

SAME-SEX DESIRE AND JEWISH COMMUNITY: QUEERING BIBLICAL TEXTS IN CANADIAN AND AMERICAN JEWISH LITERATURE

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It has been asserted that queer subjectivity can be realized in identifications with certain images of mainstream culture, sometimes to a far greater extent than in “conventional” forms of gay life (Sedgwick, *Tendencies*; Butler, *Bodies*; Munoz; Halperin, *How*). These nonlinear, nonnormative identifications and disidentifications participate in the formation of multiple, hybrid identities through working on, with, and against a dominant cultural form (Munoz 3-8, 30). This essay looks at Jewish queer narratives in their relation to mainstream Jewish culture, as examples of contemporary forms of Jewish literary imagination in North America. I am interested in exploring the ways Jewish queer culture workers read a queer valence that is already present within Jewish intellectual life in its traditional form—potentially or in actuality in individual experiences, and imaginatively, as a rhetorical trope in some modes of literature. 249

The queer possibilities in reading classical Jewish texts could be better understood in light of the Foucauldian theory of polyvalence of discourse, developed in *The History of Sexuality*. This theory regards discourse as never unified or fixed, but rather as “a series of discontinuous segments, not uniform nor stable, multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (Foucault 100). In this sense, the queer valence present in classical Jewish texts and in traditional patterns of studying these texts does not constitute “homosexualism” as a uniform narrative or as a coherent element of a larger narrative; rather, this “queer kernel” could name a play of multiple “discontinuous segments” that lend themselves to certain modes of reception.

I will discuss two works of historical fiction that portray male same-sex eroticism in relation to Judaism and Jewish community. Each of these two novels revisits the conventional tropes of Ashkenazic Jewish identity, employing symbolic images of the

Jewish past and Jewish intellectual life. In particular, they construct the relationship between mainstream Jewish community and queerness as a relationship between two biblical sources, the legal material of Leviticus and the narratives of David and Jonathan in the books of Samuel.

250 *Miriam*, the second book of the *Rashi's Daughters* trilogy, was published in 2007 by Maggie Anton, an American, female, straight-identified author. This novel is centered on the image of medieval Jewish scholarship in France. It is set in the home and yeshivah (rabbinical educational institution) of Rashi, "father" of Jewish traditional commentaries on the Bible and the Talmud, who lived in Troyes in the eleventh century. Judah, a main protagonist in the second book of *Rashi's Daughters*, is married to Miriam, a daughter of Rashi. He is the major assistant of Rashi in the yeshivah and a co-author of Rashi's Talmud commentaries. Throughout the novel, Judah struggles with his sexual attractions to his male study partners and students. Anton's queer character is a Jewish scholar and teacher, situated at the very heart of Jewish intellectual life. The other novel, *Mourning and Celebration*, was published in 2009 by K. David Brody, a Canadian, male, gay-identified author. The protagonist, Yankl, who later changes his name to Jonathan, is a Hasidic Jew who lives in a nineteenth-century Polish town, a *shtetl*. As a teenage yeshivah student, Yankl discovers his strong erotic attraction to men, particularly to his study partners. Brody, too, has chosen a traditional image of the Jewish intellectual, the yeshivah student, in his representation of a queer Jewish man.

THE DISCOURSES OF "LEVITICUS" AND "DAVID AND JONATHAN"

Both of these novels represent male same-sex desire in terms of the interplay of two competing discourses: "the sexual," phallocentric discourse, associated with the prohibition of a sexual act between males in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13,¹ and "the affective" discourse, associated with the story of romantic friendship between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18-20, 23 and 2 Samuel 1.² These discourses denote the use of the biblical sets of texts in contemporary Jewish culture, which differs significantly from the meanings of these biblical texts in their context of production, in the ancient Israelite and Near Eastern cultures.³ In Jewish traditional biblical exegesis and in modern critical biblical scholarship, the prohibited act in Leviticus (*mishkevei islah*, "lyings of woman") is commonly understood as anal penetration.⁴ In the Hebrew Bible, this sexual act has no connection to sexual desire; rather, it functions as performance of gender roles that serve as social and theological categories attached to power distribution in a patriarchal, phallocentric context (Biale; Boyarin, "Are There Any Jews"; Ehrlich).⁵ In modern Jewish culture, the Levitical law has been extended to any forms of same-sex sexual relations and feelings,⁶ representing the anti-homo-

sexual attitudes of traditionalist Jewish communities at large.⁷ The contemporary “Leviticus” discourse signifies a “literalization of anatomy” (Butler, *Gender* 97), a way of understanding male same-sex sexuality in phallogocentric terms. In contrast, the “David and Jonathan” discourse emphasizes the themes of love and non-phallic homoeroticism (“more wonderful than the love of women”).⁸ It exemplifies and complicates the homosocial structures of same-sex desire.⁹ In the Hebrew Bible, the narratives of David and Jonathan depict homosocial bonds between males in a heroic couple in a military/political context with strong homoerotic imagery. In modern Jewish (and Western) culture, these narratives have generated a discourse of male queer desire that is centered on intimacy, romantic love, affection, commitment, and, to a lesser degree, erotic aestheticism.¹⁰ In contemporary Jewish queer culture, the story of David and Jonathan largely serves as a major biblical counter-tradition to the Leviticus laws.¹¹ The modern “David and Jonathan” discourse thus decenters phallic masculinity and signifies an alternative conceptualization of homo-male desire as affective and polymorphous.

