

Spinning a Rainbow Thread: Reflections on Writing Queer Jewish History

Noam Sienna

When *A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century to 1969*¹ was first published, a colleague shared the announcement in a Facebook group dedicated to buying and selling “*sefarim*.” While the Hebrew *sefarim* simply means “books,” in many Jewish communities the term “*sefer*” is reserved for a particular kind of Jewish book: a book of sacred text, or one with exegetical, theological, ritual, or halakhic content. Thus, it was interesting to note that this posting attracted a variety of responses. One group member commented on the post, “I hardly think this qualifies as a *sefer*.” They later explained their comment by adding that this book was “particularly objectionable” because of “the perversion of some of the sources” in it, as well as the fact that it included sources written by secular Jewish (and even some non-Jewish) authors. Another commenter wondered aloud whether “a similar book about Messianic Judaism” would be allowed under the purview of a group dedicated to *sefarim*. These comments about the relationship of queer Jewish texts to the canonical body of what is understood as “Jewish literature” testify to a perspective which has a long legacy, and is clearly still widespread today.

We might compare these comments, for example, to the responsum of an American Reform rabbi writing in 1969. In that year, Rabbi Solomon Freehof, president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), answered the fol-

1 Sienna, Noam. *A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century to 1969*. Philadelphia, PA: Print-O-Craft LLC, 2019.

lowing question from a synagogue in Florida: “A group in the Temple is planning a discussion program on the question of homosexuality. What is there in Jewish law on this subject?”² Freehof responded that, “One can say in general that it is remarkable how little place the whole question occupies in Jewish law... The very paucity of biblical and post-biblical law on the matter speaks well for the normalcy and the purity of the Jewish people.”³ In other words, Freehof looked only at what he believed would “qualify as a *sefer*,” one particular thread of textual history within the Jewish tradition, and from it he could see no presence of the people he considered “abnormal” and “impure.” Therefore, he denied them any place in the history of the Jewish people.

Indeed, I have no doubt that staring at his bookshelf, Freehof saw a paucity of sources dealing with the diversity of Jewish sexuality and gender. The trap that Freehof and many others have fallen into is assuming that the highly-selective body of rabbinic law produced by a small scholarly male elite was representative of a totality, or even the majority, of the experience of the Jewish people. In some ways, I imagine my book project as a

2 Freehof, Solomon. *Current Reform Responsa*. Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1969, 236-238. Solomon Freehof (1892–1990) was born in London and came to the United States as a child; he was ordained by Hebrew Union College in 1915. The responsum is signed simply “From I.B.C., Florida.” Elisa Ho of the American Jewish Archives kindly identified this as Rabbi Irving B. Cohen (1921–1990) of Temple Israel in West Palm Beach, Florida. This responsum is reproduced in Sienna, Noam. *A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century to 1969*. Philadelphia, PA: Print-O-Craft Press, 2019, 399-401.

3 On this, and similar rabbinic responses of the 1970s, see Kahn, Yoel. “Judaism and Homosexuality: The Traditionalist/Progressive Debate,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 18.3/4 (1989): 47-52.

belated response to Freehof, a book that I hope might have changed his mind if he had had it on his shelf. My mother, who served in the 1980s as a junior rabbi under renowned Reform rabbi W. Gunther Plaut (1912-2012), recalls that after the publication of her first book *ReVisions: Seeing Torah through a Feminist Lens* (Jewish Lights, 1998), Rabbi Plaut told her that if he had been able to read her book as a younger rabbi, it would have changed the way he wrote his Torah commentary. Just as many male Jewish thinkers, therefore, have realized that they had unknowingly been extrapolating from “Jewish men’s experiences” to “Jewish experiences,” so too, this project suggests that heterosexual and cisgender Jews have created a narrative of Jewish history that assumes a particular uniformity (even “normalcy,” in Freehof’s terms) and ignores the diversity of how Jews have experienced sexuality and gender.

Two moves, therefore, are necessary in the reorienting of our historical consciousness: first, to recover other sources of Jewish knowledge, such as those described by Rachel Adler as “the abundance of women’s feelings and experiences which have been non-data within the tradition and which Jewish women are only now beginning to recognize and name.”⁴ The work of Adler’s generation of feminist scholars has deepened our understanding of Judaism by recovering these experiences which formed, in Judith Plaskow’s phrase, “another world around and underneath the textual tradition.”⁵ Second, we must bring a new set of eyes, with a new set of experiences, to the table, in order to uncover new readings of old texts and new

4 Adler, Rachel. “I’ve Had Nothing Yet So I Can’t Take More.” *Moment Magazine* 8.8 (1983): 22–26.

5 Plaskow, Judith. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990, 50.

insights that had been invisible to previous readers with access to a more limited set of voices.

