. And it commands us to move through the world embodying infinitely diverse manifestations of God’s own image.³¹⁵

Here Kukla highlights that gender impacts all people, encouraging Jews to embrace their gender differences and the elements of themselves that are not gender normative. In removing binary gender expectations Kukla suggests people will come to see each other more clearly and complexly as the unique beings that they are. Kukla concludes by suggesting that this shift also allows for the proliferation of images of God, in the sense that all humans are reflections of the divine. Just as Jewish feminists have worked to create feminine and female images of the divine, challenging the dominance of images of God as male, Kukla empowers queer and trans Jews to proudly be their authentically

³¹⁴ Elliot Kukla, “Created by the Hand of Heaven,” 142.

³¹⁵ Elliot Kukla, “A Created Being of Its Own: Toward a Jewish Liberation Theology for Men, Women and Everyone Else,” *TransTorah*, available from http://transtorah.org/PDFs/How_I_Met_the_Tumtum.pdf, accessed January 12, 2014.

gendered selves – representing diverse images of God – which similarly challenge dominant images of God as cisgender.³¹⁶

Self-creation is also emphasized by some authors of *mikveh* rituals for gender transition. These rituals, innovated by transgender Jews, allow participants to mark gender transition Jewishly. Rabbi Emily Aviva Kapor has authored one such ritual and in it she explicitly names the self-creation that happens in partnership with God/dess during gender transition. Kapor writes, “I am grateful to you, dear Goddess, for having made it within my power to create and to be created, to form and to be formed, and to be a partner with You and with all creatures in the creation of worlds.”³¹⁷ Here Kapor explicitly names the Goddess-given power to be a creator herself. Kapor notes that this portion of the ritual is elaborated from a *berachah* (blessing) by Rabbi Elliot Kukla. In Kukla’s blessing he explains how this partnership in creation is expressed in gender transition: “When we take physical or spiritual steps to more honestly manifest our gender identities we are fulfilling the foundational mitzvah, religious commandment, to be partnered with God in completing the work of creation.”³¹⁸ Kapor also writes in a blog posting about the connection between God’s initial creation of the world and the self-

³¹⁶ For more on this see Judith Plaskow, “Dismantling the Gender Binary within Judaism” in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, ed. Noach Dzmura (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 224.

³¹⁷ Emily Aviva Kapor, “A Mikveh Ritual for Transitioning Gender,” June 2013, available from <http://www.emilyaviva.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Mikveh-Transition-Ritual.pdf>. This document is from Kapor’s presentation of the ritual at the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference.

³¹⁸ Elliot Kukla, “A Blessing for Transitioning Genders,” *TransTorah*, available from http://transtorah.org/PDFs/Blessing_for_Transitioning_Genders.pdf, accessed January 12, 2014.

creation she has undergone as a transgender woman. Kapor explains that two verbs are used for creation: *bara* and *yatzar*.

The Torah presents *yatzar*-creation (*yetzirah*) as an act of doing, of making, of building. The act of *bara*-creation (*b'riyah*) is a linguistic act; true creativity and creation born out of a holy emulation of God. Traditionally, Kabbalistic mysticism sees *b'riyah* as reserved for God whereas humans are limited to creation by *yetzirah*. But this is a power that humankind acquires and starts to exercise, and even God cannot stop it. Creation is speech, both for God and for us.

I, a trans woman, certainly existed before I chose to transition. When I chose to transition, it certainly involved physical and medical changes to my body. This is *yetzirah* creation: formation out of existing material, changing its shape, changing its essence. But that kind of creation was incomplete, and the person that I am now—the “I” that I *really* mean when I say “I”—was brought into existence because I declared her to exist. I created my name by declaring it; I created my gender through speech and sign. In order to exist, I had to create myself.

And that creation is an ongoing act. It is a holy act, a Godly act. It is the act of *b'riyah*, creation by a Divine force, requiring nothing more than the act of declaring it so. Both of these creations are what it takes to make a self. Both kinds of creation are necessary in the world.

God speaks the world into creation; I speak myself into creation. Every day I wake up and ask myself: what kind of woman, what kind of Jew, what kind of self do I want to be today? Who will Emily be today? How will I continue to create myself? How will I continue to create my Self?³¹⁹

The idea that human beings are God’s partners in the task of creation appears in multiple places within Jewish tradition: in the philosophy of *Tikkun Olam*, or “Repairing the World,” which suggests that humans are protectors of God’s creations, expected to create the best world possible. It also appears in a Kabbalistic interpretation of the

³¹⁹ Emily Aviva Kapor, “B’reishit: The Divine Act of Self-Creation,” *Planting Rainbows*, available from <https://plantingrainbows.wordpress.com/2013/09/30/breishit-the-divine-act-of-self-creation/>, accessed May 7, 2017.

creation story, which implies that God left the task of creation unfinished so that people would become partners with God in completing it. The covenant between God and human beings can similarly be understood as a commandment for human beings to be God's partners in the task of creation. This is exemplified in Midrash Tanhuma, *Tazria 5* which describes an encounter between Rabbi Akiva and a Roman named Turnus Rufus. In this exchange Turnus Rufus asks Rabbi Akiva whether the actions of God or man are finer, and Rabbi Akiva responds that those of man are. Turnus Rufus also asks the Rabbi why circumcisions are performed. Rabbi Akiva explains that he knew Turnus Rufus would ask him this, which is why he said the actions of man are finer than the actions of God. Rabbi Akiva asks the man to consider sheaves of wheat in comparison to cakes in order to persuade him that humans improve upon the creations of God. When Turnus Rufus once again asks Rabbi Akiva about circumcision the Rabbi responds that it "is because God gave the commandments to the Jewish people in order to refine them."³²⁰ In this way circumcision can be understood as a way of marking the Jewish people's ongoing engagement with God in the process of creation. Or more abstractly, this story can be interpreted as an assertion that the covenant between God and humans is a commandment, or imperative, for humans to improve upon God's creations. This reading lends itself to the theology of self-creation expressed in Kukla and Kapor's gender transition rituals. These rituals present opportunities for transgender Jews to continue, and to improve upon, God's creations through the manifestation and affirmation of their

³²⁰ Midrash Tanhuma, *Tazria 5* cited in Avraham Burg, *Very Near to You: Human Readings of the Torah*, (Gefen Publishing House Ltd: Jerusalem, 2012), 405-6. Burg provides a fuller recounting.

gender identities. In this way trans Jews are empowered within Judaism – they are cast both as divinely created and as co-creators themselves, partnered with God in the construction of new and improved selves and worlds.