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In contemporary traditionalist Judaism¹² in North America, the “Leviticus” discourse, which synthesizes the Jewish interpretive tradition and modern western discourses of homosexuality, represents a narrative of the cultural conflict between “Jewishness” (“the sacred,” the “Torah”) and “Queerness” (“the profane,” “anti-Torah”).¹³ I suggest that this binary narrative in Jewish traditionalism is related to the New Right and New Christian Right backlash of the post-Stonewall era in the 1970s.¹⁴ For example, in his writings of that period, Moshe Feinstein, viewed as the greatest legal authority, or *posek*, in Orthodox circles of North America, approaches same-sex sexual relations in new theological, rather than traditional legal, terms. Feinstein defines same-sex desire not as sexual desire but as an ultimate form of heresy, a desire to rebel against God (*Iggerot Moshe*, Orach Hayyim 4:115). This conceptualization persists in the twenty-first century. For instance, the “Declaration on the Torah Approach to Homosexuality,” issued in 2011 by a group of influential Ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox leaders, equates same-sex desire with “negative secular influences” and thus deems it inherently anti-Jewish (or, rather, anti-Torah). Some Jewish anthropologists argue that the traditionalist Jewish community, with its central religious value of intellectual pursuits, such as studying biblical and rabbinic texts, as well as shared history, stands in sharp contrast to the sexual scenes of gay life. The cultural discourse of home for queer Jews is thus marked by the conflict between “the yeshiva” and “the bar,” study and play, tension between Jewish text culture and gay sex culture (Shokeid 28, 40-41).

Many contemporary Jewish queer authors, I argue, develop strategies of resistance to this binary discourse. The writers that I discuss in this essay present an interplay of the discourses of “Leviticus” and “David and Jonathan” as alternative ways to conceptualize male queer desire, in particular, through affective and eroticizing modes of reading the Jewish past and Jewish intellectual life. They adopt the binary discourse of “Leviticus”/“David-Jonathan,” but assign new meanings to each of the

two biblical sets of texts, or they shift the discursive lines between them. They often present “David/Jonathan” discourse as a way to counter the “Leviticus” discourse, to contest the oppressive force of the latter by means of the affirmative possibilities of the former.

Mourning and Celebration presents the “Leviticus” and the “David/Jonathan” discourses as antagonistic, with the longing to escape from the perceived social reality of the former to the imaginary image of the latter. The central theme of Brody’s novel is moving away: from “mourning” queer desire, from the constraints of “the past,” from nineteenth-century Europe, and from Yankl’s family and community, all represented by the “Leviticus” discourse, toward “celebration” of gay desire, toward the freedom of “the present,” Canada of the new millennium, and the personal gay Judaism of the narrator, all represented by the “David/Jonathan” discourse. In contrast, in Maggie Anton’s novel, the phallogentric discourse of “Leviticus” and the romantic, polymorphous eroticism of “David and Jonathan” produce and reproduce each other. The homosocial aspect of traditional Jewish life, along with the focus on anal penetration in Jewish law dealing with same-sex issues, allows for a greater acceptance of other same-sex practices and same-sex desire *per se* in traditional Judaism.¹⁵ Whereas Brody’s novel constructs the relationship between mainstream Jewish community and queer Jews in terms of conflict and separation, Anton’s book presents possibilities for integration and co-existence. In both texts, the continuum of Jewish queer life manifests itself in the images of Jewish learning, which largely represent “David and Jonathan” discourse,¹⁶ in contradistinction to, or in a creative tension with, the “Leviticus” discourse.

THE INTERPLAY OF “LEVITICUS” AND “DAVID AND JONATHAN”: AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF JEWISH QUEER LIFE IN MAGGIE ANTON’S *MIRIAM*

Although dichotomized between “the affective” and “the sexual,” the “Leviticus” and the “David and Jonathan,” the queer desire as such is “normalized” in Anton’s book. Anton represents queer Jewish existence through a set of binaries—such as “the Good Desire” (*yetzer*¹⁷ *tov*)/“the Evil Desire” (*yetzer hara*), Paris/Troyes, “playing the game”/Torah study, and tavern/yeshivah—that are often disrupted and reframed as a continuum of coexisting discourses. This continuum manifests itself first and foremost in the images of Jewish learning.

For the mainstream Jewish community in *Miriam*, intimacy between men is an inherent and organic element of Talmud study, as long as this intimacy does not cross the legal line, meaning that the partners do not engage in prohibited sexual practices. Even then, anal sex between men is treated as an unexceptional transgression of Jewish law, without any assumptions about the transgressor’s personality or

morality. Anton's Rashi acknowledges the normality of same-sex desire, especially in the context of Jewish learning. The discovery of the romantic relationship between Judah and a yeshivah student does not surprise Rashi, nor does it anger him ("his teacher was neither angry nor ashamed of him, and even considered him capable of greatness," Anton 415). In his response, same-sex desire is "common" and is inherent in the traditional homosocial settings of Jewish learning, "with the intimacy of a study-partner relationship" (Anton 416). Their sexual desires and practices do not drive the queer characters outside of Jewish tradition and Jewish community.

Anton's book represents same-sex desire in terms of the rabbinic binary opposition of "the Evil Desire" (*yetser hara*) and the "Good Desire" (*yetser tov*).¹⁸ In the novel, the former signifies sexual drive ("My *yetzer hara* desires men more than women," Anton 343) and the latter, passion for Torah study. At the beginning of the novel, Judah, a young, promising Jewish scholar, identifies with the "Good Desire" (*yetzer tov*), the desire for Torah study, whereas he attributes "the Evil Desire" (*yetzer hara*) to his older, promiscuous brother, Azariel: "I guess when the Creator handed out the *yetzers* in our family, you got the *yetzer hara* and I got the *yetzer tov*. [...] My passion is for Torah study, not seducing women" (Anton 32-32). In the context of Judah's queer-ness, this binary opposition of two competing types of desire, the dichotomy of Torah study and sexuality, sets the distinction between the sexual discourse of "Leviticus" and the affective discourse of "David and Jonathan."