The title of my book, *A Rainbow Thread*, speaks to one of the primary challenges that I have faced in this project: the balancing act between acknowledging the fragmentary nature of history, on the one hand, and recognizing continuity on the other. Queer Jewish history could be described as an infinite rainbow, with no beginning or end, and with no clear boundaries between its different facets. In compiling this anthology, I took the perspective that history is not an uninterrupted march towards some universal goal, but a messy, contingent, and complex network of processes, connections, interruptions, and innovations. It is not my intention to imply a unity of identity or experience between the different stories included in this book, nor do I see them as presenting any narrative of development or movement in a particular direction (from “discrimination” to “tolerance” and then “acceptance,” for example).

On the one hand, therefore, we have a “history” of singular, fragmentary, discontinuous pieces. On the other hand, there is a thread that runs throughout the book (hence the title): a continuity that links our lives, our joys, and our struggles today to an ancestral heritage in the past and to our inheritors in the future. Certainly, it is irresponsible to project our identities onto people in the past; at the same time, however, it is also irresponsible to ignore the shared practices, behaviors, and experiences that link these stories to other places and times, and that offer clear resonances to our lives today. We must balance between recognizing the shared dimensions of history, and allowing space for a diversity of individuals and identities without erasure or homogenization. As Rachel Hope Cleves has written regarding the practice of trans history, this method of holding onto multiple meanings simultaneously “offers a tool not for imposing new stabilities but for fracturing what we think we know about the past.”⁶ Overlapping resonances do not collapse

6 Cleves, Rachel Hope. “Six Ways of Looking at a Trans Man?: The

into a single history, but rather support each other in their infinite variety.

The word *anthology* is used here in its etymological sense, from the Greek *anthos+logia*, “a bouquet of flowers” — this is a curated selection of historical moments, arranged to bring beauty and meaning. I faced many difficult choices in preparing this bouquet and deciding what to trim or prune. The restrictions of a textual anthology meant that I was unable to include the creative works of many queer Jewish artists, musicians, and activists, whose lives did not leave extensive written records, while the temporal boundaries excluded the many memoirs, oral histories, and other reflections on queer Jewish life since 1969.⁷ I also chose purposefully to use the project to showcase the broadest set of Jewish voices. Thus, for example, I selected only four gay Ashkenazi men writing in America in the 1960s (Frank Kameny, Leo Skir, Sanford Friedman, and Edward Field) out of many other similar examples, in order to make space for other kinds of texts — especially prioritizing the voices of Jewish women, trans and non-binary Jews, and Sephardi/Mizrahi Jews — many of which have never been published before or made accessible in English.

In collecting these texts and allowing readers to engage directly with original primary sources, I have been inspired by scholars like the medievalist Caroline Dinshaw, who has argued that marginalized communities today can link themselves with the past through “shared contemporaneity,” which involves imagining ourselves and our ancestors as participating

Life of Frank Shimer (1826–1901).” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 27.1 (2018): 32-62.

7 1969 was the year of the Stonewall Riots, which brought a new visibility and urgency to the battle for civil rights for LGBTQ people in the United States. While it was neither a beginning nor an ending, especially for LGBTQ communities outside the United States, 1969 was a clear turning point in both Jewish and non-Jewish discourse; conversations which had already begun in the 1950s and 1960s exploded with a new energy and visibility in the 1970s. For more, see Sienna, *A Rainbow Thread*, 11-12.

in the same project, across time and space.⁸ Drawing on Dinshaw's argument, José Esteban Muñoz suggested in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* that,

queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future... Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present... [It is] a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity.⁹

Muñoz is proposing a model of history that focuses not on linearity (where a single original event leads inevitably to its contemporary conclusion) but on multiplicity, on discontinuity, and on simultaneity. This is a history filled with surprises and reversals, with paradoxes and unknowns. Above all, this is a history which is unapologetically entangled with the ongoing negotiations of all of us who are fighting for a better world in the present. This project attempts to facilitate that process, distilling moments from the past that might spark the imagining of other possibilities.

The circular relationship to history that Dinshaw and Muñoz propose, which constantly returns to the past as a “field of possibility” to reshape a new future, is not only characteristic of how queer communities might relate to time (what Muñoz terms “queer futurity”), but also seems

8 Dinshaw, Carolyn, et al. “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13.2–3 (2007): 177-195.

9 Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009, 1-2, 16.

deeply Jewish. Many thinkers have suggested that Jewish history too can be understood as a non-linear, constantly recurring field of possibility, a sentiment articulated perhaps most famously by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. In his book *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (1982), Yerushalmi proposed that the Jewish world has always structured the memory of its own past through a cyclical and mythic imagination pointed towards redemption. He writes: “Those Jews who are still within the enchanted circle of tradition, or those who have returned to it, find the work of the historian irrelevant. They seek, not the historicity of the past, but its eternal contemporaneity.”¹⁰