Ritual: *Mikveh* Ritual for Gender Transition

In this section I examine three *mikveh* rituals created by transgender Jews, which allow participants to mark gender transition within Jewish tradition. These rituals were authored by Rabbi Emily Aviva Kapor, Rabbi Elliot Kukla, and Max Strassfeld. Vanessa Ochs has written extensively about the innovation of Jewish ritual, and the framework she provides for innovation and what makes such rituals meaningful for participants is helpful for understanding transgender ritual innovation. Ochs explains new Jewish ritual makes use of a “Jewish ritual toolbox;” this toolbox consists of: 1) Texts, which can be quoted as is or given new interpretation and meaning. 2) “Familiar and resonant Jewish ritual actions and objects,” which are powerful for making new rituals recognizably Jewish by connecting new rituals to extant meaningful and familiar Jewish ritual. 3) Enduring and core Jewish understandings, for example beliefs about “the merit of ancestors... the significance of preserving Jewish memory through study, and all the ethical obligations held toward fellow Jews and all of humankind.”³²¹ *Mikveh* rituals innovated to honor changes to gender call on Ochs’ three categories within the Jewish ritual toolbox in order to create rituals that possess the familiar trappings of Judaism but in their newness provide something needed that has been absent from Jewish tradition

³²¹ Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 5-6.

until now. Queer and transgender ritual innovation is also heavily influenced by the innovations made by feminist Jews.³²² Like feminist Jews, queer and trans Jews have utilized two approaches in creating new rituals: “adaptation of existing rituals and creation of new ones.”³²³ Adapting rituals means taking those traditionally performed by men or that only honor or acknowledge heterosexuality/heterosexual relationships or cisgender identity and expanding them to be inclusive. One critique of this approach is that it is not clear whether adapting rituals in this way does anything to challenge patriarchy, hetero-, and cissexism that is traditionally part of Judaism’s framework. Another approach is to create rituals that honor the lives and needs of Jewish women, queer, and trans people. The rituals discussed below fall into this second category; they were created by and for queer and trans Jews precisely because queer and trans Jews needed such rituals and began seeking them out or creating them themselves.

Mikvaot, or Jewish ritual baths, are traditionally used to mark transitions or to confer purity for the person immersing. Individuals may immerse monthly after menstruation, as part of the process of conversion to Judaism, or before one’s wedding, among other reasons. Historically, *niddah* – the monthly ritual immersion after menstruation – has been the most common use for *mikveh*. In its traditional conception, *niddah* is both heteronormative and gender normative, formulated as a requirement for women seven days after the end of menstruation before re-engaging in sexual activity with their husbands. Because *niddah* is traditionally a women-focused purity ritual and

³²² To be clear, some of those involved in feminist innovation are queer/trans.

³²³ Vanessa Ochs, 47.

because it has persisted, particularly in Orthodox Judaism, while *mikveh* rituals for the purity of men have not – such as immersion after seminal emission – some have read *niddah*, and thus *mikveh*, as sexist or outside the realm of egalitarian Jewish practice. This critique of *mikveh*, has influenced some, particularly in non-Orthodox American Jewish communities, to eschew *mikveh* rituals.

More recently though, as a result of feminist and queer Jews reevaluating and reclaiming *mikveh* practice, immersion rituals have gained popularity in non-Orthodox American Jewish communities. Those who have newly embraced, or re-embraced, *mikveh* immersion express a desire to Jewishly mark a variety of pivotal moments of transition in their lives, including ones that have not traditionally been observed through *mikveh* ritual. For these moments they have innovated numerous immersion rituals including ones to acknowledge an abortion, coming out as LGBTQ, or gender transition. In order to make *mikveh* rituals more accessible, these Jews have created and changed *mikveh* spaces so that they reflect feminist and queer sensibilities. Thus, a wider swath of individuals are able to engage in these transformative rituals, applying them to pertinent events in their lives while simultaneously abandoning the elements of *mikveh* they perceive as heteronormative, gender normative, and misogynist.

Traditionally, *mikveh* immersion functioned to make the participant ritually pure. Today the language of purity may be less common, but many still immerse in order to experience or mark a transition or transformation. *Mikveh* rituals may reference aspects of the transition of the body directly, as in post-menstruation immersion rituals, or more abstractly as in religious conversions, where the water aids the transition from life as a

gentile to a Jew.³²⁴ Individuals ready their bodies and minds in preparation for immersion, reflecting on the reason for their visit and the transitional moment they are marking at the *mikveh*.

Some *mikvaot* encourage physical preparation for the ritual where participants remove adornments and clean their bodies. These preparations are meant to remove barriers between the body and the waters, and to bring the human body as close as possible to its “natural” state. This is sometimes conceived as the state the body was in upon birth, with the *mikveh* waters symbolizing the womb itself. After these preparations, the participant submerges entirely under the water – often multiple times – recites a blessing, and exits the *mikveh* waters transformed.

Mikveh provides an encounter with liminality, or the state of being “betwixt and between” that participants experience during the ritual before they emerge from the waters transformed.³²⁵ Victor W. Turner describes the liminal period of ritual, particularly of rites of passage, as structureless. According to Turner, if rites of passage serve to reify the social order within a given culture then the liminal, in between, and transitional period of the ritual is often absent the structure of the culture. In this way the

³²⁴ Haviva Ner-David, “Reclaiming Nidah and Mikveh through Ideological and Practical Reinterpretation” in *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*, ed. Danya Ruttenberg, (New York: NYU Press, 2009). Ner-David explains how practices relating to ritual purity and impurity became obsolete after the destruction of the Second Temple, with the exception of impurity contracted from uterine blood flow, which remained because of its relationship to sexual prohibition. She goes on to critique the persistence of this ideology of impurity, which has been attached to women, and to explain its ongoing negative impacts.

