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Vassar College

**Towards a Queer-Jewish Future: An Exploration of the Jewish Mother-Queer  
Daughter Relationship and the Liberatory Potential of Queerness**

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Arts in  
Sociology

by

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Thesis Advisor:  
Professor Light Carruyo

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## ABSTRACT

Current mainstream Jewish communities perceive queerness as a threat to the future of the Jewish peoplehood. Using the relationship between the Jewish mother and queer daughter as a site through which to explore the nature of the intersections between queerness and Jewishness, I will demonstrate that in fact, an embrace of our queer identities will only lead to an emancipated, long-lasting Judaism. As a result of their different social realities, the Jewish mother-queer daughter relationship proves useful in analyzing the connections between Jewishness and queerness because it is a place where the compatibility of these two identities is being constantly contested and negotiated. In my effort to contextualize their respective social positionalities, I hope to move them towards deeper understanding, empathy, and healing. I then turn to the queer daughters' oral histories, as well as contemporary scholarship, to exemplify the liberatory potential of further integrating queerness into our Jewish theology, liturgy, and ritual practices. I posit that queerness poses no threat to the continuation of Judaism; rather, the incorporation of queerness into our Jewish identities generates more expansive, enriching ways of engaging Jewishly.

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## PREFACE

“Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement.”

— Adrienne Rich

Dear Jewish Mothers and Jewish, Queer Daughters,<sup>1</sup>

When I look at myself in the mirror, I see the curves of my mother’s hips on my own, watch how her delicate, thin lips curl inwards when I smile, and spend too much time fruitlessly trying to tame your very dark and hairy eyebrows. I’ve been noticing lately how alike we sound when I meet someone new and how we both shiver when we’re nervous or scared. I touch the strong, sturdy legs that have carried the bodies and souls of the generations of women who came before me. These traits are sacred, forever encoded into the Shapiro family legacy.

My *Ema* is powerful and nurturing and strong. She brought five human beings into this world and has dedicated her life to them. She has a knack for predicting illnesses and has the perfect piece of wisdom to offer during moments of despair. She gathers the pieces when I fall apart and cheers me on when I succeed. She has taught me to see the good in the other and to always invite the stranger inside. She is, quite simply, extraordinary.

She was born to mother.

And yet, I know that it is because of the intensity of this love that we also struggle. And it is because of the messiness of our shared Jewishness, this beautiful and rich and complex identity that you have faithfully passed down to your children, that so many Jewish mother-daughter relationships are fractured.

As Jews, as women, as mothers and daughters and people on this earth, we need one another. Collective liberation means recognizing that all of our struggles are intimately connected every person is worthy of dignity and respect oppression (United Students Against Sweatshops). I believe that only when the relationship between the mothers and the daughters is whole, will we be full enough to immerse ourselves in liberatory work.

This thesis is an offering to both you, Jewish mothers and you, Jewish daughters who have, at one point, caused one another harm, or who are living amidst an ugly tension right now. I hope this project sparks generative conversation and brings the mothers and daughters of this world to a place of greater healing, understanding, and sense of compassion. All that I ask in return is that you read with a humble heart and an open-mind.

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<sup>1</sup> For simplicity’s sake I will be referring to the people I interviewed as “daughters,” however there are a few gender-queer and trans individuals who rightfully contest the limitation of our gender-binary system. I worry that using both “daughter” and “genderqueer and trans folks,” will cause confusion and distract from the message of the thesis. Please keep this in mind as you read.

## INTRODUCTION

### *The “Jewish, Queer Problem”*

Jewish folks, and as I will demonstrate later on, Jewish mothers in particular, believe that we are in a state of imminent danger. They have this profound fear that the Jewish peoplehood will one day “die out.” For as long as I can remember, in every Jewish institution I have attended--summer camps, schools, synagogues--the issue of Jewish continuity has surfaced. Jews are terrified. Institutions and donors spend exorbitant sums of money to study rates of intermarriage, level of affiliation, and denomination decline. In 2013, the Pew Research Center conducted its first comprehensive national survey of American Jews in more than a decade. The data incited a renewed sense of urgency and fear among mainstream Jewish communities. The study found that the overall intermarriage rate was at 58 percent, up from the 43 percent in 1990 and 17 percent in 1970; these statistics are disturbing because they mean that the Jewish population is shrinking (Pew Research Center 2013).

As a result, most mainstream Jewish establishments are, above all-else, dedicated to creating Jewish families. By “mainstream” I refer to those Jews who belong to the Conservative and Orthodox denominations and abide closely by traditional Jewish law, or *Halakhah*; these are the two largest and most prominent sects of Jews in North America. *Halakhah* commands Jews to “be fruitful and multiply,” and thus the survival of the Jewish religion relies heavily on the institutions of marriage and procreation. Jewish Studies scholar Helene Meyers (2012) notes how these biblical injunctions carry new cultural urgency for even the most secularized Jews in the post-Holocaust world (P. 74).

However, the type of family deemed legitimate by mainstream Jewish institutions is the the “hegemonic standard North American family,” composed of “two heterosexual married persons parenting their biologically produced children...it has become an “ideological code” (Maura and Berkowitz 2009:160). Because heterosexual reproduction is considered the key to Jewish survival, queerness is generally perceived “an overdetermined Jewish problem” (Meyers 2012:75 ) As a result, those who inhabit both identities are rendered illegible. Meyers charts some of the historical and contemporary expressions of the “oxymoronic nature of queer Jews.” She turns to two different case studies in an effort to demonstrate how the seemingly innocuous language actually pits Jews and queers against one another. She first provides a brief analysis of a piece of political discourse from Texas in 2005, when a majority of its citizens voted to add a hateful anti-gay marriage amendment to the state constitution. In response, a Jewish political action committee formed in an effort to defeat the amendment. Meyers (2012) goes on to relay the strange rhetorical strategies employed to mobilize the Jewish vote. She cites the following email:

In the great civil rights movement in the middle of the twentieth century, the leaders of the Jewish community were proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with the leaders of the African American community...And in this great civil rights battle, the leaders of the Jewish community are proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with the leaders of the gay and lesbian community to fight this very same fight (P. 74).

Meyers is disturbed by the implication of the shoulder to shoulder metaphor, which is that the Jewish community and the queer community are assumed to be separate bodies (It is also important to underline the false assumption that Jews and People of Color necessarily inhabit separate bodies as well). Turning to the popular play *Bent*, one of the first productions to represent the persecution of gay people by the Nazis, she further demonstrates how Jewish

people and queer folks are depicted as contradictory identities. Near the end of the play, a gay Berliner who had been passing as a Jew in a labor camp, tries to reclaim his identity by replacing a yellow star with a pink triangle. This action, the replacement of the yellow star with the pink triangle, “obscures the relationship between Jews and queers that was both cause and effect of the merging misogyny, homophobia, and racism in Europe” (Meyers 2012:75). Moreover, this scene situates the queer-Jew as “oxymoronic.” The language of either/or as demonstrated in the ending of *Bent* can function to make queer Jews feel “twice strange” or “at the very least consign some part of the Jewish queer to illegibility” (Meyers 2012:75).

This perceived Jewish/queer “either/or dilemma” has always been an issue in both Jewish and queer communities and persists to present-day. Prominent Feminist and Jewish studies scholar, Evelyn Becken Tort says in plain terms that, “According to Jewish Law...we don’t exist” (Beck 1994: xiii). In Sandra Faulkner and Michael Hecht’s study about the negotiation of closetable identities, they find many conflicts due to the subjects’ feelings of alienation from both Jewish and LGBTQ circles. One of the interviewees expresses, “I’m not interested in dividing my identity into different parts, like I’ll be a pervy dyke but not a Jew when I go out dancing, and I’ll be a devout Jew but not queer when I’m in Shul (Faulkner and Hecht 2011:352). As a result, many LGBTQ Jews experience their identities as “bifurcated rather than integrated,” oftentimes forced to choose between being Jewish or queer, depending on the kinds of community available to them.

## *Review of the Literature*

### *Jewish and Queer Studies*

Queerness is still perceived as an “overdetermined Jewish problem” and as a result, queerness and Jewishness are positioned as incompatible identities (Meyers 2012:76). This narrative is harmful not only because it is factually incorrect, but it directly undermines the existence of queer-Jews and encourages a distancing, rather than an integration, of these two worlds. In analyzing the existing scholarship regarding the relationship between these two identity groups, I will trace the sources that have resulted in my conviction that we must embrace the historical and present-day relationship between queerness and Judaism. The literature that interrogates the nature of the intersections between queerness and Jewishness leads me to believe that queer folks in no way threaten Jewish survival; rather, queerness will generate a more inclusive, long-lasting, and liberatory way of engaging Jewishly.

Much has been written on the topic of queerness and Jewishness. The most readily available literature notes the various overlaps and connections these two identities share. For example, both Jews and queers experience a category crisis, a “definitional instability,” whereby neither quite “fits” into an existing identity group. British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has labeled Jews as “indefinable by definition,” and in Christian religious terms, the Jew is “long obsolete yet (unfathomably) not extinct” (Lebow 2008:116). Bauman asserts that in modernity’s “ordering compulsion,” Jews have come to signify disorder and alterity by “exceeding all national racial and class limits, the very categories that have obsessed modernity” (Lebow 2008:117). Similarly heterogenous, queers also represent another of the Western culture’s “consummate others” (Lebow 2008:117). Jewish Studies scholar Jonathan Freedman suggests

that because of the Jew's perpetual state of non-belonging, "a language of sexual aberration could serve to ground the radically amorphous figure of the Jew: the simultaneously emerging technologies of sexual perversion could provide a definition for a Jewish identity that was increasingly understood as pliable, metamorphic, ambiguous" (Freedman 2001:525).

Additionally, both Jewishness and queerness are closetable. These identities are not easily ascribable and typically "become known through a disclosure process that allows or denies others access to this private information" (Faulkner and Hecht 2011:831).

More recent scholarship recognizes queerness and Jewishness as "constitutive forces" that have largely shaped the formation of the identity of the other. Matti Bunzl, a prominent historian, indicates that Jewishness and homosexuality should not be thought of as preconditions of each other, but rather as "inter-articulated products of a specific historical and cultural moment" (Bunzl 2000:335). The nineteenth century witnessed both the emergence of the modern Jew and the modern "homosexual" gender provided an "interpretive grid through which nineteenth-century science could detect and interpret the racial difference of the Jews" (Boyarin, Itzkowitz, Pellegrini 2003:2). Highly regarded Jewish studies scholars, Boyarin, Pellegrini, and Itzkowitz, compiled the seminal volume *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, where they explore the "complex social arrangements and processes through which modern Jewish and homosexual identities emerged as traces of each other" (Boyarin, Itzkowitz, Pellegrini 2003:1). This work makes the important intellectual leap from studying queerness and Jewishness as if they were separate categories to analyzing the "rhetorical and theoretical connections that tie together the constellations 'Jew' and 'homosexual'" (Boyarin, Itzkowitz, Pellegrini 2003:1). While there are no straightforward equations between Jewish and queer identities, the two are

bound up with one another in resonant ways. Scholars of Jewish cultural studies demonstrate that the notion that Jews embodied non-normative sexual and gender categories is long-standing (Geller 1992, Gilman 1993 ).