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The "Good Desire" for Torah study, however, generates and proliferates "the Evil Desire" for sexual pleasure: as Miriam points out to Judah in response to his coming out to her, "I know Talmud study excites you" (422). Judah's wife asserts that traditional Jewish scholarship is highly sexualized; Talmud study *per se* can arouse sexual desire. Moreover, these two drives are in fact one: as the reader discovers, Judah's passion for Torah signifies his desire for his male study partners. The fine lines between the sexual and the affective, between the homosocial and the "homosexual," and between the normative and the transgressive are blurred: Judah admits that "relationships between study partners ought to be close ones, and sometimes a man's *yetzer* is too strong to control" (Anton 293). The expected and approved closeness, intimacy of study partnership includes an expected and disapproved sexual desire (*yetzer*). Queer desire and Jewish scholarship are thus two forms of one desire that are intimately intertwined and inform one another.¹⁹

In the following episode, two queer Jewish boys, Judah and Daniel, who are study partners and who are in love with each other, are studying a rabbinic text in Bava Metsia 84a discussing the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan, a Talmudic rabbi: "It was then that Daniel sighed and, not looking directly at Judah, said, 'Rav Yohanan may have been more learned than you, but I doubt he was more beautiful than you. [...] 'Rav Yohanan may have been proud of his beauty, but I find it a curse,' Judah confided sadly. 'In Paris the women give me covetous looks, while the men's eyes are like daggers. It's a relief to be back at the yeshiva'" (Anton 35-36). The reader sees the beauty of Judah from the perspective of Daniel, his study partner, similarly to how readers

of the Talmudic narrative see the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan from the perspective of Resh Lakish, his future study partner. Like Rabbi Yohanan, Judah is “beautiful and learned;” he possesses the two key components of the traditional image of the eroticized Jewish scholar. Judah himself identifies with Rabbi Yohanan as the archetypal beautiful male.

Judah’s relief of being “back at the yeshiva,” in his cultural homeland, reaffirms the dichotomy of the sexual, “Levitical” space of the outside gay world of Paris and the desexualized, “David and Jonathan” space of Rashi’s yeshivah in Troyes where Judah teaches, a place of study and refuge from the temptations and dangers of “gay” inns and taverns of the big city. However, the later events of Judah’s life in the novel prove that a study hall is anything but asexual. It is precisely at the yeshivah where his real sexual desires and relationships unfold. Yeshivah is a true queer space for Judah, far more than the taverns and inns of Paris. The yeshivah of Troyes is marked by the complexity of personal relationships in the context of Jewish intellectual pursuits.

254 It represents a distinctively Jewish queer subculture within the Jewish mainstream community.

In a dialogue between Judah and the queer Jewish merchant Reuben, the Talmud study is sexualized and queered and the dichotomy of the two desires is broken: not only do both of these activities disrupt cultural taboos, but they are fueled by the same transgressive, erotic desire, *yetzer hara*: “‘Torah study keeps me too busy to indulge my *yetzer hara*,’ Judah replied. There was no one sitting nearby, but he lowered his voice and added, ‘Though some here might say that the way I study Talmud is worse than playing the game’” (Anton 313). Like queer sexual practices, Jewish scholarship can be transgressive and remain “in the closet.” Anton uses “playing the game” as a medieval term for “sex with other men,” which is forbidden in the traditional Jewish and Christian discourses (470). Like sex between men, Rashi’s Talmud commentary is transgressive in the eyes of the Jewish society of his time, and thus requires secrecy (“discretion”). The image of the “scholarly closet” establishes another link between queer desire and Jewish learning. The intellectual process of innovative engagement with the classical Jewish texts (“the way I study Talmud”) parallels sexual acts between men (“playing the game”). The scholarly queerness of Rashi’s commentaries (asking new questions about the traditional texts) is regarded by Rashi’s thirteenth-century contemporaries as more transgressive than sex between men (“some here might say that the way I study Talmud is worse than playing the game”); and yet, in historical perspective, Rashi’s commentaries become the core of normative traditional Judaism. The continuum of queerness in Anton’s novel thus points to changes and new possibilities for inclusion.

Anton imagines a thriving queer male urban subculture in medieval Europe, including traditional Jewish communities. Queer experience here is an inseparable part of the social fabric, communal life, and religious institutions. In this imagined Jewish past, the gay and the Jewish belong to different realms: there are taverns, an imagined medieval analogy of modern gay bars, and there is the yeshivah, a place

for studying Jewish texts. For example, to “consummate” their love, Judah and his student Aaron make arrangements to meet in Paris:

“The city is so huge that almost no one will know you, and nobody knows me there at all, so we’ll be free to do whatever we want. [...] There’s an inn outside the Jewish Quarter called Jacques’ Watering Hole.” Aaron’s breathing was heavy. “Leave word for me there.” Judah began to laugh. “What’s so funny?” “All those taverns and inns for men who play the game; I just realized why they’re all called so-and-so’s cavern or cave or hole.” Judah continued to chuckle. “That’s how the Ganymedes find each other.” (428)

Paris and Troyes, tavern and yeshivah, represent two types of queer spaces, two possibilities of sexual relationships between men, two versions of Jewish queer male culture. Paris is full of “taverns and inns for men who play the game,” the places where queer men can find each other. It is the ultimate symbolic space of male queer desire and same-sex sexual culture, a place of secrecy and freedom all at once. Paris signifies escape into the larger “gay world,” the sexual and romantic possibilities that are outside the Jewish community and not yet actualized, or perhaps not capable of actualization. The decision of Judah and Aaron to meet in Paris represents a rebellious break with Jewish tradition, one that will permit the expression of a sexual desire that is free from Jewish religious restraints.