By the “historicity of the past,” I believe Yerushalmi refers to the conception of any historical moment as particular and relevant only to its own concrete occurrence; instead, Yerushalmi argues that the “enchanted circle” of Jewish tradition honors the emotional connections that link people and communities across time. This perspective, that which Yerushalmi terms “Jewish memory,” is what I have aimed to capture in this anthology project. All of these frameworks—Yerushalmi’s “eternal contemporaneity,” Dinshaw’s “shared contemporaneity,” Muñoz’s “field of possibility”—suggest that queer Jewish history must be constructed through an intertwining of past, present, and future. We return to the past, we excavate it, and we reassemble it, not only because it has been buried for centuries, but because our own future liberation depends on it.

I will conclude by presenting two examples from the book as illustrations of how these historical fragments might be re-used as building blocks in contemporary queer Jewish life. The first is Simeon Solomon, an artist whose

10 Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim. *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1982, 96.

work represents a fascinating early articulation of queer Jewish identity. Solomon was born in London in 1840 to a newly-prominent Jewish family—his father, a hat merchant, was one of the first Jews to be given the municipal honor of the Freedom of the City of London.¹¹ Solomon excelled as an artist, entered the Royal Academy of Arts, and joined a circle of Pre-Raphaelite artists, poets, and writers who questioned Victorian conventions of art and literature, and defied expectations of gender and sexuality; his circle included Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Solomon's art, which portrayed both Jewish and classical subjects and especially the beauty of androgynous youth, was well regarded, and sought out by galleries and collectors (including Oscar Wilde). Solomon's promising career took a serious blow when he was arrested in 1873 for "indecent exposure" and "attempted buggery" with a man in a public restroom. Although he continued to paint and draw over the following decades, he was abandoned by many of his friends and relatives, and eventually sank into depression, poverty, and alcoholism; he died in the St Giles Workhouse in 1905.

In 1871 he published his only literary work, *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep*; a surreal fantasy which draws

11 This biography is based on: Cruise, Colin and Roberto C. Ferrari (eds.). *Love Revealed: Simeon Solomon and the Pre-Raphaelites*. London: Merrell, 2005; Dau, Duc. "The Song of Songs for difficult queers: Simeon Solomon, Neil Bartlett, and A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep," *Queer Difficulty in Art and Poetry: Rethinking the Sexed Body in Verse and Visual Culture*. Edited by Jongwoo Jeremy Kim and Christopher Reed, New York: Routledge, 2017, 34-47; and Morgan, Thaïs. "Perverse Male Bodies: Simeon Solomon and Algernon Charles Swinburne," *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*. Edited by Peter Horne and Reina Lewis, New York: Routledge, 1996, 61-85.

on the biblical language of revelation, and the erotic poetry of Song of Songs, to imagine a mystical journey with his Soul. It begins with an invocation of three verses from Song of Songs:

Upon the waning of the night, at that time when the stars are pale, and when dreams wrap us about more closely, when a brighter radiance is shed upon our spirits, three sayings, of the wise King came unto me. These are they: *I sleep, but my heart waketh*; also, *Many waters cannot quench love*; and again, *Until the day break, and the shadows flee away*; and I fell to musing and thinking much upon them.¹²

Throughout the rest of the book, these three verses and their themes — the contrast of sleeping vs. waking, and interior vs. exterior; the unstoppable power of love; and the yearning for a dawn just over the horizon — are constant threads. At the beginning of his journey, Solomon sees the personification of Love, first “dethroned and captive,” and then “imprisoned in an alien land of oblivion.”¹³ Then, after Solomon has left the sad and forgotten Love, the Day begins to break. Solomon finds himself among a community; he doesn’t define the exact nature of the community, saying only that he recognizes many people who are dear to him, and others who are known to him from his dreams. This moment, for Solomon, is the place where past and future meet: “all the air about teemed with the echoes of things past and the vague intimations of things to come.” In this joyous community, Love is finally enthroned again in glory, and Solomon beholds a dazzling vision of the revelation of what he calls “the Very Love,

12 The three verses are Song of Songs 5:2, 8:7, and 4:6. As reproduced in Noam Sienna, *A Rainbow Thread*, pg. 146.

13 Ibid., 148-149.

the Divine Type of Absolute Beauty, primaeval and eternal.” Love whispers to Solomon his innermost secret, which Solomon does not tell us: “Ah, how may words shew forth what it was then vouchsafed to me to know?” A love that dare not speak its name, perhaps? Finally, the vision closes by returning again to Song of Songs: “until the day break and the shadows flee away.”¹⁴

In other words, Solomon imagines a community of like-minded people devoted to the freedom of Love, in whose unity, a new future is made possible. For Solomon, Love is now asleep, but soon, when the Dawn comes, it (or he!) will awake. Solomon mobilizes the richness of Jewish text into support for his own vision of a world of light, of love, and of life just beyond the horizon (prefiguring, perhaps, Muñoz’ queer future as “a horizon imbued with potentiality”) — his assertions that the force of Love cannot be quenched, and that a new Day for Love will dawn, are grounded, for Solomon, in the support of the Jewish textual tradition. I argue, therefore, that we can read this text as an early and powerful example of explicitly gay or queer midrash, and one that still holds relevance today.