A select but growing group of academics posit stereotypes of Jewish gender trouble were not always rejected by Jews themselves, and in fact were at one point considered emancipatory. Matti Bunzl asserts “in the context of a profoundly homophobic religious and cultural system, there has been little incentive for queers to search for affirmative evidence of same-sex sexual realities in Jewish history. Nor has there been, until quite recently, any mainstream institutional recognition of the painful position of lesbian and gay Jews vis-à-vis Judaism’s heteronormative injunctions” (Bunzl 2000:328). However, Daniel Boyarin’s *Unheroic Conduct: the Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* is one of the first serious academic analyses to propose that queerness was, at one time, embraced by the Jewish people. As I will describe more in-depth in the second chapter, Boyarin uses evidence from Jewish memoirs, religious texts, and folklore, to exemplify the effeminate qualities embodied within the figure of the ideal Jewish man in premodern Eastern Europe. In contrast to European Christian culture and its ‘masculine’ values such as “war-making, dueling, and adulterous courtly love affairs,” the ideal Jewish man was marked by “scholarliness, quietism, modesty, and a spiritual aptitude” (Daniel Boyarin, pg 63). Similarly, gender studies scholar Ann Pellegrini, use a historical conception of Jewish emancipation that almost mirrors Boyarin’s.

Throughout this thesis, I will further demonstrate how queerness has the capacity to create an emancipatory Judaism, be used a tool of resistance, and ensure the survival of the Jewish people. The work of these theorists has bolstered my conviction that a deeper embrace of

queerness has the potential to be liberating for the Jews: operating as a tool of both healing and resistance. By centering the work of these scholars on the margins, I hope to underscore their significance in the future of Jewish and Queer studies.

*The Gap between Jewish, Queer, and Motherhood Studies*

Missing from the literature on Jewish and Queer studies is a meaningful analysis of the Jewish mother as a sociological subject. Given the fact that Judaism is a matrilineal religion, it is strange that she remains mostly absent from the “interarticulation” of Jewish and queer scholarship. There is, however, substantial literature that traces the historical evolution and significance of the Jewish mother stereotype. In Joyce Antler’s pivotal *You Never Call! You Never Write!* (2007), she uses comedy and satire as literary evidence to document how the popular images of Jewish mothers in America have changed throughout the last century. Asserting that the Jewish mother was not always universally hated, the image of the Jewish mother as “aggressive and manipulative, living vicariously through her children,” only became popularized after World War II. The mothers of 1950 Jewish life in suburbia experienced a degree of far greater “equality between husband and wife than is generally assumed” (Antler 2007:104). While the father was engrossed in business affairs, the mother filled the spiritual and cultural matters he neglected to cultivate with his children. She assumed the “executive leadership” in her home. In response, the men of this generation constructed a Jewish mother who embodied the negative features of “Old World backwardness, loudness, vulgarity, clannishness, ignorance, and materialism” (Antler 2007:143).

I spend the first chapter proving why the Jewish mother-queer daughter relationship is a useful site through which to examine the intersection between queerness and Jewishness, as a result of the larger social forces that influence her (and vice versa.) The field of motherhood studies implies that mothers are sociologically significant; they indicate a great deal of information about the world around us. Motherhood research has primarily focused on the oppressive and empowering dimensions of the mother figure, as well as the complicated relationship between the two. Challenging the narrow definition that has limited motherhood to mean “white, heterosexual women who have biological children” feminists scholars now call for a more inclusive view of maternal identity: one that considers race, class, sexuality and citizenship status in shaping the experience of motherhood (O’Reilly 2010:7). Chicana mothers, for example, must act as mediators between racial messages from the “outside world” and their kids. Minority mothers must consciously work to defuse negative external racial messaging and replace them with affirmation; they see themselves as responsible for passing down ethnic traditions and gender ideologies and roles. One study exemplifies how Muslim mothers must cope with generational differences around the tradition of arranged marriages. While the matriarch generally arranges the marriages of sons and daughters, young people are increasingly meeting others outside familial connections. The Muslim mother is the “repository of ethical values, the incarnation of beauty and nurture, and the only one capable of giving birth” (O’Reilly 2010:52). However, influences both within and outside Islamic societies are leading to new ideas and in some cases, change. An analysis of the experience of Muslim mothers reveals the importance of considering the impact of non-Western ideologies in addition to other factors such as race and class. Perhaps due to the fact that motherhood studies is a relatively new field, as

well as the silencing effects of anti-Semitism, Jewish mothers are mostly invisible from the field of motherhood research.

The premise of my thesis also relies on the conceptualization of Jewishness as a social identity deserving of a place in the ongoing discussions about race, ethnicity, nationness, diaspora, memory, religion, gender, and sexuality (Bunzl 2000:335-340). We can thus conclude that the Jewish mother's "Jewishness" is an identity worth exploration, especially in the context of Jewish and Queer studies. By placing these three disciplines in conversation with one another, I will examine the sociological significance of the Jewish mother in both Jewish and non-Jewish contexts. I hope to also provide greater clarity about why and how she believes queerness and Jewishness mutually exclusive.

### *Argument and Chapter Overview*

The first part of my thesis justifies why the Jewish mother-queer daughter relationship is a constructive site through which to explore the connections between Jewishness and queerness. In doing so, I will illuminate the social forces that shape the mothers' and daughters' respective understandings of the nature of the relationship between these two identities: in part due to my desire to facilitate generative and healing conversation. I then turn to the stories of the queer daughters to demonstrate the liberatory potentialities of further integrating queerness into our Jewish theology, liturgy, and ritual practices. I posit that queerness poses no threat to the continuation of Judaism; moreover, queerness, both in theory and praxis, creates more expansive, enriching ways of engaging Jewishly.

I split the first chapter into two parts: the first section situates the mothers as social actors and the second situates the queer daughters as social actors. The Jewish mothers' *Halakhic* responsibility to create a Jewish family, her position as both carrier and transmitter of trauma, and the insidious yet harmful effects of internalized anti-Semitism, situates her to see queerness and Jewishness as contradictory identities. This particular relationship serves as a place where the compatibility of Jewishness and queerness is being constantly contested, negotiated, and discussed. Furthermore, because of their position in the current socio-political climate, the queer daughters have the means to embody a lifestyle that more fully integrates their queer and Jewish identities.

In chapter two I turn to relevant contemporary Jewish and queer studies literature, as well as the queer daughters' stories of identity formation to trace the intersections between their queerness and Jewishness and highlight how queerness leads to a more expansive, inclusive, and liberatory form of Judaism.

I conclude with a personal anecdote that further substantiates the awesome potential and profound beauty of an integrated queer-Jewish world. I also call attention to the larger implications of embodying both queerness and Jewishness and discuss what that might mean for the future of Judaism.

## METHODS

### *Recruitment Process*

I first began by speaking informally to some of my Jewish queer friends about their relationships with their mothers. My sister, an involved member of the queer, Chicago Jewish community, connected me with numerous folks who were interested in the topic. This turned out to be the most effective way to reach people, and I am grateful to her for supporting me in my academic endeavors. I ultimately interviewed a total of ten daughters and two mothers; and I have changed the subjects' names and personal details in order to preserve their anonymity.

I also posted a brief description of my study and request to speak with queer Jewish daughters in various Facebook groups. The first was a Jewish political organization called IfNotNow; a national movement dedicated to ending mainstream Jewish support for the Occupation in Israel/Palestine. The second group, titled "Cool Chicago Jews," was one I had only recently joined. Two out of the twelve interviews came from this source, which was surprising as I did not anticipate to actually connect with strangers. I believe this speaks to the power of the bond that links queerness and Jewishness; our shared queer Jewish identities were enough to link us.

I want to note that after sharing my post I received a great deal of pushback regarding the language I used to publicize the study. I advertised that I was specifically looking for AFAB and queer and non-binary folks, but I would not be including trans women due to limited time and resource. People understandably expressed feelings of deep hurt and frustration; trans women are consistently excluded from Jewish spaces, and I further perpetuated the violence of exclusion. This moment of ignorance forced me to confront the privilege I have as a cis person and consider

more carefully my complicity in systems of oppression. Although painful to hear at the time, I am grateful to my community for holding me accountable. In hindsight I realize that interviewing Jewish trans women could have provided profound insight into the construction of gender as it relates to Judaism. I hope that future research in the Jewish and Queer studies disciplines centers the voices of the Jewish trans women.

### *Oral History*

I decided to use oral histories as a research method both to offer the subjects who generously offered their time and vulnerability the space they deserve. The discussions ranged from forty minute to hour long discussions and most of them were conducted over the phone. Many of the people I spoke to were strangers so I attempted to establish a good rapport in an effort to create an environment in this short time span where folks felt comfortable being so vulnerable.

Oral histories are a method of “gathering, preserving, and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events” (Library Guides at University of California, Santa Cruz 2019). This method places an emphasis on the significance of temporal context by interviewing people about their past experiences along with their present realities. Oral historians regard the interview as an object in itself--it has a shape and meaning determined not just by the content of the conversation, but how that information is narrated and by the social relationship of the interviewer. Because of emotional nature of the topic, I believe oral histories to be the most appropriate approach in collecting data for this project. Further, a life history or

biographical approach enables reflection and analysis which draws makes clear the importance of centering the voice of the person, bridging more intimately life experience and academia.

### *Judaism and Oral History*

I also wanted to ground this project more fully within my religious roots. The written law generally refers to the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, also known as the *Torah*. Included in the Oral tradition is the *Kabbalah*, mystical interpretations and commentary of the *Torah*. It is a foundation of Judaism to believe that God gave Moses and oral explanation of the Torah along with written text. The oral tradition was eventually documented by a body of Rabbis during 190 CE (Silberberg 2009). The Written Torah cannot be understood without the oral tradition, the blueprint to understanding and embodying the values of the written source. The Oral Torah was originally meant to be transmitted by word of mouth. It was transmitted from master to student in such a manner that if the student had any question, he would be able to ask, and thus avoid ambiguity. A written text, on the other hand, is always subject to misinterpretation. The Jews of the Diaspora transmitted legends orally from generation to generation and not until our own era were they couched in literary form because they believed that the essence of the story lay in its transmission, via the voice (Benjamin 1963). In transforming these oral histories into a written thesis, much gets lost in the process translation from one medium to the other. My analysis of the stories are incomplete because one cannot write body language or vocal inflection. I still maintain that oral history was the best method to use for this particular project, because it enabled me to capture the essence of the conversations.