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The “gay” taverns, however, exist not only in Paris, but in Troyes, too, in close proximity to the yeshivah. Moreover, the boundaries between the tavern and the yeshivah, between the gay world and the Jewish community, are often blurred, as evident in the following dialogue between Judah and his student Shmuli: “Shmuli’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. ‘But he said you spend all your time at that tavern where men go if they want to do *mishkav zachur*.’ ‘Josef’s Grotto isn’t...that kind of tavern.’ Judah couldn’t bring himself to say the word. ‘Scholars go there to study in peace and quiet’” (Anton 43). The sexualized queer space, places where men meet other men for sex (“that tavern where men go if they want to do *mishkav zachur*,” a rabbinic term for the proscribed sexual intercourse between men) is at the same time a place for Jewish learning and scholarship (“scholars go there to study in peace and quiet”). The “gay bar” and the Jewish “study hall” are in fact one and the same.

In Anton’s novel, sexual practices and desires are in creative tension, which shapes the cultural settings of the novel and the experiences of the characters. Anton locates this tension within Jewish society rather than presenting it as a conflict between Jewish and “gay” cultures. The “sex/desire” dichotomy becomes a complex relationship between Jewish “popular sex culture” (the random sexual connections in the inns and taverns) and the sexuality of the intellectual elite. “Playing the game” turns from a designation of male-male anal sex to a cultural symbol of the “inns and taverns” and their patrons (“merchants”), which corresponds to the contemporary gay sexual culture of clubs, bars, and bathhouses. The opposite of this subculture is the eroticism of scholarship, the strong intimate bonds that arise among study partners or students and teachers in the process of their intellectual pursuits. Anton contrasts the “inns and taverns” to queer sexual desires and acts that are linked to religion, as

in the case of *hevruta*, the study partnership. Yeshivah represents not an anti-queer space, but a different kind of queer space. Judah's same-sex sexual desires and practices are closely linked to his Jewish scholarship. The link between same-sex desires and the study of Jewish classical texts places this desire at the very heart of Jewish religion and culture. The relationship between these two sectors of queer life, the tavern and the yeshivah, is, however, ambivalent. The two may overlap. The scholars often find themselves in the inns and taverns. The relationships between scholars take many forms and are rarely asexual. In turn, the merchants and the patrons of the inns and taverns are learned Jews who engage in intellectual pursuits as well. The sexual relationships between the merchants are not always random; sometimes they form long-lasting personal bonds.

256 Queering the study hall and traditional Jewish scholarship is a major representational trope of male queer desire in Anton's novel. For example, when Judah reveals to Aaron the work of writing the commentaries on the Talmud in which he and his father-in-law Rashi engage, Aaron makes a connection between this intellectual activity and the love relationship between himself and Judah: "'This is truly sharing secrets of Torah,' Aaron exclaimed when he saw the extent of Salomon's *kuntres*. 'Promise me that when I finally have to leave Troyes, I can take a copy with me so I'll never forget my learning.' Aaron gazed up at Judah and added, 'Or you.' Judah's spirits soared. 'We will harness our passion for each other and use it for Torah study'" (Anton 402-03). The intellectual sharing "secrets of Torah" between two men in love parallels the anticipation of the sexual "sharing the passion" between them later in the novel (Anton 428). The line between the study partnership and the romantic-erotic relationship is blurred to the extent that the learning and the lover are equated. To Aaron, a copy of the Torah commentaries serves as a symbol of his lover, representing both the scholarship and the love between the scholars: "I'll never forget my learning...or you." A copy of Judah's scholarly work becomes a symbol of his romantic and erotic bonds with Aaron, similar to the way Jonathan's royal clothes and weaponry become symbolic gifts that signify Jonathan's love relationship with David in Tanakh: "Jonathan and David made a pact, because [Jonathan] loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the cloak and tunic he was wearing and gave them to David, together with his sword, bow and belt" (1 Samuel 18:1-4). In a similar fashion, Talmud study for Judah signifies his connection to his male lover: "'I'll never forget Aaron then,' he whispered as the enormity of this knowledge sunk in. 'Not as long as I study Talmud'" (Anton 453).

The culturally approved homosocial affective bonds of the "David and Jonathan" model are intertwined with the tropes of control, danger, and secrecy that shape the sexual "Leviticus" discourse: "Once the Cold Fair ended, despite his dread of discovery, he was increasingly tempted to put his arm around Aaron's shoulders or to press his thigh against Aaron's while they were studying. And Aaron was finding excuses for his body to touch Judah's. More and more, Judah caught himself gazing at Aaron's face instead of concentrating on the text before them" (Anton 414). The process of

studying is sexualized, with the physical expressions of affection and acts that bear strong erotic and sexual meanings (gazing, touching, embracing, pressing), similar to the erotic images of *hevruta* in Brody's novel.