³²⁵ Victor W. Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*,” *The Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society* (1964), Symposium on New Approaches to the Study of Religion: 4-20.

reification of the culture is emphasized when after the transition the ritual participant becomes clearly situated within the social structure of the culture. Turner argues that in some cases the liminal state is further signified through the representation of the ritual participant as liminal. One way this may be accomplished is through an upending of sex/gender, which is often an important element of societal structuring. As a result, the person undergoing the ritual may be “represented as being neither male nor female,” “symbolically assigned characteristics of both sexes,” and/or “symbolically either sexless or bisexual.”³²⁶ Turner explains that ritual participants in the liminal stage may be regarded as human “raw material,” recalling God’s creation of the first humans out of earth. He further speculates that, “it was perhaps from the rites of the Hellenic mystery religions that Plato derived his notion expressed in his *Symposium* that the first humans were *androgynes*.”³²⁷ The liminal stage of *mikveh* ritual provides potential for queer and transgender individuals immersing to reflect on gender, and the process of transformation and becoming that occurs through the ritual.

Mikveh ritual involves the removal of clothing, but while those immersing are devoid of the external trappings clothing provides as a signifier of gender, the traditional formulation of *mikveh* ritual is gendered. For example, the reasons for immersing are distinct depending on the sex/gender of the individual, and immersion is traditionally divided by gender – men immerse with men and women with women. In queer and transgender reformulations of *mikveh* ritual, gender is problematized in a number of ways

³²⁶ Turner, 49.

³²⁷ Ibid.

as a response to its centrality in traditional *mikveh* ritual as well as in Judaism more broadly.

For some queer Jews, the liminality experienced in *mikveh* ritual may couple in meaningful ways with liminality in their own lives, mirroring the experience of living in the unstructured or in-between spaces of nonnormative gender and sexuality. In terms of gender, this may be experienced as permanent marginality for those whose genders do not fit within a binary, or temporary liminality for those who are transitioning across binary gender categories. Turner did not only see rituals as reifying extant social structures, as Catherine Bell writes he also saw them as a dynamic “part of the ongoing process by which [a] community [is] continually redefining and renewing itself.”³²⁸ Mary Douglas also acknowledges the potential that lies in breaking with order and engaging disorder. While disorder “is destructive to existing patterns [...] it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power.”³²⁹ Disorder is dangerous because of the threat it poses to normative culture and the established structure of society, but disorder also has the potential to introduce new concepts that challenge or restructure culture and societal structure, and therein lies its power. Disorder is often directly related to what is understood as “polluting” within a culture. Douglas argues that “we have seen how the abominations of Leviticus are the obscure unclassifiable elements which do not fit the pattern of the cosmos. They are incompatible with holiness and blessing,” and they may

³²⁸ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions – Revised Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 39.

³²⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (New York: Routledge, 1966), 95.

also be incompatible with societal norms.³³⁰ In other words those practices and customs labeled *to'evah* (which some translate as “abomination” and others as “taboo”) in Leviticus were categorized as such because they threatened to blur categories and challenge the norms of the time in which the text was written, redacted, and/or interpreted. Deuteronomy 22:5, which proclaims, “a man’s item shall not be on a woman, and a man shall not wear a woman’s garment,” also seems to respond to the threat of blurred categories. Some Jews have pointed to this verse to bolster an anti-transgender position. The perceived danger of queer and transgender people lies in part in their gender and/or sexuality, which is undefinable for the perspective of normative society. This inability for queer/trans people to be defined and categorized calls into question the humanity of the queer/trans person. In response some will ask: do queer/trans people deserve to live? How do we change them or otherwise make them “normal”? The irony, of course, is that these dominant societal perceptions mean that queer and trans people are the ones who face imminent danger. However, it is true in a way that queer, trans, and other marginalized people pose a “threat” to normative society, in the sense that they pose a threat to bias, inequity, and injustice. Like Turner Douglas acknowledges the way rituals often function to aggregate someone into society after the marginal period, however, she also gives attention to what happens to the permanently marginal person who cannot be aggregated into society. She considers those who have been released from prisons and mental institutions in order to conclude that it is difficult or impossible for

³³⁰ Douglas, 96.

these marginal individuals to be successfully aggregated into society.³³¹ What Douglas does not acknowledge, and what I am concerned with in my discussion of queer and trans *mikveh* ritual, is the potential for ritual to help marginalized individuals restructure normative society in order to create spaces and affirmation for themselves.

For many queer and trans people who choose to participate in *mikveh* ritual, this engagement with liminality does not serve as a temporary reprieve from the structure of society before reaffirming that structure. Instead the ritual functions as an opportunity for queer and trans Jews to celebrate liminality and ambiguity as an end unto itself rather than an outlying experience useful only in its reification of norms. Through *mikveh* queer and trans Jews celebrate themselves, their bodies/genders, and/or their lives. *Mikveh* may even allow participants to subvert identity, arguably a queer act in itself and one that functions as “a celebration of liminality, of the spaces between or outside structure, [and serves as] a kind of anarchistic championing of ‘pure’ freedom from all constraints and limits.”³³²

Intentionality, the removal of barriers between the body and the water, and the simplification of the body are elements of *mikveh* that entail vulnerability and self-reflection. The removal of barriers in particular can take on a compounded meaning for transgender people. For some this act may reflect the removal of obstacles to a body that aligns with their gender identity, for others it may symbolize the unbound gender space

³³¹ Douglas, 98-99.