### ***Content Analysis:***

Content analysis is a research method that allows the qualitative data collected to be systematically analyzed to make larger generalizations about them. In my study, the unit of analysis was theme; I looked for patterns and commonalities across the interviews to effectively organize the large amount of content from the oral histories. I initially grouped the data into the following categories: the Jewish continuity trope, anti-Jewish oppression (in the form of internalized anti-Semitism and intergenerational trauma), the moment of discovery (of queer sexuality), experiencing Judaism and queer identity as connected. While I did not organize my thesis solely around the original data, I do draw on the lived experiences of the Jewish mothers and queer Jewish daughters to substantiate my claim that the Jewish mother-queer daughter relationship is indeed a site worth investigating. The findings from each respective categories enabled me to tease out the connections between them. The list of the interview questions is included in the appendix, however, because I wanted to give space for new themes to emerge, the questions morphed and evolved. I mostly used them as a guide to focus and ground the conversation. Additionally, I used several works of more recent scholarship to further chart out the nature of the intersections between queerness and Jewishness.

### ***Limits of the study***

I want to acknowledge that this paper is Ashkenazi-centric and does not include the voices of Jews of Color (JOC) or Sephardic Jews. According to Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ), Ashkenazi technically means “of central or Eastern European Jewish descent,”

but today it is often used as a catchall term that includes Western European Jews too (JFREJ 2016:40). The omnipresence of Ashkenazi culture and history is enforced by institutional and social Jewish spaces, as well as a society as whole. This results in the erasure and marginalization of other Jewish traditions and narratives. In the US Ashkenazi identity is normalized that the phenomenon is generally invisible unless directly challenged by the acknowledgement of Mizrahi and Sephardic cultures and histories. Unfortunately, due to limited time and resources I was not able to include the unique perspectives Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews and Jews of Color have to offer. The false perception that all Jews are white permeates many Jewish circles and distorts the way we see and treat each other, creating a complex “colorism.” I hope future Jewish studies research will center the narratives of Jews of Color and the other oppressed groups that are consistently left out and invisibilized.

**CHAPTER 1: THE SITE**  
THE SITE PART 1: SITUATING THE JEWISH MOTHERS AS SOCIAL ACTORS

The Jewish mother-queer daughter relationship serves as a useful site through which to explore the nature of the intersections between queerness and Jewishness (and thus the liberatory power of queerness) because it is a space where the compatibility of Jewish and queer identities is being constantly contested. The mother is structurally positioned to see queerness as an identity that is harmful rather than liberatory when paired with Judaism. Because of her *Halakhic* duty to “be fruitful and multiply” and subsequent investment in ensuring that her children procreate, her connection to trauma, and the internalization of anti-Jewish oppression, she receives constant messaging that queerness and Jewishness are incompatible and thus views queerness as a threat to Jewish identity. The Jewish daughters are encouraged to marry Jewish men and have children; just as their mothers did. Queerness is perceived as problematic because it disrupts the traditional nuclear family, the dominant structure in both the secular and Jewish worlds (Ryan and Berkowitz 2009:160). Moreover, the mothers, as well as the entire Jewish peoplehood, carry and transmit intergenerational trauma: the product of an anti-Semitic violence that was deeply informed by homophobia. As such, it is understandable how and why they would want to distance themselves from queerness. Furthermore, as a result of internalized anti-Semitism, the mothers’ anxiety and fear prevent them from being able to fully accept their children’s sexually deviant identity.

*The Jewish, Queer Problem as the Source of Greatest Tension*

Upon learning about their children's queer sexual orientation, many of the mothers in the study jumped to their fears about intermarriage and immediately made assumptions that their child's queerness functions as a threat to their Jewishness; very clearly influenced by the image of the "oxymoronic nature of queer Jews" and the resulting erasure of queer Jews due to the normalization of such a narrative.

Beth, one of the mothers, is a member of a Conservative Jewish Synagogue. She shared with me the speech she gave during Saturday morning services where she "came out" as the mother of a gay daughter. In our interview, she conveyed the deep fear she felt before deciding to reveal such a vulnerable story in front of her entire Jewish social world. The anxiety in trying to merge these two seemingly contradictory spheres, bringing gayness into a Jewish space, stems from a long history of trying to Jews trying to distance themselves from queerness. She included in the speech the difficulty she felt between integrating her queer and Jewish communities. She writes:

I felt alone and I was keeping a secret but only here at Beth El...in the secular world, many knew about this shift in our world. This duality I was living was difficult as there was and is no visible synagogue or community of people who were living through similar circumstances to turn to, to query, or to help me find my way or with which to share feelings.

Beth underscored an important issue within the Jewish community, the socially constructed contradiction that has pitted Jewish and queer identities against one another. She was, for a long time, unable to connect these two worlds; confining her daughter's queerness to the secular realm and hiding it from her Jewish life. The perception that these two categories are somehow

incompatible is a product of the dominant and hegemonic homophobic and anti-Semitic ideologies.

I learned through the oral histories, that the greatest source of tension between the Jewish mothers and queer daughters did not come from a lack of acceptance of their child's sexual orientation, but rather appears to stem from their opposing opinions regarding the compatibility of Jewishness and queerness. Mothers take issue with their daughter's queer identity because they believe it will jeopardize her Jewishness. For example, this same mother revealed that her daughter:

Came out to us in the beginning of college saying maybe she thought she was bi but not really sure...the funny thing was that in college the first woman she dated was not Jewish. It was my worst parenting moment. I went berserk. And it wasn't 'cause it was a woman. It's because she wasn't Jewish. So, if that sort of gives you perspective.

It is not the queerness itself that bothers Beth, but the threat her daughter's queer identity poses to her Jewishness. Thirty-four year old epidemiologist, Hannah, expresses confusion and anger at her mom's "judgement of me as being not connected to Judaism and not really understanding where gets that...if you compared it, me and her made a list of how many things I do and how much of my life is connected to Judaism, I am doing way more." It is apparent that her mother believes that her daughter's sexual orientation makes her "less" Jewish.

***Mother as Transmitter of Jewish Identity:***

The mothers' belief in the importance of ensuring the survival of the Jews through the heterosexual family structure, which echoes the perspective of mainstream Jewish establishments, suggests an inherent (yet mythical) friction between Jewishness and queerness. The religious commandment to "be fruitful and multiply" has been normalized and

institutionalized via schools, summer camps, and synagogues--the centers of Jewish social life. According to Jewish tradition, women hold the power to determine their children's religious affiliation. Although the specifics of the rabbinic arguments as to why the matriarch is deemed as the only legitimate progenitor of Jewish identity (within the Conservative and Orthodox movements) remain unresolved, the key foundational assumption across most denominations is that if the mother is Jewish, so is the child, regardless of whether 'non-Jewish sperm and eggs' were involved in the conception (Cohen 1985). The consensus of Orthodox authorities on Jewish law is that the creation of a Jewish child can only be accomplished via gestation and birth from a Jewish womb (Boyarin 2013:60). The status of the mother's Jewish identity thus determines that of her children. Even the most androcentric of the Jewish texts agree that it is the Jewish mother who ultimately has the power to shape the Jewish future.

Because Judaism is a matrilineal religion and the mothers possess the sacred responsibility to pass down their Jewishness, many of them hope that their daughters will feel the same desire to transmit their Jewish identities through creating families of their own. For example, after Hannah came out to her mom, she was confronted with the response: "But I wanted to be a grandmother." Even the less traditional mothers expressed their desire to see their children create new families. Noah exasperatedly stated: "And then the other thing about being Jewish and gay is kids and my mom is like, "How are you gonna have kids?" Like, "You need to bring down the Jewish faith." And I'm like, "Well, I don't really wanna carry kids," so that's something I don't really talk about with her because she's very ... She's not comfortable about it." However, the type of family that mainstream Jewish establishments uphold, and the one that the mothers within my sample invariably reinforce, is heteronormative in nature: thereby making it

difficult to inhabit both queer and Jewish identities. While recent changes in the Liberal streams of Judaism have decided to accept both matriarchal and patriarchal validity for passing on Jewish religious practices, customs, and identity, the larger and more prominent Conservative and Orthodox movements continue to assert that only women can be the “hereditary bearers of Judaism to their children” (Pratt 1978:23).

This model of the Jewish family that promotes heterosexual reproduction as the key to Jewish survival has, as a result, depicted queerness as “an overdetermined Jewish problem” (Meyers 2012:75 ). Jewish Studies scholar Helene Meyers notes how “biblical injunctions ‘to be fruitful and multiply’ carry new cultural urgency for even the most secularized Jews in the post-Shoah world; the Jewish gays and lesbians, who are assumed to be non-procreative beings, are oftentimes figured as threats to Jewish continuity. Queer Jews disrupt the typical family structure, by nature of their queer identity. Gay people may choose to create a “chosen family” defined by shared values rather than DNA. The Jewish law itself and the way it defines Jewish identity in relation to one’s biological, heterosexual family unit insidiously, yet effectively, poses queer people as a threat to the future of Judaism.

### ***Mother as Carrier and Transmitter of Trauma***

In addition to their role as cultural transmitters, mothers also carry in their bodies, a trauma which stems from anti-Jewish oppression. Although the present experience of anti-Semitism is nothing like the catastrophic genocide that resulted in the slaughtering of six million Jews, Jewish leaders are still highly concerned with ensuring the continuation of their people. The scars of the past continue to haunt the Jewish people, and as such it makes sense that

an oppressed group of people would try to fit assimilate into the status quo and do what they can to maintain their position of safety and power. Consequently, the mothers who have been deeply affected by anti-Semitism and trauma, see their children's sexual deviancy as an identity to be feared.

Jewish and Feminist scholar, Cherie Brown, states that, "the trauma of the Holocaust is such that even Jews born after World War II unknowingly suffer from its psychological effects" (Brown 1995). Although more than seventy years have passed since the end of the Holocaust, the scars live on in the daily personal lives of the Jewish people in ways more pervasive and complex than is presented. The internalized fear of the Holocaust generation has been passed onto a new generation, shaping their lives, politics, and emotional wellbeing. Cherie recounts how:

As I sat in synagogue between my parents every Yom Kippur afternoon, glued to my seat as I listened to the readings from the Martyrology service, the recitation of the pious and the saintly Jews who died at the hands of their persecutors... I became increasingly convinced that, as a Jewish child, I was not safe, indeed would never be safe" (Brown 1995).

The Holocaust has been incorporated into our educational institutions, our religious ritual, and our relationship to the non-Jewish world. Young children who hear tragic stories, particularly when the victims of the tragedy are children, do not always make a distinction between what has happened to others and what has happened to them. They quickly believe that they are personally involved in the events - that they were there. And they often feel personally responsible for not being able to prevent the tragedy. Many Jewish children have thus internalized the unhealed terror in the voices and the actions of the adults around them. Even children who were never given specific information about the Holocaust or even about being Jewish, had nevertheless

unintentionally had that terror passed on to them, in the generalized message that the world is a dangerous place.