ESCAPING "LEVITICUS" FOR "DAVID AND JONATHAN": A SEPARATIONIST MODEL OF QUEER JEWISH LIFE IN K. DAVID BRODY'S *MOURNING AND CELEBRATION*

In Brody's *Mourning and Celebration*, when Yankl "comes out" to his first study partner Eliyohu, with whom he is infatuated, the latter responds with a reference to Leviticus: "'I can't help it, but I have feelings for men,' said Yankl. Eliyohu stood up. 'You can't. You mustn't. It's a sin. It's an abomination. It says so in the Torah'" (Brody 28-29). In contrast to the biblical law, the conversation here concerns sexual feelings, not sexual acts. Eliyohu's reference to the Torah and the centrality of the term "abom-
ination" in his response represent the popular sentiments of modern western society rather than the biblical text or the Jewish legal tradition, both of which discuss particular sexual practices and never sexual feelings. In a similar way, the rabbi of the town, Rabbi Levy, and Yankl's parents discuss the boy's personality, rather than his sexual behaviour, debating Yankl's essential "immorality" and its alleged threat to society: "'Two young men, from good families pursuing immorality...what an example to set for the innocent young!' Mrs. Bradawka came out of her shock. 'He's always been such a good boy. Immoral? I cannot imagine my Yankl being immoral.' The rabbi bristled. 'It is an abomination. The Torah states that it is an abomination!'" (Brody 81). Both Eliyohu and Rabbi Levi conceptualize same-sex desire in terms of modern interpretations of Leviticus, employing the trope of "abomination" associated with "immorality." It is noteworthy that they use the generic term "Torah" rather than a more specific reference to the book of Leviticus.²⁰ In this construction, the legal code of Leviticus represents the entire biblical tradition and becomes a cultural symbol of Judaism as a whole. Leviticus thus signifies the mainstream Jewish community in Brody's novel.

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Brody depicts the persecution of the gay teenager as an escalating set of attempts by the community to protect itself against queer desire, which the members of the community perceive as a major threat to their Jewish values. When the rabbi decides to excommunicate Yankl, he speaks of the danger that Yankl presents to all Jewish communities in the world: "we must ensure that he has no power to poison the life of anyone else in any community he finds himself" (175). The reason for Yankl's excommunication is ideological; it is the cultural confrontation between Judaism and "gayness": "he rejected our way of life" (175). Rabbi Levi views same-sex desire and Jewish community as the opposite poles of the conceptual universe. Same-sex attraction drives one outside of the Jewish world. Contrary to Jewish religious law,

the rabbi does not differentiate between sexual acts and sexual desires. The rabbi shifts the category of “abomination” from the act to desire, adding a moral judgment to the legal issue. It is the desire, “an evil temptation, an abomination” (175), that creates the rationale for the rabbi’s decision to excommunicate Yankl. The moral panic of Rabbi Levi echoes the dominant rhetoric of Jewish conservative religious leaders of the 1970s such as Moshe Feinstein, which in some Orthodox circles persists today, as discussed above. The dialogue of Rabbi Levi and Yankl’s father Mendl—“he has shunned us, and he has shamed us”; “my family...our name...the disgrace” (132)—echoes Feinstein’s rhetoric of “obscurity, shame, and disgrace” in reference to same-sex sexual desire (*Iggerot Moshe*, Orach Hayyim 4:115). The moral discourse here is incorporated into a theological framework. According to the latter, Brody constructs the conflict between Yankl and his community as tension between two philosophical and religious systems, Orthodox ideology and “homosexuality.” Consequently, Yankl’s punishment is excommunication (*herem*), an extreme measure

258 that had been traditionally reserved in Jewish communities for an *apikores* (heretic), one who rejects dominant Jewish doctrines and practices. Brody’s representation of the past reflects modern western sensibilities that sometimes construct queer desire as heretical desire, a discourse that could be traced to medieval Christian theology, the writings of Peter Damian in particular (Jordan 29, 44).

In contrast to the mainstream Jewish identification of queer desire with Levitical law, the queer Jewish subjects, Yankl and his new study partner Velvel, identify with the biblical figures of David and Jonathan (46-47). In a similar fashion, Yankl responds to the homophobia of his community by framing his identity within the “David and Jonathan” narrative:

But he wanted even more radical break with his past identity. He found it in his name. He would change his name. [...] The name immediately flashed before his eyes: Jonathan. Jonathan, the biblical character whom the future King David had loved with “a love greater than that for a woman.” Jonathan who had loved David, the youth with a ruddy complexion like Velvel’s, “as his own soul.” From now on, he would be known as Jonathan. (Brody 125)

Yankl’s change of name to Jonathan, “who loved David,” signifies a “radical break” with his community. The change of name represents his attempt to escape from the “Leviticus” discourse, from his community that cannot understand him and from his own, closeted “Yankl” self, threatened, struggling, and exiled, to the “David-Jonathan” discourse, to the idyllic home of fulfilled desire and mutual love. In his escape from and break with Jewish society, Yankl uses Jewish texts and rituals to resist the oppressive values of the mainstream Jewish society, to separate himself from the community, and to create a new identity. Yankl’s change of identity and the simultaneous escape from his inherited community evokes the modern concept of coming out. However, Yankl’s act suggests secrecy and employs coded language: only Yankl/Jonathan knows the true meaning of his new name. Like queer Jews, the Hebrew Bible as a gay literary canon is invisible in the traditionalist Jewish com-

munity. More so, even within the “David/Jonathan” narrative, he identifies not with the future King David, but with the Prince Jonathan, whose love for David puts him in conflict with his father and who is doomed to lose his kingdom and his very life.