³³² Steven Seidman, “Identity and Politics in a ‘Postmodern’ Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes,” in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 105-142.

they occupy daily. This attention to boundaries, coupled with the naked body, provides an opportunity for individuals to let the time and space of *mikveh* heal some of the gender trauma that arises as a byproduct of their confrontations with normative boundaries in a transphobic culture. Furthermore, the performance of transgender *mikveh* ritual upsets normative gender boundaries, which are often maintained in elements of traditional *mikveh* rituals, and in Judaism more broadly.

I spoke with a number of queer Jews in Boston who have found *mikveh* rituals to be a desirable and meaningful part of their religious or spiritual practice, though not always easily accessible. Some were fond of outdoor *mikvaot* because natural sites like Walden Pond are permissible according to Jewish Law and do not require interaction with *mikveh* staff who may be homophobic or transphobic. Others were excited to tell me about an indoor *mikveh* in Newton, Massachusetts called Mayyim Hayyim (or Living Waters in English), which was founded with the mission of providing an inclusive *mikveh* space. As part of this mission it has aimed to remove barriers that might otherwise keep transgender, gender nonnormative, and other LGBTQ Jews out of the *mikveh*. The inclusion efforts of Mayyim Hayyim, along with liturgical materials innovated by and for queer and transgender Jews available at the site, help create an environment where LGBTQ *mikveh* rituals are normalized.

The work of transforming *mikveh* into a space that is for transgender people too means changing the conceptions and realities that currently maintain *mikvaot* as cisgender, heteronormative, and predominantly women's spaces. One individual helping to make this shift is Rabbi Emily Aviva Kapor, who has worked with Mayyim Hayyim,

as well as independently, to create liturgy and ritual for transgender Jews. In addressing the absence of current liturgy and ritual for transgender Jews, Kapor meets a need she is intimately familiar with as a traditionally observant transgender woman who herself sought out *mikveh* in the midst of gender transition.³³³ “The reason I got involved with [Mayyim Hayyim] was because after... I’d actually changed my name about a week had gone by without me needing to say my old name out loud and then I had to for some reason or other... I had to do it, and I felt dirty afterwards like I needed to take a shower, and that got me thinking about *mikveh*. And so I was like you know I wonder if anyone out there has ever addressed the issue of trans people and *mikveh*, lo and behold I found Mayyim Hayyim, sent them an email and was like hey here’s who I am, here’s what I want to do; can we work on this? And they were absolutely fantastic to me about it.”³³⁴ Kapor’s reaction to saying her “old name” creates an inversion where *mikveh* ritual – which traditionally functioned to confer purity – now serves to allow Kapor to resist, or cleanse herself of, broader cultural constructs of the queer/trans body as impure or unnatural.³³⁵ In this queer reading of *mikveh*, the ritual does not serve to cleanse the (queer/trans) body of its own essential impurities, rather it has been reconceptualized as a

³³³ It is important that Kapor is traditionally observant because it implies that *mikveh* is already a part of the ritual tools frequently used within her religious community.

³³⁴ Emily Aviva, interview by author, 25 November 2013, Boston, tape recording.

³³⁵ Two examples can be found in Deborah R. Vargas, “Ruminations on *Lo Sucio* as a Latino Queer Analytic,” *American Quarterly*, Volume 66, Number 3, (2014) where she explores conceptions of queer as “dirty” and in C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, eds. Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013) where they write on conceptions of trans people as “unnatural.”

method for healing or cleansing the queer/trans body from the toxicity of hetero and cisnormativity.³³⁶

The *mikveh* Kapor chose, Mayyim Hayyim, has a mission of accessibility that is reflected in the self-conscious construction of the *mikveh* space. It is also visible in the templates it provides to visitors for non-traditional rituals that acknowledge a variety of moments that individuals may look to the intimate ritual space of *mikveh* to mark. In 2014 twenty-five percent of immersions at Mayyim Hayyim were for innovated, rather than traditional, rituals.³³⁷ Though the categories of innovated and traditional can be contested, generally, traditional rituals include immersions for *niddah*, conversions, brides/grooms prior to their wedding, Shabbat, daily, and Jewish holidays. Innovated immersions include those for life transition, celebrations, healing/illness, bar/bat mitzvah and others. Attendance at Mayyim Hayyim is evenly split between those who identify as Reform, Conservative, and unaffiliated, while Orthodox Jews make up a smaller percentage of the attendees, but comprise a growing contingent.³³⁸

Mayyim Hayyim consciously resists the heteronormative, cisgender legacy of the *mikveh* in a number of ways. Mayyim Hayyim employs gender inclusive language in its literature when talking about gender identity and coupling ceremonies, its facilities contain two baths, which are not divided by gender as is traditionally the case, and instead allow people of all genders to immerse in either one. There are four preparation

³³⁶ Jane Ward originally suggested this reading to me in email correspondence.

³³⁷ Mikveh staff, email correspondence, August 6, 2014.

³³⁸ Mayyim Hayyim staff, in-person conversations and emails, from Fall 2013 to Summer 2014.

rooms in which individuals ready themselves for immersion; one of these rooms is equipped for an infant and another is wheelchair accessible.

As at many *mikvaot*, from the moment a visitor is greeted at Mayyim Hayyim, through the completion of the ritual, a *mikveh* attendant serves as their guide. Since these attendants have direct interaction with the individual immersing, and are responsible for leading them through the process, they shape an important portion of the *mikveh* experience. Accordingly, *mikveh* attendants at Mayyim Hayyim, who are volunteers, receive curriculum and training on how to welcome and guide visitors. Their training contains education about inclusion for LGBTQ Jews at the *mikveh*, and some *mikveh* attendants are themselves LGBTQ identified. Traditionally, *mikveh* rituals require a witness, a role often played by the *mikveh* attendant. However, Mayyim Hayyim allows those immersing to choose whether or not to have a witness, and visitors may bring their own if they prefer.

Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari, a trans Jew who for the first time found an accessible *mikveh* space in Mayyim Hayyim, describes how it disrupted his previous assumptions about *mikveh*. Fornari explains that before Mayyim Hayyim the small relief he found was in discovering that the *mikveh* waters could not become impure (*tumah*). “As a transgender and genderqueer person, I often experience my presence in gendered spaces as somehow contaminating. I feel this in a synagogue that has gender-segregated seating. I feel this in a public bathroom. And for most of my life, I associated this with a

mikveh.”³³⁹ For Fornari, the de-gendering of the ritual space at Mayyim Hayyim, and the general interweaving of the “needs and insights of trans people into [Mayyim Hayyim’s] structure” is what makes the ritual accessible and affirming in a way it had not been for him before.³⁴⁰ The accessibility and affirmation this space provides for trans Jews opens up possibilities for reimagining the trans body outside the framework of contamination. In constructing a *mikveh* with the intention of addressing the needs of LGBTQ people (as well as others who often avoid or are excluded in the considerations of traditional *mikvaot*) Mayyim Hayyim serves as an important model for how the Jewish community can effectively implement inclusion and affirmation.

When Kapor became interested in crafting a *mikveh* ritual for gender transition, she began by taking note of what rituals already existed to mark such a moment Jewishly. Kapor built on an extant ritual addressing gender transition composed by Rabbi Elliot Kukla. In the preface to Kukla’s ritual he laments that “the most important moments in the lives of transgender, intersex and genderqueer Jews are not honored within [Jewish] tradition.”³⁴¹ His blessing was created for a friend who wished to recite it each time he received hormone therapy, but Kukla states that it can be used for many of the occasions that occur in transitioning “such as name or pronoun changes, coming out to loved ones

³³⁹ Ari Lev Fornari, “Safe, Seen, Sanctified,” *Mayyim Hayyim*, available from <http://mayyimhayyimblog.com/2013/11/20/safe-seen-and-sanctified/>, accessed December 28, 2013.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Elliot Kukla, “A Blessing for Transitioning Genders,” *TransTorah*, available from http://transtorah.org/PDFs/Blessing_for_Transitioning_Genders.pdf, accessed January 12, 2014.

or moments of medical transition.”³⁴² Kukla’s ritual contains three blessings, the first is “Blessed are You, Eternal One, our God, Ruler of Time and Space, the Transforming One to those who transform/transition/cross over.”³⁴³ Here Kukla is drawing on a rich history of Jewish liturgy and texts, as well as linguistic analysis of ancient Hebrew, which label Jews as a transitioning people, as a people who cross over. This “crossing over” refers both to spiritual transformation and to the biblical moment when the Hebrews cross over the Jordan River in their escape from slavery.³⁴⁴

The second blessing in Kukla’s ritual, “Blessed are You, Eternal One, our God Ruler of Time and Space who has made me in God’s image,” references the creation of both men and women in the image of God in the book of Genesis. Kukla also makes reference to a Midrash (or exegesis of the Torah), which states the first human being was an *androgynos* or an intersex person, and asserts, “Our tradition teaches that all bodies and genders are created in God’s image whether we identify as men, women, intersex, or something else.”³⁴⁵ Kukla unearths queer affirming moments in Jewish texts and commentary, providing queer Jews with a history rooted in Jewish tradition. He interprets the ritual for gender transition as an act of manifesting or creating gender identity, which “[fulfills] the foundational mitzvah... to be partnered with God in completing the work of creation.”³⁴⁶ Kukla’s ritual empowers each participant to complete God’s work as the creator of their self, their identity.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

The third blessing says, “Blessed are You, Eternal One, our God Ruler of Time and Space who has kept us alive and sustained us and helped us to arrive at this moment.”³⁴⁷ This prayer, commonly known as the *Shehecheyanu*, is sometimes recited as part of traditional *mikveh* rituals and typically marks a new event or a special occasion. In this blessing Kukla speaks on behalf of trans people collectively, thanking God for sustaining them and for making the arrival at this particular moment of transition possible. This is especially powerful in light of the impacts of oppression, hostility, and elevated suicide and murder rates, on the lives of transgender people. Kukla notes that this blessing can also be understood to mark for Jews their “collective transition as a people as [they] begin to transform [their] tradition in order to honor and celebrate the lives of transgender, intersex and gender queer Jews.”³⁴⁸

Emily Aviva Kapor’s ritual for transitioning gender builds on Kukla’s, hers opens with the recitation of Psalms 6:7-10. This is a passage that acknowledges extreme hardship and adversaries who wear the individual down, a crying out, and redemption through God who hears their plea and answers their prayer. This is followed by a teaching from the *Midrash*, which is meant to affirm the participant’s name, it says: “It is taught that a human being has three names: one given by their parents, one that others call them, and one that they acquire themselves through their deeds.”³⁴⁹ This teaching acknowledges both the past and future of the individual and recognizes that while some

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Emily Aviva Kapor, “A Mikveh Ritual for Transitioning Gender,” June 2013, available from <http://www.emilyaviva.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Mikveh-Transition-Ritual.pdf>.

trans people may have complicated feelings towards their pasts, this history is not all that defines them. This blessing also affirms any new name an individual may have chosen as part of gender transition.

Right before immersing in the mikveh, a blessing for gender transition is recited. In this blessing Kapor, like Kukla, marks the moment as one that brings trans Jews into partnership with God both in the creation of self, and in the creation of worlds. The blessing reads, “Blessed are You, Yah our God, Source of Life, who breathes a pure soul into me, and helps me to transition among those who transition in the Jewish people and in the world. I am grateful to you, dear Goddess, for having made it within my power to create and to be created, to form and to be formed, and to be a partner with you and with all creatures in the creation of worlds. Blessed are You, Yah, who brings over those who transition.”³⁵⁰ In this blessing Kapor genders God as both female and male, and uses the less traditionally familiar and poetic name “Yah,” to refer to God. Both of these choices indicate an intimacy and familiarity with God, and also a desire to bring God and Goddess, male and female into the ritual with the participant.

For the second immersion the participant recites, “Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Source of Life, Who creates a transformative miracle for me in this place.”³⁵¹ This blessing is an elaboration on another, which traditionally acknowledges a site where a miracle has occurred. In this reformulation gender transition itself is cast as a personal

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

transformative miracle. Just as in Kukla's ritual, Kapor uses the *Shehecheyanu* as the prayer for the third immersion.