Various psychological studies bolster the authenticity of such claims. The long-range generational effects of trauma have been reported in the literature, especially regarding war experiences such as the Holocaust (Lev-Wiesel 2007:80). The first significant qualitative study on the topic looked at how three generations in Israeli families of Holocaust survivors have worked through the past. The interviews were analyzed for central themes and values. For each generation, family relationships and the emotional difficulty of dealing with the Holocaust came up (Sagi-Schwartz, van IJzendoorn, and Bakermans-Kranenburg 2008:110-115). Traumatic events often have severe negative consequences for those who were directly exposed to them as well as to others, particularly family members, who were not directly exposed to that event (Lev-Wiesel 2007:85-90).

Many of the people I spoke to brought up mental health issues when I inquired about their proximity and relationship to the Holocaust. Becky, the second mother I interviewed, is a third generation Holocaust survivor. Her grandparents were from Poland but eventually fled. Many young Jewish men left Poland during that time because of their mistreatment in the Polish army. Becky recalls how her grandmother use to call up, “she would have nightmares. I remember she would wake up screaming the Nazis were coming to get her. My mother would screaming at her the Nazis aren’t here.” Becky goes on:

I think all of her childhood experiences led her to be a very sort of a paranoid and she always thought she was being persecuted. And she probably was somewhat bipolar but nobody ever diagnosed that... She was very depressed for most of her life.

This experience has undoubtedly had an impact on the way Becky relates to her Jewishness, her role as a mother, and the way she experiences the world.

Another interview speaks fondly of her *safta*, her mother's mother who escaped from Poland and came to the US as a very young woman. She managed to escape to the woods and survived until she made it to a displaced persons camp; the rest of her family had been killed. This same grandmother was eventually diagnosed with lung cancer even though she had never smoked. The doctors told her family that they believed that the development of the disease was in reaction to an accumulation of trauma.

Mirit is also the descendant of Holocaust survivors. Her mother's household never talked about the tragedy itself, but obviously still felt connected:

Like for example, my mom went with her sister and her mom, my grandmother, to Germany. I think about two years ago at this point, to see where my great-grandparents had lived and to see graves of other family members and to see the towns that they both came from. And I think that there was a lot that my mom learned about her family history then, that had been pretty much kept from her for a long time. Things about my great-grandfather's mental health. The one who had been in, he was in Dachau, I think. But he had had a series of mental breakdowns, obviously, that nobody talked about and my grandmother never mentioned to them."

Most likely, Mirit's great-grandfather who had been in Dachau experienced PTSD following the Holocaust. This silence is also a common response to traumatic events. Even those who did not have any immediate survivor ancestors, were still confronted with the collective pain and fear so deeply ingrained in the minds of Jews. Noah's grandma "brings it up sometimes and she always talks about tattoos...I have seven tattoos, and she's like, 'You know, tattoos are bad. Our ancestors were marked on their bodies during the Holocaust'" (Ari pg 9).

Penny Rosenwasser states, "I assume that someone who is oppressing others was exploited or traumatized themselves in early childhood-whether through physical or sexual or

emotional abuse, health trauma, upheaval or loss, and/or systemic oppression-and has not successfully faced or addressed these wounds. The intergenerational trauma which so profoundly affects my Jewish community today is a product of the interlocking systems of homophobia and anti-Semitism. Just as queerness and Jewishness are co-constitutive, they have also been used to mutually deconstruct one another. As demonstrated by the events of the Holocaust both Jews and gay people were targeted. While there are no simple equations between Jewish and queer identities, they are “bound up with one another in particularly resonant ways” (Boyarin, Itzkowitz, Pellegrini 2003:2). An anti-Semitic history of reading Jews as perverts and degenerates has also discouraged Jewish communities from identifying with, embracing, and being defined by their queer members (Meyers pg 2012:76). Anti Semitic discourse has

Encouraged forms of Jewish gender and sexual assimilation that disenfranchise Jewish queers...Jews and homosexuals were analogized as undesirable outsiders: both groups were read as degenerate beings who pollute and weaken the body politic and as having more influence than their numbers warrant (Jews) and as being sexually perverse (Meyers 2012:76-77).

I believe that the effects of the trauma encourage most Jews to distance themselves from queerness and invisibilize the historical and present-day connections between Jewishness and queerness, due to the role that homophobia has played in perpetuating anti-Semitism.

### ***Mothers and Internalized anti-Semitism***

Moreover, many of the mothers expressed concern, fear, and worry for their daughters' safety as queer-identifying: landmark traits of internalized anti-Semitism (Rosenwasser 2002). I would like to point out that gauging the psychic impact of oppression on any target group is inherently imprecise, intuitive and speculative (JFREJ 2016:19). We search for patterns of

behavior, shared experiences, and unexpected insights about shared traits, but it is still impossible to know for certain if correlation amounts to causation. In addition, we can only speculate on what we see in the center of the behavioral bell curve: “for every few shared experiences of internalized oppression, someone will say, ‘hang on, that doesn’t describe me at all!’” (JFREJ 2016:19). But, the above understanding of internalized oppression, “approximates some aspect of our lived experience and our observations about some Jews” (JFREJ 2016:19).

Betj articulates the terror she initially felt after learning about her daughter’s queer identity:

I was mostly fearful for her safety. That was really my initial fear. How are you gonna get through the world? People are gonna judge you. What if you want to have a family and you have children and people are gonna judge you. And they're not gonna be open to you. I was fearful of how hard her life would be. You want the best for your children. You want them to have an easy life. That was my fear. That she wouldn't find a community. That she wouldn't find a partner, you know, whatever it is. And those were my fears for just allowing her to have a happy, comfortable life.

Already marginalized as Jews, the mothers do not want their children to experience anymore “otherness.” Twenty-two year-old Annie recounts a conversation when she was interrogating the reasoning behind her mother’s refusal to accept her queer sexual orientation. Her mom remarked, “‘I just don’t want you to be persecuted,’ and I was like, ‘That’s a weird thing to say.’” The word “persecution” is particularly resonant among Jews because of the long history of violence and genocide. Abby similarly highlights the conflicted emotions her mother feels about her being queer:

I think that her relationship to my queerness is that part of her admires it and thinks it’s courageous and the way that my appearance, the way that I present myself I think part of her admires it and thinks it’s brave. And I think part of her doesn’t understand it just fundamentally, and then the third part is just worried about what it means for me in a male world.

Abby does not feel the threat of patriarchy and heterosexism in the same way that her mother does.

Researchers of a psychological study that attempted to create a mechanism to measure internalized anti-Semitism concluded even though a generation “might not face the over-institutionalized anti-Semitism that past generations of Jews in America, or Jews living in other parts of the world today, have been forced to endure” Jews living in the US in the 21st century are not exempt from the “intense psychological dynamics that face every oppressed group and lead them to internalize anger in the form of self-loathing” (Chattman 2009:4). With the identity development of other minority groups, it has been suggested that ‘every American Jew goes through the process of learning (and hopefully unlearning) internalized anti-Semitism (Chattman 2009:6). Jewish feminist and activist, Penny Rosenwasser, conducted a study with nine Jewish women over a period of ten months to explore the various manifestations of internalized anti-Semitism and to develop healing and resistance strategies. Her comprehensive research on the subject solidifies her conviction that “every Jew has some form of internalized Jewish oppression, feelings and behaviors developed in response to anti-Semitism, and that this internalized oppression can manifest in a myriad of ways...” (Rosenwasser 2005:33-36). The devastating effect of oppression is the way in which it leads people to believe that oppressed communities are at odds with one another--in this case, Jewish and queer people--making it impossible to have multiple identities, or rendering those identities as contradictory and “oxymoronic.” Oppression only breeds more oppression, and oppression is what leads to the erasure of identities.

*Conclusion:*

Jewish mothers are positioned to perceive Jewishness and queerness as competing, rather than complementary, identities; the greatest source of tension is not about the mothers' lack of acceptance of their daughters' sexuality, but rather it is rooted in a fundamental disagreement about the nature of the relationship of these two groups. Because they are the "hereditary bearers of Judaism" they rely on the heteronormative family structure to properly ensure Jewish continuity and perpetuate the disconnection between Jewishness and queerness. Additionally, because mothers are both the carriers and transmitters of a trauma which is a product of the dual systems of homophobia and anti-Semitism, they are more likely to distance these two identities. Moreover, the internalized anti-Semitism leads to a heightened state of fear and anxiety. Many mothers expressed concern about what their daughter's queer sexual orientation might mean regarding their safety.

## THE SITE PART 2: SITUATING THE JEWISH QUEER DAUGHTERS AS SOCIAL ACTORS

While the mothers generally believe that queerness poses a threat to Jewish continuity, the daughters regard these two identities as harmonious and even emancipatory. The queer daughters of Jewish mothers who constantly question the compatibility between Jewishness and queerness, must learn to contend with this issue; because their mothers dispute the very possibility of the existence of the queer-Jew, the daughters are likely to think critically about the nature of the relationship between these two categories and defend the richness of their experience as members of both. Moreover, the current socio-political culture that influences the queer daughter enables her to engage with her sexuality and Jewishness in ways that were not available to their mothers. The queer daughters' distance from the trauma along with the nature of the mental health discourse today, their growing up during what theorists have coined the "gender revolution," and their activist, political identities, have enabled them to feel secure enough in both their Jewishness and queerness to take risks and recognize the liberatory power that results from an integration of the two.

### *The Salience of the Mental Health Discourse Today*

Because of their distance from the trauma and the everyday experiences of anti-Semitism, the daughters feel more secure in visibly inhabiting their Jewish identities than the mothers.

Beth, for example, shared that she feels:

Very conscious of who knows that I'm Jewish and who knows that I'm not Jewish. I use Robinson, which is my maiden name. I don't use Goldstein in business, which is a very

purposeful decision. I am careful about who knows it because I don't know what the response will be. And I think that probably is somewhat informed by that history that exists. I have experienced Anti-Semitism. I have been called names. I worked in advertising for many years and it was several times people came in my office and said "Well, he just Jew'd me down."

Beth is constantly aware of her Jewish identity and understands more deeply than her queer daughter the potentially grave consequences of making her Jewishness visible. In contrast, one of my interview subjects decided to change their name from an ordinary-sounding feminine one to a more gender-queer Hebrew one. The queer person chose to embrace their Jewishness and make very public their queer-Jewish existence.

Additionally, the scholarly literature and popular culture have recognized mental health issues as a growing problem in the United States (Berry 2017:107). As a result, discussions around mental illness has become much more commonplace among millennials. In response to my question about mental health history, Jess readily revealed:

I also have some anxiety things. My dad has been more open with the fact that he can struggle with depression, or anxious depression. My younger sister also takes medication for depression. Depression and anxiety are definitely things that run in my family...I have asked my mom if she thinks she is a person who is anxious, or has experienced depression, and she's been pretty ... She's always firm with everything, like, "No, I'm not," which is really interesting.