Not only does Brody’s protagonist counter the “Leviticus” discourse with the “David and Jonathan” discourse, but he also assigns a new meaning to the Leviticus law, as the following example demonstrates. Yankl’s first sexual experience with Avrum, another Hassidic man, becomes traumatic when Yankl realizes that his partner perceives their encounter as nothing more than a random hookup: “This was to be his destiny. Furtive sex, condemned by the Torah as a forbidden act, ‘an abomination.’ It was all so clear and so completely unfair. [...] He had no more to say to Avrum, but pride prevented him from giving way to the tears of frustration and anger that brimmed up in his eyes” (Brody 24). Yankl applies the Levitical prohibition exclusively to this specific type of same-sex sexual practices, to “bad sex”: it is *furtive* sex that is condemned by the Torah as an “abomination.” Random sexual acts, deprived of emotional attachment and religious context, represent the “trap” into which the mainstream Jewish community forces gay men should they choose to conform to heteronormative values. In contrast, “good sex,” represented by the images of David and Jonathan, is predicated upon shared spirituality and the symbolic framework of Judaism; however, it is situated outside of the mainstream Jewish community. Brody’s representation of “hookup culture” is ambivalent. On the one hand, he places this type of gay sexual culture in radical opposition to traditional Jewish culture. On the other, anonymous sex represents acquiescence to the oppressive values of heteronormative Jewish society. It is both a product and an essential element of mainstream Jewish community. Avrum is married to a woman; he “passes” as a straight and pious man. A random hookup is the only option that mainstream Jewish society leaves to him.

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To Yankl’s Jewish community, the discourse of “Leviticus” represents “the gay,” the “un-Jewish.” To Yankl himself, the discourse of “Leviticus” represents the homophobic mainstream Jewish community, the traditional Judaism “as we know it.” In contrast, the discourse of “David and Jonathan” represents a queer Judaism of the future, one that is non-existent or invisible, a queer Jewish space that yet has to be created. This new queer Judaism is centered on the text and hermeneutical activity. For example, Yankl’s new study partner, Velvel, becomes his lover. In contrast to the rest of Yankl-Jonathan’s relationships, the desire for his partner is framed in the context of Jewish texts and Torah study, through identifications and disidentifications with biblical figures and through the intimate space in *hevruta*, traditional study partnership.²¹ Studying classical Jewish texts together constitutes the core of the lovers’ romantic and sexual bonds.

Even before meeting Velvel, Yankl perceives *chevrusa* with another partner, Eliyohu, as queer space, and the study process as one that realizes queer sensibilities: “Yankl’s *chevrusa*²² was Eliyohu. [...] As Eliyohu grew, he became more attractive. [...] His face was covered in a light blonde down that would soon develop into a

full beard. Every day, Yankl looked forward to seeing him with far more enthusiasm than he had for study. He watched him, swaying gently as he intoned the sacred text of the Talmud” (Brody 11-12). Here, the body is represented as the text that calls for a sexual and intellectual exploration.²³ The study of the classical texts in *hevruta* involves erotic gaze. Brody describes the beauty of Eliyohu, Yankl’s first study partner, through Yankl’s eyes. Studying the Jewish texts and watching the study partner are interrelated acts, sacred and sexual at once. These are two aspects of one process, driven by the same passion. They involve the same acts of looking, studying, and comprehending, and they are accompanied by the same sounds (intoning the “sacred text of the Talmud”) and by the same body movements (swaying).

Yankl’s repeated acts of watching his study partner resemble the instances of Samuel,²⁴ Saul’s courtier,²⁵ and Jonathan²⁶ erotically gazing at David. In the Hebrew Bible, the gaze always produces an immediate effect: it is followed by an act of choosing, sexually, romantically, or politically (“anointing” to be a new king, taking to
 260 serve in the royal court, “liking,” “loving,” or “soul binding”). In *Mourning and Celebration*, the gaze has a value of its own: it parallels the process of learning, or, rather, it is a component of this process.²⁷ It does not require a sexual, affective, or religious act to follow, because it *is*, itself, a sexual-affective-religious act that produces a specific pleasure and meaning.

CONCLUSION

Maggie Anton and David Brody construct two major models of co-existence between queer Jews and the mainstream Jewish community: an attempt of normalization and integration in Anton’s book and a break and separation in Brody’s novel. The biblical texts are used to legitimize each of these models in a Jewish frame of reference, and to differently eroticize the queer Jewish male. In their representation of the binary discourses associated with the legal code of Leviticus and the biblical narratives of David and Jonathan, the two authors attempt to find the cultural spaces “in-between.” The image of “Leviticus” remains the dominant modern construction of the cultural conflict between “Jewishness” and “Queerness,” but the meanings of this conflict keep changing. For mainstream Jewish traditionalists, it stands for “homosexuality,” for queer desire as such, condemned as the ultimate “Otherness.” For queer Jews and their allies, it stands for the traditionalist Jewish community that rejects them.

In contrast to mainstream traditionalist discourses that categorize homosexuality as “anti-Torah,” queer Jewish narratives re-draw the lines between the “sacred” and the “profane,” conceptualizing male same-sex sexual experiences that exist outside of Jewish religious frameworks as profane, and male same-sex sexual experiences in the context of traditional Judaism as sacred. The writers construct a new binary opposition of the “Leviticus” discourse as “profane queerness,” associated with the bars/cruising culture, and the “David/Jonathan” discourse as “sacred queerness” that

requires shared religiosity and that is associated with yeshivah and Jewish learning. Both writers locate the profane “Leviticus” narrative within Jewish community. For Anton, the sacred “David/Jonathan” narrative signifies actuality of Jewish intellectual life and thus remains within Jewish community. For Brody, however, the sacred queerness (the “David/Jonathan” discourse) is only possible outside of Jewish community. It is yet to be constructed on one’s own terms.

Whereas *Mourning and Celebration* presents the “Leviticus” and the “David/Jonathan” discourses as antithetical and contradictory, with the longing to escape from the social reality of the former to the imaginary image of the latter, *Rashi’s Daughters* represents these two discourses in terms of paradox, as both belonging to the social fabric of Jewish life, producing and reproducing each other. Brody’s characters conceptualize queer desire as either pseudo-Levitical “abomination” or romantic love of David and Jonathan, which serves to highlight the theme of ideological conflict between Jewish community and the queer man. In contrast, Anton’s characters treat same-sex feelings and practices as part of social reality, framing them within a rabbinic dichotomy of “the Evil Desire” (*yetser hara*) and the “Good Desire” (*yetser tov*).