Jewish Studies scholar Max Strassfeld has also co-authored a transition ritual. Like Kukla and Kapor, Strassfeld includes the *Shehecheyanu*, and in an interview with *The Jewish Daily Forward* about the ritual Strassfeld explains that “using the *Shehecheyanu* to engage with the *mikveh* – a space traditionally segregated by sex – felt both radical and appropriate. The *Shehecheyanu* celebrates a moment of arrival but not necessarily a final destination, which complements the idea of a gender transition as a process without a clear-cut beginning or ending.”³⁵² The use of the *Shehecheyanu* highlights every transitional moment as a moment of arrival and frames gender transition as an ongoing process of becoming. Strassfeld also sees this prayer as an opportunity to express gratitude for the past – even though some trans people may feel alienated from their previous gender expression, without the past there would not be a present, and it is this present that will enable a future. In reflecting on the creation and performance of this ritual Strassfeld describes the experience as a gift that allowed him to “envision a Judaism that could celebrate [transgender] lives.”³⁵³

Each of these rituals is readily accessible online, allowing other queer and transgender Jews to use them, or to create their own. Queer Jewish ritual is powerful in that it provides an escape from the hetero and cisnormative Jewish world that queer Jews

³⁵² Max Strassfeld, “Marking Gender Transition in the Mikveh,” *The Forward*, available from <http://forward.com/articles/181849/marking-gender-transition-in-the-mikveh/?p=all>, accessed December 15, 2013.

³⁵³ Ibid.

are most often confronted with. These rituals allow the ritual creator and/or participant to imagine and engage in a queer Jewish world – built on queer theologies and hermeneutics – that affirms their queer and trans identities within Judaism.

Queer Jewish Worldmaking

In considering *mikveh* rituals for gender transition as a creative site for envisioning a queer Judaism I turn to José Muñoz’s concept of “queer futurity.” In his works *Cruising Utopia* and *Disidentifications* Muñoz describes queer futurity as a reflection on the past, used to critique the present, in order to envision a queer utopian future. Muñoz writes, “Queerness is not yet here... yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain.”³⁵⁴ Queerness is also performative for Muñoz: “it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”³⁵⁵ This utopian future, this alternative possible world, gives hope in moments of hopelessness. In particular Muñoz thinks queer futurity holds immense potential to imagine and work toward something better than today’s pragmatic gay political agenda and anti-relational trends that resist the idea of a collective queer community.

In *Cruising Utopia* Muñoz employs a “utopian methodology” providing a series of reflections on the past, which provide perspective from which to critique the present, for the purpose of imagining a utopian future: a “queerness” always on the horizon. It

³⁵⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

does not then seem a coincidence that Muñoz pinpoints for examination cultural productions from the Stonewall period, the moment of gay liberation and collective queer becoming that serves as a cosmogonic myth for the queer community.³⁵⁶ As with all myths, the absolute truth of the myth is not as important as its narrative power and its potential for meaning making. At the moment of becoming, anything is possible; the future has yet to be determined. Origin myths remind us of our beginnings, our purpose, and our vision for the future. In focusing on the potentiality of the Stonewall period, Muñoz shows how queers might critique the present and reimagine the future from that historical moment prior to the dominance of political pragmatism.

Similarly, the authors of the rituals for gender transition I have discussed – Kukla, Kapor, and Strassfeld – utilize Muñoz’s utopian methodology in constructing and participating in these rituals. These authors also employ an origin myth – the moment of creation; they reflect on the traditions of Judaism in the Torah and the Mishnah, highlighting moments of queer potentiality in order to critique the narrow hetero and cisnormative state of the Jewish world; and then envision and create rituals that affirm queer people within Judaism. Like Muñoz, they provide a perspective that emphasizes that the normative Jewish world of the present is not the only inevitable outcome. In returning to moments of potentiality the ritual authors critique the shortcomings of the mainstream Judaism world, and imagine a queerer one of the future. In imagining,

³⁵⁶ Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Cragé’s article, “The Making of the Stonewall Myth,” *American Sociological Review*, Volume 71 (2006) considers why the Stonewall riots became the focal point of gay collective memory while other events did not.

constructing, and performing these rituals queer Jews are “doing for and toward the future;” they are insisting on the possibility of a queer Jewish world.³⁵⁷

For Muñoz “queerness” is conceptual: it exists in the future as an ideal to strive for; queerness is, and should forever be, a continuous process of becoming. This understanding of queerness is also reflected in rituals for gender transition, and especially in the inclusion of the *Shehecheyanu* in each. The *Shehecheyanu* is a prayer that acknowledges the human experience of constantly arriving at the present moment and continually creating and becoming who we are. The prayer thanks God for allowing us to arrive and to become again and again.

In *Disidentifications* Muñoz writes, “queer performance... is about transformation of the world, about the world that is born through performance.”³⁵⁸ Those who encounter these rituals are transported to a world where queer and trans identities are not polluting to, or incompatible with, Jewish identity, but rather where they are honored within Judaism. In these rituals the tradition of immersion in the *mikveh* has been restructured to frame gender transition as a miraculous act of perpetual queer becoming, and of queer worldmaking, in which the ritual participant becomes God’s partner in the task of creation. This ritual moment allows queer Jews to glimpse a utopian future: a queer Jewish world where queer and transgender lives are not condemned, ignored, or even simply included, but *celebrated*. The creation of these rituals, as well as their easy availability to others online, empowers Jews to mark moments of queer becoming. Taken

³⁵⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

³⁵⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xiv.

together, the creation, performance, and existence of these rituals do the work of forging an imagined queer Jewish world of the future in the present.