Mirit, similarly unprompted, shared that after having lied to her parents about her non-Jewish boyfriend, she "eventually told them, and it was a very bad time in our relationship. And then that ended before I went to college, and then I talked about it for a year in therapy." It is also important to note that the daughters have generally grown up with greater wealth, privilege, and access to therapy. The queer daughters have the means to address their traumas

and mental health issues both because of their financial resources as well as the cultural norm that has pushed mental health discourse to the center. Consequently, they are better equipped to heal and free to explore integrating their queerness into their Jewish identities. Ariel's queer-Jewish journey began in rehab: "The only Jewish person I'd ever really met was my roommate from rehab whose name was [Shana], and every day in rehab she would say her prayers...and she would *daven Shacharit* (recite the morning prayers), and I would read the book of lamentations, which I had memorized." This same friend encouraged Ariel to go to a Jewish retreat center: where they fell love and experienced Judaism for the first time. This center itself became the therapeutic, healing site, that enabled them to embark on their Jewish, queer journey.

### ***Growing up during an Age of Progressivism***

The landscape of progressive Jewish activism has changed considerably since the 1980s; in this current political moment "Jews and queers are a vibrant part of American culture" (Shneer 2002:3). Liberal Judaism is at the forefront of advancing queer empowerment and visibility, and leftist Jewish resistance has increased significantly. Unlike the much more traditional and gender binary world their mothers grew up in, queer Jews today are contesting the very notion of margins and center, of sameness and differences, and their demands for inclusion have sparked unprecedented and often contentious dialogue about where exactly queer Jews belong.

According to David Shneer, the "solidarity wrought by external oppression of a homophobic and heterosexist society is no longer enough to define these groups" (Shneer 2002:4). It is not enough to define identities by oppression. Queer Jews recognize that we must move past this limiting

practice, and center the intersections, observing how they move and expand and grow, rather than the oppression.

Additionally, there appears to be a collective confusion over what the term “queer” means. Hannah remarks, “So my mom does not understand my queerness. I don’t think she understands the word queer, which is the word I used to identify with and to describe myself.” Beth talks about the new vocabulary she had to learn after her daughter came out in order to have meaningful conversations about gender and sexuality.

Moreover, justice movements across the country, such as Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, the Progressive Jewish Alliance, and Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace, are increasingly lead by visibly young and queer Jews. Feminist scholar Susannah Heschel asserts “third-wave Jewish feminists...[have become] their own authorities” (P. xvii). Evidenced by a variety of significant texts such as Danya Ruttenberg’s *Yentl’s Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*, Lisa Schiffman’s *Generation ‘J,’* and a rapidly expanding body of Jewish works, we can see a burgeoning activism lead by Jews compelled to speak out against injustices (Rosenwasser 2005:175-176). Most of the daughters I interviewed were, in some capacity, involved in justice work and dedicated to finding and creating liberatory ways of expressing their traditionally marginalized Jewish and queer identities. Hannah views her queerness as more than a sexual orientation, also as a “political identity or an identity that means pushing on the things that aren’t working and figuring out the ways that we can live more holistic and liberatory lives.”

### *Conclusion*

Jewish queer daughters are important sociological actors in this study because they have the capacity to integrate their queerness more fully into their Jewishness. Due to a growing

awareness around mental health issues and greater access to resources, the daughters have the tools to heal from the traumas that might have prevented them (and their mothers) from safely inhabiting both identities. Also, the term “queerness” goes beyond sexual orientation and has a political connotation. I intentionally reached out to Jews who identify as queer rather than gay or lesbian precisely because of the word’s implied political element. I wanted to speak to people who already believed in the liberatory potential of inhabiting fully two marginalized identities.

### *The Site*

The Jewish mother-queer daughter relationship thus serves as a useful site through which to study the nature of the intersections between Jewishness and queerness. The Jewish mother’s role as the “hereditary bearer” of the Jewish religion, her connection to trauma and internalized anti-Semitism positions her to perceive queerness and Jewishness as two opposing identities. The queer daughters, on the other hand, are free to integrate the two; their distance from the trauma, access to mental health resources, and activist mentality, enable them to embody a harmonious Jewish-queer lifestyle that their mothers will inevitably have difficulty comprehending because of their different social position. In response to the mothers’--and the larger Jewish establishment’s--fundamental belief that queerness is incompatible with Jewishness, we see how the queer daughters turn this notion on its head and actually use their queerness to create more inclusive, abundant Judaism.

## CHAPTER 2: THE LIBERATORY POTENTIAL OF FURTHER INTEGRATING JEWISH AND QUEER IDENTITIES

Queer theorist Janet Jakobsen encourages us to think of “Jews and homosexuals as in a complicitous, rather than analogous, relation [which] can then be part of a process for thinking about how to subvert the network of power that ties together, anti-Semitic, antihomosexual, and white supremacist discourses” (Jakobsen 2003:80). Each identity is complicit in the formation of the other, and very crucial, as Jacobson implies, is their connection to power. Queers are more than merely a symbol for difference but, “queers are those whose differences is potentially resistant, subversive, perhaps even liberatory” (Jakobsen 2003:81). Studying Jews at the intersection of queerness and vice versa enables us to uncover new forms of subversion and resistance. For many folks, “sexual orientation functions as a lens through which we empathize with the oppression of others” (Shneer 2002:7). They also recognize the power of embodying their sexual orientation in conjunction with their Jewish identity as a way to resist the oppression. Both Jewish and LGBTQ history teach us that identity is not static, and “it is incumbent upon us to reshape it according to conditions in which we live at any given time” (Shneer 2002:8).

In the following section, I will use various scholarly works as well as the oral histories to document the various ways in which queerness generates a more expansive, bountiful, and beautiful Judaism.

### *A Queer Analysis of the White Ashkenazi Jew*

I would like to demonstrate the potential that queerness, both as a social identity and theoretical framework, has in creating a more liberatory, expansive Jewishness by beginning this section with a “queer” reading of Ashkenazi Jews’ social positionality. Placing Jewishness and queerness in conversation with one another and applying elements of queer theory to Jewish studies, enables us to make the immediate connection between the Jew’s state of “definitional instability” and the ambiguity and fluidity that the term “queer” evokes. In this particular section, I will rely on David Halperin’s understanding of queerness as an identity not merely defined by any particular person or thing, but rather to mean “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant...it demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-a-vis the normative” (Halperin 2004:158). Queer theorists, however, are unable to agree on the exact place of lesbian/gay issues, or sexuality more broadly, within the emergent field of queer studies.

Jews are also described as a social group that is subject to a “definitional instability” because they simultaneously benefit from the privileges of whiteness and suffer from white supremacy. Ambivalence and ambiguity characterize the social location of both Jews and queer people. *First Person Jewish* by Alisa Lebow, looks at various contemporary films that illuminate the difficulty in fully inhabiting a Jewish-queer identity. The films she analyzes demonstrate the “syncretic coexistence of these two mutually implicated yet distinct identities [which] has led to a queer Jewish aesthetic of ambivalence” (Lebow 2008:112). There is a structural ambivalence that shapes queer and Jewish identity. British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has named Jewishness as “categorically ambivalent within modernity, contending first and foremost that Jews are indefinable by definition” (Bunzl 2000:116). In the Christian West, the Jew is the perennial stranger, never fully belonging anywhere yet present everywhere. The Jew stands out

as divergent, making modernity's obsessive preoccupation with ordering, an impossible reality. The Jew does not fit easily into established categories of national, class, and race. This ambivalence can be read "as an unconscious symptom of a cultural positionality or indeed the performance of a prescribed role (Lebow 2008:117). Similarly, queers constitute another one of Western culture's "consummate others" ( First person, xxxiii). Ambiguity and ambivalence, in terms of both queer and Jewish articulations, are the common defining elements of each (Lebow 2008:33).

Antisemitism is often described as cyclical in nature. The Jewish experience in Europe has been characterized as "cycling" between period of Jewish stability and success only to be followed by periods of intense anti-Jewish sentiment and violence. Originating in European Christianity, antisemitism has functioned to protect the prevailing economic system and the almost exclusively Christian ruling class by diverting blame for economic hardship onto Jews (JFREJ 2016: 10). Like all oppressions, anti-Jewish ideology consists of elements of dehumanization and degradation via lies and stereotypes about Jews. It has deep historical roots and uses exploitation, marginalization, discrimination, and violence as its tools. Anti Semitism began as religious intolerance, but has always been at least partly xenophobic. Jews have been cast as "outsiders, pollutants...such as with the 15th-16th century Spanish *limpieza de sangre*...Eventually through the development of modern 'scientific' racism, many people began to consider Jews a distinct, inferior and troubling race" (JFREJ 2016:12). It is crucial to note that while Christian dogma was central in the development of antisemitism, and Christian hierarchs were often its agents, many Christians throughout history, both secular and religious, have been active allies to Jews. Jews were, however, prohibited from owning land or joining tradesmen's

guilds and were restricted to jobs that Christians found distasteful or were not allowed by the Church, such as money-lending and tax collecting. After centuries of church indoctrination claiming that Jews rejected Jesus and were agents of the devil, it was not difficult for European Christians to tout Jews as the source of the various social and economic problems. Whether it was spreading the Black Plague or hoarding a community's wealth, they served as an ideal group to scapegoat. This meant that attention and anger was diverted away from the people who levied the taxes and toward the "strange, greedy Jews tasked with collecting them" (JFREJ 2016:12). The Jewish experience in Europe has been characterized as "cycling" between period of Jewish stability and success only to be followed by periods of intense anti-Jewish sentiment and violence.

This cyclical anti-Semitism relies on stereotypes and myths about Jewish people, which claim that Jews are secretly power-hungry, have control over the economy of a country or even the world and thus are stealing jobs, preventing good Christians from prospering. In order for these myths to be plausible, Jews must accrue at least some degree of wealth and standing in society. One cannot claim Jews to be all-powerful unless they have at least a small measure of power. Thus, "rather than keeping Jews perpetually at the bottom, antisemitism often becomes most intense when Jews are afforded a measure of success" (JFREJ 2016:16). But if Jews were truly as collectively powerful as the anti-Semitic myths claim, if they truly controlled the government or societies in which they live, they would not have been able protect themselves from anti-Jewish violence and bigotry. Prior to Hitler's rise to power, for example, Jews were generally an assimilated and comfortable minority in Germany. After WWI, most Germans experienced deep economic hardship from the war and the economic reparations demanded by

the victors. As the German economy worsened many became outraged as what they believed as an injustice against them. At the same time, a large wave of Jews immigrated from Eastern Europe, people already deemed “pollutants” or “outsiders:” conveniently labeled as such for Hitler, because his rise in power rested on the “tide of hatred toward Jews, Romani, queer people and others.” Hitler stoked the country’s collective hatred of Jews and support for discriminatory policies and practices and ultimately led to widespread violence, systematic expunging and murders, and the attempted genocide of the Jewish people. The Nazis exterminated six million Jews in death camps and mass murders. The global Jewish population has only very recently, as of 2017, approached its pre-Holocaust numbers.