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The strategy of utilizing the binary discourses while changing their meanings overlaps with a second move that both authors make: constructing a Jewish queer continuum that disrupts binary definitions of desire (such as sexual/affective, gay/Jewish, yeshivah/bar). Each author does so differently. In Brody’s novel, Jewish queer continuum is found in a personal, separate gay Judaism of the protagonists. Queer space in *Mourning and Celebration* is represented by forest; a wilderness, outside of the city and outside of the Jewish community, is the only place where the lovers can meet. The experience of Jewish queer men is individual and lonely. By contrast, Anton imagines a thriving queer male urban subculture in medieval Europe, including traditional Jewish communities. Where Brody’s Yankl wanders between shtetls in a cycle of homophobic environments, Anton’s Judah finds himself within a queer spatial dichotomy that is represented by the taverns of Paris and the yeshivah of Troyes.

The reworkings of the biblical texts and associated with them discourses in contemporary Jewish gay fiction serves to legitimize Jewish queer experience and to resist the dominant narratives of Jewish-gay dichotomy by representing mainstream traditional Judaism as always already queer in multiple ways. The Jewish tradition, under an umbrella of queerness, is imagined as responsive to the individual sensibilities of contemporary queer subjects who work to make Judaism intelligible for themselves, as well as to make their experience intelligible from a Jewish perspective.

NOTES

1. The Holiness Code of Leviticus is concerned with the issues of ritual purity and holiness understood as

setting up boundaries and separation of categories, establishing a social-theological order (Douglas). Accordingly, the prohibition on the act of anal penetration between males expresses anxiety about confusion of gender roles (Boyarin; Ehrlich; Nissinen; Olyan), procreation (Biale; Eilberg-Schwartz; Milgrom), or social status and male dominance (Carr; Nissinen). Many biblical scholars date Levitical law as contemporaneous to composition of the Samuel narratives (Nissinen) or later (Olyan). Friedman and Milgrom support a pre-exilic date for the Holiness Code and association of H with the reforms of Hezekiah, whereas Levin locates its production in the postexilic period, when the loss of sovereignty and monarchy, centrality of exile in Judean collective memory, and adopting and resisting Persian and Hellenistic cultural models in the Second Temple period may explain the anxieties of the H redactors regarding reproduction, in their interpretations of law and history.

2. The books of Samuel, part of Deuteronomistic history, present an apologetic attempt to justify the reign of the Davidic dynasty or the hope for a restoration of Judean monarchy, by rewriting previous historical accounts (Friedman; Levin; Nissinen; Olyan).
3. Some also identify a third, sacred/spiritual discourse of homoeroticism in the Hebrew Bible (Jennings). I would include in this type of texts the episode of Jacob's wrestling with the angel in Genesis 32:22-31 and marriage metaphors in Ezekiel 16 and 23, as well as the numerous narratives of the relationships between God and human males, such as patriarchs and prophets, throughout the Pentateuch. Some other instances include obscure terms such as *kadesh* ("holy one" or "the consecrated one") and *kelev* ("dog") in Deuteronomy 23:18-19 and elsewhere, which might refer to male sex workers servicing men or women (Sifra, Kodashim 9.14; BT Sanhedrin 54b; see also Milgrom 1788-89; Olyan, "And with a Male" 181, fn4 and 181, fn6).
4. In rabbinic exegesis: Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 54a; Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 26b; Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 83b; Rashi on Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 26b. In medieval Jewish exegesis: Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, Part 3, Chapter 49; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Negative Commandment 350; Avraham Ibn Ezra on Leviticus 18:22; Isaac Luria, *Sha'ar ha-Yehudim* 35d. In critical biblical scholarship, among others: Milgrom; Nissinen; Olyan, "And with a Male"; Walsh.
5. Among other biblical sources that belong to the phallogocentric/penetrative discourse of homo-male relations are the stories of Sodom in Genesis 19:1-13, Levite and his concubine in Judges 19-21, Noah and his sons in Genesis 9:20-25, and Hanun, king of the Ammonites, and David's servants in 2 Samuel 10:1-5.
6. Rabbinic literature debates the necessity of precautionary measures that would expand the biblical laws by creating a "fence around the Torah" (see, for example, the statement "two bachelors shall not sleep under one cloak; but the sages permit it" in Mishnah Kiddushin 4:14). In medieval Jewish society, Maimonides discusses the Jewish legal prohibition of sex between men in the context of his larger ascetic approach to physical pleasure: "For if the thing that is natural should be abhorred except for necessity, all the more should deviations from the natural way and the quest for pleasure alone be eschewed" (*Guide for the Perplexed*, III.49). Very similar to Jewish-Hellenistic thought (for example, Philo) and Christian theology (exemplified by Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, Peter Damian, and Thomas Aquinas), Maimonides is suspicious of all forms of sexual pleasure and recognizes no category of the sexual apart from reproductive. As non-procreative, sex between men (still imagined in terms of anal penetration) is conceptualized as an excess of sexual desire, pleasure for its own sake, and thus an obstacle to spiritual and intellectual perfection. Kosman and Sharbat argue, based on the reading of Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* ("Laws of Forbidden Intercourse," Chapter 21) by Jehiel Michel Epstein, a nineteenth-century Jewish legal authority (*Arukh ha-Shulhan*, "Marriage Law" 20:18), that the "expansive" interpretive approach, which understands the Levitical law as a ban on any kind of "non-heterosexual" practices and unions, predates the "limiting" interpretation that reads the interdiction as exclusively referring to the act of anal penetration between males. Kosman and Sharbat admit, however, that Epstein's formulation is the first one of this kind "since the time of Maimonides" and that it differs from the "limiting" stance of the classical Jewish sources, including the Babylonian Talmud (40 and 45).
7. See, for example, the use of Leviticus in Feinstein and "Declaration" discussed below; see also repre-

sensation of Leviticus in Alpert, "In God's Image," Jaffe, and Raphael, among others.