Queer Jewish Futurity

As a final thought I would like to suggest briefly that the future-focused queer methodology these Jews employ might have a productive impact on normative Judaism. In many ways, normative Judaism is fixated on the past: it is anchored in ancient tradition, in the Holocaust, and the subsequent formation of the state of Israel; its narrative presents Jews as an enduring people despite being the victims of hatred and violence throughout the ages. The imagined normative Jew of today is one who is invested in the future through Jewish continuity in order to ensure Judaism – always under threat of dying out – endures, one who must support the Jewish state of Israel as a safe haven for Jews globally, and one who must never forget the Holocaust and its enduring specter: anti-Semitism and the constant threat of annihilation. These elements of Judaism give normative Jewish identity a backward facing character and reflect a mentality of simple survival. However, queer futurity provides Jews with an alternative message for how they should behave in the present. Queer futurity suggests they must not only be hopeful about the infinite possibilities of the future, but that they must also imagine and perform these desired futures in the present. As we have seen, innovated ritual is one way this performance is accomplished. The confrontation between the Jewish focus on the past and the queer focus on the future is significant for all Jews in that futurity and utopian imagining have the potential to challenge the boundaries of normative Judaism, rupture its fixation on the past, and contest what it assumes to be

“traditional.” While some will likely view this as threatening, futurity can benefit Judaism by enlivening it, presenting generative spaces and unexplored possibilities for the creation of Jewish futures.

Futurity is not an entirely unfamiliar concept to Judaism. There already exist Jewish philosophies that look to the future for hope and inspiration in living out meaningful lives in the present, such as *Tikkun Olam* (healing the world) or *Olam Ha-Ba* (the world to come), and futurity might simply serve as another amongst them. Queer Jewish futurity in particular can inspire the destabilization and critique of all elements of normativity in the Jewish world. It can allow for the imagining and creation of a Jewish world that affirms all marginalized peoples historically ignored or silenced within Judaism: LGBTQ people, Jews of color, interfaith couples/families, Jews with disabilities, non-Ashkenazi Jews, and single Jews, amongst others. As opposed to the fear and isolationism that may accompany normative Judaism, queer Jewish futurity encourages solidarity with all marginalized peoples, taking for granted that Judaism is strengthened and enriched by the inclusion of all Jews, and by centralizing the needs of all those who are most marginalized – Jewish or not.

Conclusion

While LGBTQ Jews' experiences reflect both increased inclusivity and barriers to full inclusion, the presence of growing numbers of "out" LGBTQ Jews might seem to suggest that LGBTQ-inclusion within mainstream Judaism is inevitable. This seems all the more likely given the similarly growing population of "out" LGBTQ rabbinical students. The existence of openly transgender rabbis is still a fairly recent occurrence, within roughly the last ten years, and there are many more trans rabbinical students who will soon be graduating. So while social change in many ways has already been set in motion, mainstream Judaism continues to grapple with questions about the place of LGBTQ people in Jewish tradition and the preparedness of institutional Judaism to welcome and affirm them. Like Jacob, a number of participants expressed predictions as well as a range of desires for the future of LGBTQ religious life. Below I recount some of these desires.

Critiques of inclusion and affirmation within Jewish community came up in many conversations with participants. Some lamented that the basics of inclusion for LGBTQ Jews are still not met, especially in mainstream Jewish spaces. For example, that LGBTQ individuals and families need to feel welcome at their local JCCs. LGBTQ people need to see programming and advertising that reflects that they are a part of Jewish community in these institutions. Similarly, professionals who work in Jewish settings as therapists, camp counselors, teachers, and in all other roles must be trained in how to work with and support LGBTQ Jews of all ages. Amy told me that a therapist in a Jewish organization said she was unable to work with Amy because she felt ill equipped to handle LGBTQ

identity. Zoey explained that as a polyamorous person, she felt unacknowledged and unsupported in most spaces. Alexandra expressed a simple desire that Jewish organizations march in their local Pride parades as a show of support, especially alongside local LGBTQ Jewish organizations (when possible). Some participants also critiqued the lack of cash flow to LGBTQ Jewish organizations as compared to non-LGBTQ Jewish organizations of comparable size. A lack of equal and sustained funding to LGBTQ Jewish organizations further suggests disinterest on the part of mainstream Judaism in supporting LGBTQ Jews.

Some participants saw value in maintaining and growing “queer Jewish space.” According to Jon this is valuable because “special things happen when you know that you’re showing up as queer in a queer space and you’re doing Jewish in that space. Jewish just ends up looking different, feeling different” when it’s in a queer context.³⁵⁹ He was particularly adamant about the growth of multiple LGBTQ Jewish spaces because the desires of LGBTQ Jews are diverse. Jordan expressed a desire to have queer Jewish community that is political, infused with queer politics and critical race politics, rather than just about LGBTQ identity. His critique identified lip service as distinct from institutions that are built with inclusivity in mind. In other words, it would be ideal “if queer people and language were regularly a part of [communities], so that you didn’t have to have a flag to show you’re accepting.”³⁶⁰ Jordan also wanted to see a move away from insularity in Jewish communities, towards solidarity, explaining that one model he

³⁵⁹ Jon, interview by author, 9 January 2014, Boston, MA, tape recording.

³⁶⁰ Jon, interview by author, 9 January 2014, Boston, MA, tape recording.

admired was provided by the rabbi at a local synagogue in Jamaica Plain who engaged in interfaith work with local Muslim communities. Lauren also hoped for LGBTQ Jewish community to think about oppression more broadly and intersectionally. In particular Lauren expressed a desire to see Trans Day of Remembrance events that center trans women of color, as well as a desire for more specifically trans events. For Lauren, inclusion in Jewish community is not enough, she wants affirmation of trans identity. “I don’t give a fuck about inclusion, I don’t want to be included on someone else’s terms, I don’t want to be invited to sit down at a table where they think I’m not worthwhile... I want being trans to be something that people can feel safe celebrating if they want to.”³⁶¹ Lauren further clarified the distinction between inclusion and affirmation by explaining that inclusion does not allow for innovation by LGBTQ Jews, whereas affirmation does. Since inclusion keeps the structure of Judaism the same and simply adds LGBTQ Jews to it, it would not allow for the innovation of a Jewish blessing for the taking of hormones. Affirmation, however, allows for expressions of Judaism that speak directly to LGBTQ identity. For this reason Lauren identifies affirmation as the only viable option for her.