The scapegoating of one group lays the foundation for the targeting of the next, and the next. The acceptability of antisemitism “ultimately leaves every marginalized group vulnerable” (JFREJ 17). Puerto Rican Jewish writer and poet, Aurora Levins Morales, states,

The oppression of Jews is a conjuring trick, a pressure valve...that redirects the rage of working people away from the 1%, a hidden mechanism...that works through misdirection, that uses privilege to hide the gears...Unlike racism, at least some of its targets must be seen to prosper...Privilege for a visible sample of us is the only way to make the whole tricky business work. Then, when the wrath of the most oppressed...reaches boiling point, there we are.

Jews are the middleman of the United States; sometimes he has access to power and sometimes he is denied--depending on the level of economic and social stress of the surrounding, dominant culture. The most prominent and least visible form of modern-day anti-Semitism is that of scapegoating (Rosenwasser 150). This particular type of violence displaces blame from those in power (usually non-Jews), onto Jews, for societal and financial crises; often singling Jews as the “sole source” of difficulty (Rosenwasser 2005:151). This cyclical, or queer pattern, continues to present day, as Jews who are landlords, lawyers, politicians are sometimes attacked because of

their structural position and serves as the public faces of, or buffers for, the ruling elite, in exchange for class privilege. For example, many falsely associate Jews with money. While the general economic position of white Jews does indeed warrant a legitimate critique of capitalists, people fail to separate the person (landlord) from the system (capitalism). Labor and housing justice coalitions will sometimes say “my Jewish landlord,” or “my Jewish employer;” although this is not explicitly anti-Jewish, the fact that “Jewishness” is even mentioned demonstrates how anti-Jewish sentiment is insidiously connected to wealth. Additionally, during his campaign, Donald Trump occasionally offered legitimate criticisms of “the role of offshoring and Wall Street speculation,” but he featured primarily Jewish financiers such as George Soros, Lloyd Blankfein, and Federal Reserve Chairperson Janet Yellen in his final campaign ad to suggest covert anti-Semitic conspiracy instead of actual economic critique. The consequences of this insidious anti-Jewish propaganda has lead to violent threats against Jewish community centers and other Jewish institutions, and provides simplistic answers--that Jews are greedy--to a complicated, structural set of problems. Anti-Semitism frames the function of capitalism as problem of human or communal mischief rather than as intrinsic to capitalism itself. The capitalist system is not oppressive because Jews are ruining, “capitalism is oppressive because capitalism is oppressive” (JFREJ 2016:19). Lerner’s key argument in *Socialism of Fools* centers on Jews’ “hidden vulnerability to being scapegoated.” Jews are strategically placed “in position where they can serve as the focus for anger [or buffers]...should the society in which they live enter periods of severe economic strain or political conflict. *It is precisely this hidden vulnerability that constitutes the uniqueness of Jewish oppression*” (JFREJ 2016:20).

Unpacking the complexities of Jewish social identity in Christian America, understanding the Jewish position as also queer, one that does not quite belong, allows us to name the true threat to the survival of the Jews: white supremacy which I define as the “political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings” (JFREJ 2016:38). Jews are societal insiders and outsiders, experiencing both privilege and vulnerability. In order to heal from Jewish oppression, it is crucial that we first learn how it works. Using queer theory to recognize how Jews have been manipulated and oppressed enables us to locate the source of violence. Rather than directing more violence towards other groups, such as Palestinians or queer folks, we must work to dismantle white supremacy, acknowledge our white privilege *and* Jewish vulnerability, build alliances, and combat oppression (Rosenwasser 2005:vi).

### ***The Relationship between Queerness and Jewishness***

#### *Queer and Jewish Identities are Co-constitutive*

Through Annie’s conversation, I was able to see how exactly her two spheres interact. She grew up going to a synagogue led by a rabbi who used to be a drag queen. The synagogue itself started out as a collective of Jewish artists who went on to create a space that is as equally queer as it is Jewish. At one point she wrote a letter to the rabbi expressing her gratitude for having the opportunity to safely inhabit her Jewish and queer identities: “I wrote in the thank you note...’As a queer person, this was a really validating experience...This is my experience in

Judaism, how rare to have such a gay Judaism.’” Her mom, who sees these two identities disconnected, scolded her for writing such a “provocative” note and said, in Annie’s words “Don’t write that because this is a professional thing and you don’t want these things to be saved,’ and I was like, “Oh my God,’ and we got into this whole big fight about it, and I think what’s so frustrating about it is how surprising and out-of-character it feels.” Annie acknowledges the beauty that comes from connecting her queerness and Jewishness. She recognizes that it is not the norm to have access to a “gay Judaism” and points to the dangerous consequence of employing the rhetoric of either/or (either Jewish, or queer--one cannot be both).

Ariel’s story also poignantly exposes the ways in which their sexual and religious worlds collide:

I actually didn't know I was Jewish until two years ago, and I also didn't know I was gay until I knew I was Jewish, and I didn't know I was trans until I knew I was Jewish, because my relationship to my body ... My whole body was waiting to find out I was Jewish in order to know these other things.

Their mother has for many years denounced her own Jewishness and attempted to assimilate completely into the white, Christian hegemony. Although she had denied her child of their Jewishness, Ariel now comfortably inhabits both Jewish and queer identities.

They moved on in our conversation to talk about their experience with the program *Adamah* at the Isabella Freedman Center. The retreat center offers Jewish holiday experiences, workshops, festivals, farm vacations, retreats, yoga classes, prayer services, and farm-to-table kosher meals (Isabella Freedom Center). The *Adamah* Fellowship, which takes place at this center, is a two to three-month program for young adults that integrates organic agriculture, Jewish learning, community building, social justice, and spiritual practice. *Adamah* values the earth and land with kindness and compassion, fostering a larger culture of lovingkindness that

inevitably welcomes and even celebrates queerness. This farm became their Jewish and queer home:

That farm was the first place where my body woke up, where I found love for the first time...I experienced Judaism. That is my Israel, that land. And I kept going back and back...That is the only Judaism I knew, which was, like hippy dippy Judaism, egalitarian, earth-based. The first Siddur that was ever put in my hand was the [Kohenet] Siddur, which uses feminine god language. So the god that Judaism put in my hands was queer as fuck, which allowed me to access it, because the god I had been given before, the first god language I ever spoke was white supremacy and Christian hegemony.

The type of *Siddur*, or prayerbook, they used was written by the Kohenet Institute, a place of learning founded on non-normative, feminist principles. It is described as a “training program in spiritual leadership for women on a Jewish path. Kohenet is also a movement, a sisterhood, and a network of communities.” The Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute reclaims the traditions of women, the centrality of ritual as a transformative force in Jewish and human life, honors the ways in which divinity appears to us in female form; and celebrates the sacred in the body, the earth, and the cosmos. The institute trains people in a radical and queer way of doing Judaism because of its fundamental mission to create an earth-based, embodied, feminist, Judaism, and no doubt their *siddurim* (plural of siddur) reflect these values as well. It was through the prayer, in the open space of the farm, where Ariel’s body literally “woke up.”

### *Jewishness informs Development of Queer Identity*

Mirit recounts the first time she felt comfortable enough to freely express their non-binary identity (Mirit now goes by both she and they). When asked what pronouns they preferred during their interview for a spot at JOIN, the Jewish Organizing Institute and Network for Justice, Mirit responded:

‘Oh, I’ll use she or they. Both are fine.’ I was not walking into spaces where people were reacting to my pronouns, because I wasn’t really involved in queer stuff at Brandeis. And so when I went to my JOIN interview, it was the first place where I was allowed to write my pronouns on a name tag, and nobody knew me, and I didn’t feel like I was going to be subject to questions...And so I started using only ‘they’ from that point.

It was within the context of Jewishness, this Jewish organizing fellowship that enabled Mirit to figure out how to safely and authentically express their queer identity.

Hannah explains that her Judaism actually encouraged and allowed her to discover her queerness: “I think my Judaism was part of making it easy to discover it. I feel like the kernel of Judaism of always interrogating something and asking questions about it and exploring it and reinterpreting and reinterpreting. I think it's a really Jewish thing, and I think that is something I use, even unrelated to Judaism, me exploring parts of myself and parts of our world. So I think that helped me in the process of realizing who I am and how I interact with the world, and now I can encounter Judaism in a way of reinventing it or re-molding traditions and *Halakhah* for the ways that it can be queered.” Rebecca also talks about the role that Jewishness played in her coming out experience: So Eden Village is a pretty queer place. I feel like there was the first time I was in a Jewish space that was predominantly queer...Then I met my first girlfriend working at camp that summer.” For Sarah, the Jewish space itself which was also a queer space, encouraged her to explore her sexuality.

Finally, for Adina, it was the Jewish people in her life who were enabled her to come to terms with her queerness.

Okay, well the way the story goes is that me and Lilly were like taking a road trip across the country to California, and we stayed at one of her best friends ... She has the ... This is an important side note. My mom has this group of best friends that she calls her Seder sisters, and [crosstalk] nine women who like, for the last 20 years, have been hanging out at least once a month and they’ll study some text together, and eat dinner and just love each other, and these are like her best friends. And so, Lilly and I stayed at one of her Seder sister's houses when we were traveling through Illinois to St. Louis. And I don't

think we were trying to hide it at all, we had been making out and more basically in a partnership immediately, and that was probably just a few weeks after. And I'm sure my mom picked up on notes of that, and I really ... I mean, I think ... I've been thinking a lot about how lucky I am to not have felt like I needed to hide it. And so, I think we like came back from that trip and I was like almost ready to tell my mom, but wasn't quite ready and I think she had spoken on the phone to her friend and that friend had asked her, "Is there something going on with Ani and Lilly?" But I didn't know any of this yet, and I think I was like planning to tell her that I had these feelings for her but we hadn't talked about it yet, and maybe something was gonna happen, but it hadn't happened yet.

Adina's mom was not upset and had a generally positive reaction. She has welcomed Adina's partner into their family with much warmth and love. Although she might not have been quite ready to "come out" to her mother, the Seder Sisters, her mother's Jewish female friends, were among the first to openly acknowledge and name Adina's queerness.

#### *Queerness Informs Jewish Practice and Spirituality*

Many of the people I interviewed figured out ways to "queer" traditional Jewish practices, or complement these practices with some of their own queer rituals, in order to make Judaism more compatible with their values. Mirit speaks of her inability to find a comfortable Jewish community in college: "I didn't like the conservative stuff. And I'm not into reform stuff. And I was not into the orthodox stuff. And so me and some of my friends started a minyan that was supposed to be sort of like Hadar style....And it was supposed to be egalitarian...it was really successful, and really big...So I co-chaired that for a while. And so that was me fraying back into Judaism, in like a 'I'm a lefty now,' and 'I care about being spiritual now.'" Mirit had trouble finding a Jewish space that allowed her to express her identity in the way that she needed, so she and her friends created their *Hadar-style minyan*, group of Jews who worship together in a way that honors egalitarianism. *Hadar* enables group worships in the Jewish Orthodox

tradition, but it's not traditional, it's slightly "queered." A woman leads the prayers, generally forbidden among mainstream Orthodox. The genders are separated by a white curtain, called a *mechitzah*, but it's translucent. Typically a rabbi leads or synagogue sanctions the service. The *Hadar*-style group is an "independent minyan," and dozens of these unaffiliated Jewish worship communities have sprung up in the past decade, mixing elements of the mainstream denominations while answering to none of them. The prayers are in Hebrew and everyone present participates--the hallmarks of the movement, and a reaction to mainstream alternatives where such prayer is not available.