The second example comes from a letter to the editor printed in the Yiddish *Forverts* (the *Jewish Daily Forward*). In 1936, following the Summer Olympics in Berlin, a flurry of articles reported on female athletes who were discovered, or suspected, to be men.¹⁵ A *Forverts* reader wrote to the editor to say, essentially, *nu?* “That’s

14 Ibid., 150-153.

15 Today, scholars and activists have emphasized the complex interplay in these stories of assumptions surrounding masculinity/femininity, intersex identity, and medical definitions of sex and gender. See, for example, Tebbutt, Clare. “The Spectre of the ‘Man-Woman Athlete’: Mark Weston, Zdenek Koubek, the 1936 Olympics and the uncertainty of sex.” *Women’s History Review*, 24.5 (2015): 721-738.

not news to the people in the town where I'm from," he explains.¹⁶ The letter-writer, a greengrocer named Samuel (Yeshaye) Kotofsky, proceeds to tell a story from his hometown of Krivozer (today Kryve Ozero, southern Ukraine) about a young girl named Beyle, who was "not quite a woman, and not quite a man." One day in the late 1890s, Beyle leaves the shtetl and goes off to the big city of Odessa... When Beyle comes back — he's a man!

Now this is, in itself, already a powerful story of someone who had the courage and the resources to live their truth; but what is even more extraordinary, I believe, is how this writer remembers it: "in the shtetl," he writes, "we waited impatiently for her return. And on the day when Beyle was to arrive, half the shtetl ran to the bridge to greet her, or better said, to greet him." From then on, in the shtetl, Beyle became Berel, and was seamlessly re-integrated into the social and religious life of the shtetl as a man. He was taught how to pray, counted in the *minyan* at synagogue, married to his old girlfriend... In other words, at least as far as this writer remembers it, there was no hesitation, no concern about what side of the *mehitzah* they should sit on, how to deal with gender transition from a Jewish perspective... It was completely natural and obvious to support Berel in their chosen gender. "By us," he concludes, "in our shtetl, Berel-Beyle always had a good name as a fine, upstanding Jew."¹⁷

This is important, I think, because it holds a surprising mirror to the stories we sometime tell ourselves about

16 Sienna, *A Rainbow Thread*, 291. This letter was first recovered and translated from Yiddish by Eddy Portnoy, and published in the *Forward* under the title "Transgender Jews May Be Nothing New," October 11, 2011 ([https:// forward.com/articles/144546/transgender-jews-may-be-nothing-new/](https://forward.com/articles/144546/transgender-jews-may-be-nothing-new/)).

17 Sienna, *A Rainbow Thread*, 291-292.

what Jewish life was like in the past: the image of the shtetl, the Old Country, as a frozen picture of conservatism, backwardness, a Fiddler-on-the-Roof type traditionalism. Some like to imagine that history always moves forward, and that there is a teleology of progress that makes each generation more tolerant, more radical, and more accepting than the one that came before. Perhaps recent events are helping disabuse us of the notion that there is any automatic or inherent progression to history. Perhaps, this story suggests, the shtetl was more diverse than we give it credit for — and perhaps our ancestors were more open-minded than we give them credit for.

This anthology is not an attempt to show that Judaism “really” promotes LGBTQ inclusion; nor is it merely an anachronistic attempt to say “Look! There were [insert-identity-here] Jews in the past!” Instead, it is intended to do something both deeper and more expansively imaginative: to push us to rethink what queer Judaism could be, and to encourage us to question what we have assumed about how Jews have understood sexuality and gender over our long history as a people. Queer Jewish identity is so often imagined as existing in spite of, or in opposition to, the world of “Jewish tradition.” LGBTQ Jews are asked how they reconcile the “contradiction” of their identity, how they overcome the “obstacles” of Jewish text. These stories show us that Jewish history does not have to be an obstacle to overcome, or a contradiction to reconcile; instead, it can be a source of strength and inspiration. Classical, canonical, texts can be reread with new eyes to make space for new possibilities of identity within a Jewish framework. Jewish lives and experiences that have been marginalized and purposefully erased can be brought back to the center, to enrich the range of possible models from our heritage. And carefully attending to

the complexities and multiplicities of Jewish identity in the past can help us work towards recognizing the same complexities in ourselves.