While most participants desired Jewish communities that were welcoming and inclusive of LGBTQ Jews, there was also a desire for these communities to actively address and affirm LGBTQ Jewish identity. The desire for support for LGBTQ Jewish practice was not limited to Reform and Reconstructionist Jews, but also expressed by Conservative and Orthodox LGBTQ Jews. One way LGBTQ Jewish space is envisioned is through critiquing Judaism’s normative construction and engaging Judaism from an

³⁶¹ Lauren, interview by author, 25 November 2013, Boston, MA, tape recording.

LGBTQ perspective. Rabbi Rosenblum told me, “Judaism as it was created, was created so dismissive of queer identity. Of course, I’m sure some of the rabbis were queer we’ve been around forever, but what does it mean then to go through this project” of engaging with Judaism as LGBTQ people? He continued, “[It] involves Torah study, [it] involves learning, [it] involves social justice in an entirely queer context, so I wanna see what that looks like.”³⁶² In addition to having goals for the examination of Torah, Jewish learning, and social justice work in a queer context, Rabbi Rosenblum also expressed a broader basic desire for all LGBTQ Jews to know that Judaism does not simply dismiss them.

³⁶² Rabbi Rosenblum, interview by author, 10 January 2014, Boston, MA, tape recording.

Appendix A

Interview Questions (Semistructured)

1. How old are you?
2. How did you end up in Boston/LA? How/why did you choose the neighborhood you live in?
3. What do you do for work?
4. What Jewish and/or LGBTQ organizations are you involved in? What work do they do?
5. What's the history of your involvement in these organizations, including how you got started with them?
6. If there's a specific role, what is it and how long have you been in it?
7. Aside from what you've mentioned, are you involved in other social justice or volunteer work?
8. Where applicable, what role does spiritual/cultural Judaism play in these organizations? What are examples of how it is present?
9. Can you tell me about your religious/spiritual identity?
10. Do you have any other religious/spiritual practice, community, or identity outside of Judaism?
11. Was/is this identity important in your work with this/these organization(s)?
12. Can you tell me about your LGBTQ identity, if you have one, and about what being LGBTQ means in your experience?
13. Was/is your LGBTQ identity important or relevant to your work with this/these organization(s)?
14. In your experience is there a notable LGBTQ presence in this/these organization(s)?
15. What impact, if any, has your LGBTQ identity had on your relationship to Judaism?
16. Do you know of any LGBTQ Jewish rituals or liturgy?
17. Do you feel your LGBTQ identity influences your Israel politics or your relationship to Israel?
18. Do you feel that your Israel politics, or relationship to Israel influences your experiences in Jewish or queer community?
19. Do you have a sense of how LGBTQ Jewish community locally is changing?
20. What do you wish for the future of local LGBTQ Jewish communities?
21. How have LGBTQ and/or Jewish spaces functioned socially as far as meeting friends or romantic/sexual partners?
22. How would you describe your local community or friend group? (e.g. mostly Jewish community, mostly queer community, mixed, etc.) If mixed, who is included?
23. Jewish identity and LGBTQ identity can both be thought of as minoritarian or marginalized identities – do you have any other such identities (e.g. racial, ethnic, ability, class, gender)?
24. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix B

Demographics (These reflect participants' answers recorded between 2013 and 2015)

Gender of Participants	Los Angeles	Boston	Total
Trans Woman/Trans Girl	0	2	2
Trans Man/Trans Guy	2	4	6
Trans/Non-Binary/Genderqueer	2	6	8
Cisgender Woman	13	27	40
Cisgender Man	7	7	14

*One participant from the numbers above also self-identified as intersex.

**Two participants are omitted from the numbers above because I did not interview them about their gender identities.

Sexuality of Participants	Los Angeles	Boston	Total
Queer	4	33	37
Bisexual	0	1	1
Queer or Bisexual	2	2	4
Lesbian/Gay Woman	10	2	12
Queer or Lesbian/Gay Woman	1	5	6
Gay Man	5	1	6
Straight	2	2	4

*One straight participant previously identified as queer.

** Two participants are omitted from the numbers above because I did not interview them about their sexualities.

Age of Participants	Los Angeles	Boston	Total
20-29	9	23	32
30-39	9	19	28
40-49	3	2	5
50-59	0	0	0
60-69	2	2	4

*Three participants' ages are missing from the data.

Race of Participants	
White	69
Cuban and Puerto Rican	1
African American and Latinx	2

Religious/Spiritual Identity of Participants	Los Angeles	Boston	Total
Agnostic/Secular/Cultural Jew	5	8	13
Spiritual Jew	4	1	5
Catholic	0	1	1
Jewish (Modern Orthodox)	0	1	1
Jewish (Conservadox)	2	0	2
Jewish (Reform)	2	2	4
Jewish (Reconstructionist)	0	2	2
Jewish (Unaffiliated/Not Specified)	8	24	32
Jewish (Unaffiliated; Specified Religiously Traditional Practice)	2	6	8
Spiritual – Religiously Unaffiliated (raised Christian)	0	1	1

* Out of the participants who identify as Jewish above, 6 also had religious/spiritual beliefs/practices outside of Judaism.

** Four participants are omitted from the numbers above because I did not interview them about their religious identities.

Neighborhood of Los Angeles Participants	
Brentwood	1
Claremont	1
Downtown	2
Hollywood	1
Koreatown	2
North Hollywood	1
Palms	1
Pasadena	1
Pico-Robertson	4
Sherman Oaks	1
Silverlake	2
Van Nuys	1
West Hollywood	2

* Data is missing for six participants whom I did not interview about their neighborhoods.

Neighborhood of Boston Participants	
Brighton	2
Brookline	2
Cambridge	5
Jamaica Plain	30
Medford	2
Newton	2
Somerville	1
Waltham	1

* Data is missing for one participant whom I did not interview about their neighborhood.

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