Adina calls on a moment where she was teaching at a Hebrew school and was confronted with the discomfort a homophobic value in the Torah:

I don't know. That's definitely tied into Judaism in some sense. Gender roles and the Torah and how fucked up all that was. And I think, yeah. I think I wrestle a lot ... I wouldn't say I wrestle a lot, but when I teach these 13 year olds and it's like, I have my Vassar education alongside this biblical portion about what purity and impurity are, and how women need to be kicked out of the camp for two weeks because they have their periods. And it's like, there's a part of me like my mom, who in some sense wants to find something holy or find some spark, and I can do that. I can always find something. It's like, maybe there is something meaningful here that we can just interpret it in this way and it doesn't have to be harmful and hurtful. And then there's all the bigger ways in which religion is violent and destructive and reinforcing of these very destructive binary's that are like, well, I can't just pretend that doesn't exist because it's very problematic.

She recognizes the beauty in Judaism, the truths and wisdom her religion espouses, but she also acknowledges some of its problematic components. Adina, like Mirit, finds a way to "queer" it; make it more of her own and something that authentically reflects her identity.

Jess talks about her initial surprise at the ways in which Judaism was carried out on her college campus: Smith, an all-women's and very queer-friendly school.

Yeah. I don't think that they're separate. I think that in some ways, I was really lucky at Smith to find really cool Jewish communities. Because there was that space, it also meant that a lot of folks in that community were queer, and it's been so powerful to watch a lot

of folks, whose Judaism informs their queerness, and their queerness informs their Judaism. I didn't understand that intersection that much, because I was just raised in a lot of heteronormative environments. I definitely knew there were queer families going to my synagogue, but I didn't ... I knew that Judaism could be accepting and inclusive, but I didn't know how it could also be very much steeped in queerness, or a queer lens of a Judaic practice, if that makes sense. Some people at Smith have shown me how much these things can be connected. I feel like I'm really looking forward to understanding that more, but I think for the most part, I've mostly just met a lot of weird, Jewish people at Smith, and knew that those folks were trying to use the lens of queerness to be Jewish. That was really cool, because I think, probably, it's like you've experienced, queerness also lends itself to politics really, really easily. I don't think I've ever had a sincere relationship with a queer person who is not progressive or radical in some kind of a way. I feel like that has been the most meaningful Jewish community that I've also been a part of, if that makes sense. Those are the values that are also imperative to our Judaism.

Because of the already queered campus environment, the Jewish life it cultivated was also one that was inclusive and celebratory of all identities.

*Historical Evidence that Jews Used Sexual Deviance as a Means to Resist:*

The popular conviction that Jews have historically embodied non-normative sexual and gender categories is long-standing, and recent work in Jewish cultural studies documents attributions of “softness” to Jewish men predating the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Boyarin, Itzkowitz, Pellegrini 2003:1). Daniel Boyarin provocatively suggests that these stereotypes of Jewish “gender trouble” were not always rejected by Jews themselves (Boyarin, Itzkowitz, Pellegrini 2003:2). Anchoring his analysis in an interpretation of the sex-gender system in the traditional Ashkenazic culture of pre-modern Eastern Europe, he argues that this system fostered a model of gentle, nurturing masculinity: exemplified in the eroticized figure of the *Yeshiva-Bokhur*, the pale and meek student of the *Talmud*, the book of commentaries on the Old Testament. Boyarin reads this idealized construction as a form of resistance and opposition against the dominant European sex-gender institution. While the Christian culture advanced a

masculine agenda which centered on “war-making, dueling, and adulterous courtly love affairs,” the ideal Jewish man was marked by “scholarliness, quietism, modesty, and a spiritual aptitude” (Boyarin 1997:38, 63).

Boyarin turns to the Talmud to locate the origins of this particular version of “effeminate” masculinity. This sacred and historical text prescribed an ideal of manliness that differed from the “dominant fiction [of masculinity] that the Romans were busily imposing all over the Mediterranean region and the rest of Europe (Boyarin 1997:124). The Talmud codifies Jewish masculinity based on an oppositional act of collective self-feminization. Certain textual and ideological strands ventured to construct their ideal male figures as “androgynes” or as “feminized men” (Boyarin 1997:130). Within the larger cultural context of that historical moment, the Rabbis who devoted themselves exclusively to study were feminized, became more womanly, in contrast to the hegemonic (Roman) ideals surrounding manhood. They believed that a man without a weapon was not a man at all; he was castrated. But from the rabbinic Jewish perspective, he is merely circumcised, honoring Jewish ritual. Boyarin posits that the meanings of gender dimorphism figure not only as culturally relative, but “as a site of deliberate collective identification. That is, a mode of oppositional gendering safeguarded the resistive circumscription of Jewish cultural autonomy in the first centuries of the Common Era (Boyarin 1997:329). Jews’ collective identity as specifically Jewish subjects, chose to embrace their otherness which manifested in the form of sexual deviancy. And it is this very non-normative sexual identity, the effeminate man, that enabled Jews to continue practicing their Judaism, and to differentiate themselves from their highly masculine Roman rulers. Boyarin posits that Jews developed a “queer” sexgender system during the Talmud period to consistently resist the

Roman construction of aggressive and violent masculinity, which served as the building block of a dominant European culture of romance and romantic masculinity. His position rests on the assumption that eastern Europe's Ashkenazic culture produced men whose effeminacy was not the figment of an anti-Semitic imagination, but a cultural reality rooted in Talmud principles. As long as these principles went unchallenged, Boyarin implies, "Jewish men not only accepted the charge of emasculation but strove toward it as an oppositional identification vis-a-vis the dominant culture" (Boyarin 1997:329).

Another crucial reason to look at queer Jewish people's relationship to Judaism, thus, resides in our collective Jewish history of embracing "sexual deviancy." Our past suggests that the body of Rabbis that made up the Rabbinat, who have entirely informed what modern-day Judaism looks like, *wanted* to lift up their queerness in relationship to their Jewish identities. Their different gender expression and values acted as a means towards resisting the hegemonic ideology of the Romans. The Jews' livelihood, its essence, its sacredness has continued on account of our ancestors' collective oppositional gender identity as a form of resistance.

Through speaking with queer Jews, inquiring about their relationship between their religious, spiritual, and gender identities, in attempt to reclaim and relive this radical history. Heeding the calls of the now realized "prophetic minority" of queer Jews will once again provide us with great insight into ways to connect to our Judaism more authentically, resist oppressive White Supremacist values, and more fully engage with our sexually progressive past.

However, with the onset of the Jewish enlightenment period, Jewish men began to reject their effeminate qualities. The enlightenment period brought the Jews of Western and Central Europe into prolonged contact with non-Jewish society according to a "logic that promised

equality in exchange for cultural normalization” (Boyarin 1997:330). While the Jewish population of eastern Europe tended to retain their traditional cultural orientation in opposition to the dominant system, Western (especially German) Jews sought to adopt the cultural styles of their host countries. They deemphasized their own difference, abandoning Yiddish for European national languages and embracing “religious reforms that universalized Jewish theology and diminished Jewish tradition and ritual” (Boyarin 1997:329) The conventional emancipation narrative views this historical process as positive--the liberation of Jews from “centuries of dismal ghetto existence through entry into modern society” (Bunzl 2000:330). Boyarin, conversely, regards the emancipation as the beginning of the end of a resistive Jewish cultural autonomy. As western Jews sought to adopt dominant European cultural standards, they “came to view the traditional Yiddish culture of Ashkenaz as an embarrassing remnant of a primitive Jewish past” (Bunzl 2000:330). With modernization, came sexual normalization, and a profound loss of the some of the most holiest parts of our Jewishness. I believe however, that we are a people who will always return to our socially just and radical roots--this is how we will preserve Judaism. The queer Jews I interviewed inspire me to engage with the tradition in more authentic and liberatory ways.

### ***Queer Jews at the Forefront of Change***

#### *Cultural Innovators*

Queer Jews are important to study in part because of the growing cultural contributions they are making to the Jewish mainstream and America at large. Shneer claims that it is

The lack of ambiguity, the direct engagement with Jewish tradition and with the pillars of contemporary Jewish culture like the Torah, the Holocaust, Israel, and Jewish life cycles, rather than the shying away from it, and the overt use of queer culture that puts these

queer Jews at the forefront of Jewish culture in the queer century” (Shneer 2002:63).

They play a critical role in ensuring that Judaism does not become “irrelevant.”

The queer-Jewish identity is inherently political and expansive, forcing some of our more conservative and establishmentarian Jewish institutions to rethink what it means to be Jewish, to make space to the incoming waves of involved queer Jews which will continue to grow, and to recognize the essential Jewish value of inclusion and kindness that resides at the core of our religious philosophy. I have chosen in part to listen to the stories of queer Jews specifically because of their cultural relevance during this political moment. Their calls for integration are transformative rather than assimilationist, and they will determine the trajectory of the queer and Jewish future.

These tensions make queer Jews uniquely situated to lead Jewish communities toward change, rather than waiting for those communities to act. As “Jews we have a moral responsibility, borne out of our history to lead cultural change, pursue peace, and seek justice....Thus, we are ‘twice-blessed,’ not just out of pride, but also because of our dual task to lead rather than follow as Jews and queers, to change rather than accept the status quo” (Shneer 2002:5). They are redefining what it means to be Jewish, and what the role of Jewish institutions are and should be.

We have reached a point where these the established Jewish institutions are forced react to the demands of queer Jews. In the San Francisco Bay Area especially, queer Jewish issues are “hot” among mainstream Jewish organizations. Jewish Family and Children’s Services and the Jewish Federation (look these up) have introduced a gay and lesbian task force. The largest conservative synagogue of San Francisco has a LGBTQ committee, the mainstream Chicago

Jewish Federation hired a full-time staff member to develop programming and raise awareness around queer issues, and the Jewish Foundation of Toronto established a Jewish Gay and Lesbian Fund (Shneer 2002:9). LGBTQ Jews have always existed, but only in the past five years have issues specific to queer Jews become part of the agenda from some progressive mainstream Jewish institutions. David Shneer, prominent Jewish and queer studies scholar, predicts “a time in the not too far distant future when every major metropolitan Jewish community will have a queer Jewish resources program to offer programming, education, and technical assistance to actively end homophobia within Jewish communities and affirm the presence and importance of queers” (Shneer 2002:10).

There is a new recognition that queer Jews are at the forefront of Jewish and American change. According to Shneer, the “assimilationist anxiety of the twentieth century is out, and culture and sexual pride in the twenty-first is in, and this heady mixture has been very good for Jewish culture” (Shneer 2007:58). This new “post-assimilationist queer Jewish culture” brings together politics and entertainment and morality and aesthetics in ways that place queer Jewish culture in the vanguard of American culture more broadly. The most significant difference, however, lies between the previous generation of lefty queer Jewishness, which used aesthetics and ethics to be part of American leftist culture, the new queer Jewish culture now uses these same elements to critique and advance Jewish culture (Shneer 2007:59). Shneer documents various cultural markers that have finally brought together queer aesthetic and Jewish moral sensibilities. In the 2000’s queer Jews started to proudly engage their own culture, bringing together both queer aesthetics and Jewish moral criticism to create some of the most “interesting edges of Jewish culture precisely because they are queer and Jewish simultaneously” (Shneer

2007:59). “Charming Hostess,” for example is a band that makes Ladino and Balkan Jewish, music that is typically excluded from Ashkenazi, or Eastern European spaces, more visible by putting it on stage in a variety of large venues. The all-female band Isle of Klezbos, is a group of Lesbian Klezmer musicians who entertain at *Bar/Bat/B’nei Mitzvah* events, the Jewish coming of age ceremony that happens around age twelve or thirteen. The term *B’nei Mitzvah* is becoming increasingly popular to use because it is the plural and gender neutral version. An outgrowth of “Metropolitan Klezmer,” one of the most popular of its kind in New York, follows a relatively new tradition in Jewish culture in which queer Jews turn to Yiddish culture as a route into and means of criticizing Jewish culture. The group fused together queer politics and Jewish music: a potent mix “that made klezmer the then trendy...Jewish art form that aroused the ears of young and old” (Shneer 2007:60). David Shneer refers to a third group that integrates both Jewish and queer culture to demonstrate its significance in those communities at large called “Storahtelling.” Its mission is to “bring traditional Jewish texts to life through performance, translation” and queerness (Shneer 2007:60). The productions include more conventional Torah portion interpretations to very “sexy Jewish performance art.”

### *Liturgical Changes*

Queer Jewish folks are also playing an increasingly significant role in transforming various Jewish liturgy and religious practices that demonstrate acceptance and inclusion of queer identities. Rebecca Alpert’s 1977 *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition* expanded traditional Jewish practices (which forbids eating leavened bread on Passover) radically engaged Jewish text, tradition, and lesbian experience and

broke new ground in Jewish practices across denominations. The author presents a number of approaches for dealing with traditional laws on homosexuality. Suggesting that we interpret them in the context of our own time and place, we can try to “wrest new meaning from them.” While some posit that change results from a world that is getting worse, others believe that religious change can and should be made based on progress, not decline. For example, the *Sotah Ritual*, during which a man suspects his wife of adultery and subjects her to a public ordeal has been notoriously difficult for contemporary readers. The unequal application of the ritual to women and not men, the lack of due process, and the physical and emotional pain combine to make this passage a challenging place in which to find meaning. This ritual, however, has not been practiced for at least two thousand years. The very discontinuation of this practice implies change in “Jewish Tradition.” Change can be positive and holy if it means living in accordance with our new understandings of gender and sexual identity.

Jewish queer people continue to create changes that enable Jews to live a more open and diverse existence, changes that should be celebrated rather than lamented. One powerful example of the way queer people are expanding Jewishness is through the establishment of the S’vara movement: “A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva [that] builds and activates a radically inclusive and interpretive community of people who seek to restore Judaism to its radical roots so that it might once again be a voice of courageous moral conscience in the world and reflect the truest possible vision of what it means to be human.” S’vara is named after a 2,000 year-old Talmudic term which means “moral intuition;” the only source of law that the Rabbis agree can overturn the Torah itself. The work of this institutions follows in the footsteps of Chazal, the more progressive Rabbis of the Talmud who were willing to make radical moves, sometimes uprooting

the Torah itself, to make Judaism more meaningful, compassionate, and responsive to the wellbeing of all people.

The S'vara program creates a space in which people historically excluded from the tradition can engage in intimate and intense conversation with it and with one another. The commitment to uplifting the “Queer experience” means that people who have experienced Judaism as an outsider have the opportunity of gaining the necessary text skills and Jewish legal expertise to “enrich, push, and define the evolving Jewish tradition” (S'vara website). Since its founding, thousands of students have learned at Svara.

Perhaps the most visible evidence of queer Jews transforming Jewish liturgical interpretations is in the overwhelming presence of queer Jews in the rabbinate. The book *Lesbian Rabbis* documents the rise of women and then lesbians into this profession that, for thousands of years had been off limits both to women and to open queers. We can see the effects of this phenomenon occurring across denominations. The Reform Jewish Movement's seminary, Hebrew Union College, admitted its first trans student in 2004 and has since ordained many more. Orthodox feminist filmmaker, Sandy Simcha Dubowski, produced *Trembling Before God* and has made visible the presence of queer Orthodox Jews.

Both the American and Jewish global landscape are changing as queer Jews are being offered more space to alter archaic and homophobic readings of the Torah and are making significant strides towards creating more socially just and authentic ways of doing Judaism. Listening to the stories of the interview subjects, the ways in which they are figuring out how to navigate their Jewishness and queerness in the context of white America, are not only brilliant and inspiring, but represent a “prophetic minority” that is holding up the Jewish institution,

ensuring that the tradition is alive and growing, and will continue to do so as long as people populate this earth.

*Conclusion:*

Jewish life has the “potential to be conceived not as unique in its otherness, but deeply entrenched in queer life” (Shneer 2002:8). Queerness enables healing, resistance, and innovation within the Jewish community. Evelyn torton Beck asserted in her seminal book *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* that Jewish lesbians are “doubly other,” and as a result they function as the “prophetic minority within Judaism” (Shneer 2002:3). Queer Jews’ calls for integration are transformative rather than assimilationist and forces us to question what it means to be a Jew. They are at the forefront of redefining conceptions of family relationships and community. For queer Jews creating family involves both “adopting the social paradigms but moving beyond the mere assimilation of bourgeois definitions by undermining the assumption that family is determined solely via biology” (Shneer 2002:8). The passing down of Jewish identity relies on the biological family structure; if queer Jews are changing the way we create families, they must also be altering the parameters we use to define Jewishness. I do not think I can go so far as to claim that because the heterosexual family structure has violent implications for all those who do not neatly fit, Judaism should no longer be transmitted through biological family because I recognize the power of connecting with someone based on more than shared values, but through a shared ancestry, history, and way of life. It is difficult to decide where to draw the lines of identity; however, I believe that we have much work to do before fully realizing the liberatory potential of integrating queerness into Jewish theology, practices, and, values.

## CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A QUEER, JEWISH FUTURE

I gently close my eyes and sway to the rhythm of the melodic tones that send a ticklish vibration down my spine. I let the words of the prayer carry me to a place of peace, belongingness, and freedom.

“We are loved by an unending love.  
 We are embraced by arms that find us even when we are hidden from ourselves.  
 We are touched by fingers that soothe us even when we are too proud for soothing.  
 We are counseled by voices that guide us even when we are too embittered to hear.  
 We are loved by an unending love. We are supported by hands that uplift us even in the midst of a fall.  
 We are urged on by eyes that meet us even when we are too weak for meeting. We are loved by an unending love.  
 Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled, Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices; Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles.  
 We are loved by an unending love.”  
 --Rabbi Rami Shapiro

This is the song that my transmasculine friend Ezra chose to begin his *Bar Mitzvah* service with. A *Bar Mitzvah* is the religious initiation ceremony of a Jewish boy that marks his transition from childhood to adulthood. He too wanted to celebrate his transition into his Jewish manhood and enlisted my support in preparing for the day. He asked if I could be the one to recite the blessings of the Jewish naming ceremony, typically done after the birth of a baby, as a way to celebrate the beginning of his life journey as a self that is authentic and whole. I was touched by this request but reminded him that I don't have the training to do that; I'm not a *Rabbi*. He didn't care--he just needed someone who could read the Hebrew well enough (and someone he loved and trusted) to perform the ritual.

The night before, we ran through the service together, perfecting the pronunciation of the Hebrew prayers and mapping out the appropriate spaces to insert personal anecdotes and poems. We reviewed the structure once more to ensure that the hodgepodge of poems, stories, and New Agey songs which constituted the bulk of our service, would still somewhat resemble and maintain the integrity of the conventional *Bar Mitzvah* ceremony.

When we awoke the next morning an excited energy permeated the air. The service took place in the *Bayit*, the center for Jewish life on Vassar's campus. Guests slowly trickled in. Students and faculty alike showed up. The Director of Office of Community-Engaged Learning was among the first to arrive followed Vassar as well as non-Vassar friends. There were so many different types of people, strangers uniting in community to express their shared love for their dear friend.

Ezra started the service, and a deep serenity transcended upon us. I remember how beautiful the lighting was that day. It was slightly overcast outside, but rays of sun pierced through the clouds and enveloped the room in a sort of mystical fog.

The service was magical and profound and liberatory. And also very queer. During the naming ceremony, Ezra's mom recited a speech in his honor. As she placed her hands on his head, tears began to stream down her face. A letting go of past wounds, a cherished healing between mother and child was happening. I felt deeply, in that moment, the liberatory lives we can lead when we wholly enmesh our queer and Jewish identities.

## Appendix A.

### Interview Questions for the Daughters and Mothers:<sup>2</sup>

#### Category One: Mother-related Questions

- 1) What is the first memory you have of your mom?
- 2) Tell me about your mom's mom.
- 3) What is your mom's relationship like with your dad?
- 4) Does your mom treat your siblings differently?
- 5) Where did you grow up?
- 6) What is your relationship like with your mom?

#### Category Two: Jewish-related Questions

- 1) What is your mom's relationship to Jewishness?
- 2) How do you see any of this as connected to your relationship with her?
- 3) What was your Jewish upbringing?
- 4) Can you tell me about your Jewish journey?
- 5) What is your relationship like with your Jewishness?
- 6) What is your connection to the Holocaust?
- 7) Does your family have a history of mental health?

#### Category Three: Queer-related Questions

- 1) Can you talk about your relationship to queerness?
- 2) What was the coming out process like?
- 3) How do you think your queerness has affected your relationship with your mother?

#### Category Four: Mother/Jewish/Queer-related Questions

- 1) What is the connection between your queer and Jewish identities like?
- 2) How do you think your mom's relationship to her Jewish identity has influenced the way she relates to your queerness?
- 3) What is the role of:
  - a) The Jewish continuity trope

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<sup>2</sup> I did not strictly adhere to these interview questions. They mostly served as guidelines to help me organically move the conversation towards a direction that was generative; some questions were not relevant to the person I was speaking with. I relied on my interpersonal skills to tailor the content, type, and number of questions I asked, to match the interviewee's comfort level with sharing such personal information with me. Additionally, I relied on these same questions and themes to inform my conversations with the two mothers I interviewed. I excluded the queer-related questions and we spent more time discussing their relationship with their daughters, as well as their relationship with their own mothers.

## b) Jewish gender roles/expectations

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