8. Critical biblical scholarship is divided with regard to the interpretation of the relationship of David and Jonathan. Some read it as sexual or homoerotic (Gunn; Jennings; Olyan; Stone). Others interpret it as non-sexual, but depicted via homoeroticized language and images (Ackerman; Bonjour and Römer; Jobling; Nissinen). Still others understand it as neither sexual nor erotic, but as a form of friendship or political allegiance (Bar-Efrat; Gagnon; McKenzie; Zehnder), which, to some, may include "warm personal intimacy" (McCarter 77). Arguably, the non-phallogocentric discourse of homoeroticism in the Hebrew Bible also includes the Joseph cycle in Genesis, chapters 37-45.
9. On the homosocial continuum and homoerotic desire, see Smith-Rosenberg, who describes "the relationship along the spectrum of human emotions between love, sensuality, and sexuality" (74) in the female homosocial environment in nineteenth-century America, which included emotional and erotic elements, romantic bonds, and physical affection. As well, see Sedgwick's analysis of a continuum between male homosociality and homosexuality in English literature, where the "homosocial," while lacking direct genital contact, is often the potentially erotic (*Between* 1-2, 66).
10. Boswell notes the European Christian use of imagery of David and Jonathan, along with Zeus and Ganymede, in representation of same-sex romantic relationships (as "gay conventions") already in the High Middle Ages, in the eleventh-twelfth centuries (245). With the rise of modern gay and lesbian activism in the second half of the twentieth century, some Christian gay authors, such as Horner, attempted to reclaim biblical sources, employing the figures of David and Jonathan as major cultural symbols of homosexuality. See a critique of this modern cultural use of the biblical narrative in Ackerman. In Jewish culture of the turn of the new millennium as well, the narratives of David and Jonathan represent an affirmative biblical tradition of male homoeroticism, e.g. Greenberg 178-79. Some contemporary Jewish authors such as Maggie Anton and K. David Brody, discussed in this paper, make direct and recurring references to the biblical legend of David and Jonathan. Others predominantly base their works on the story of David and Jonathan, either rewriting the biblical narrative as a historical-erotic fiction about "gay love in ancient Israel," e.g. Schecter, Levinson, and Ramer, or "modernizing" the biblical story by identifications of the protagonists with the biblical heroes, e.g. Lassel.
11. See, for example, Felman, who contrasts the narratives of David and Jonathan and the Leviticus law as two conflicting biblical traditions that compete for the right to represent Judaism in a conversation about male same-sex desire.
12. Drawing upon Sagi, I understand the term "traditional" as referring to various forms of pre-modern Judaism, and "traditionalist" as denoting modern Jewish religious groups, mainly Orthodox and some Canadian Conservative communities, that reflect on traditional Jewish culture by representing a specific, static and uniform image of tradition (see Sagi 9), often in a nostalgic, romanticized relation to the past. In contrast, liberal Jewish communities (Reform, most of the Conservative communities in the United States, Reconstructionists, Jewish Renewal, the *Havurah* movement, and various non-denominational congregations) recognize the dynamic and diverse character of traditional Judaism and offer an explicit reflective criticism of tradition.
13. Munoz describes the use of queerness in discourses of "othering" among minority groups (7-8).
14. On the anti-homosexual movements of the American New Right and New Christian Right in the 1970s, see Stein 115-16, 138-41.
15. See Foucault's critique of the "repressive hypothesis," Boyarin's argument about homoeroticism in rabbinic Judaism ("Are There Any?"), and Dorff's argument for halakhic acceptance of same-sex unions while retaining the Leviticus ban on anal penetration.
16. See, for example, Adler's use of the figures of David and Jonathan as a model for traditional study partnership ("Virgin" 32).
17. In my discussion of this rabbinic concept, I follow the conventional transliteration, *yetzer*; in my references to Anton's text and in quotations from her novel, I use her spelling, *yetzer*.

18. See Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, on the ambivalence in rabbinic understanding of sexual desire, referring in particular to the Talmudic statement in Genesis Rabbah on Genesis 1:31 that “the Evil Desire (*yetser hara*) is very good”; see also BT Yoma 69b (61-63).
19. Boyarin argues that in Talmudic culture, these desires are one: the same passion that, in the study-house, drives a scholar to study Torah would, in bed, lead him to have sex with his wife or, in another situation, with a woman to whom he is not married (*Carnal* 65).
20. Olyan points out that the two verses in Leviticus that proscribe sex between males are the only such laws in the Hebrew Bible: “there is absolutely nothing analogous to them in the other Israelite legal collections mediated to us, though their uniqueness has not generally been acknowledged by scholars” (“And with a Male” 181). According to Olyan, the absence of these laws in other biblical sources may indicate either that the majority of the biblical traditions are not familiar with this legislation, or that they do not share these sentiments.
21. On the intimacy of *hevruta*, including romantic and erotic aspects, see Holzer.
22. In my discussion of this rabbinic concept of study-partnership, I follow the conventional transliteration based on Modern Hebrew pronunciation, *hevruta*; in my references to Brody’s text and in quotations from his novel, I use his spelling, based on Ashkenazic Hebrew and Yiddish pronunciation, *hevrusa*.
23. Wolfson points to a similar notion in the erotic hermeneutics of medieval Jewish mysticism, in particular to “the zoharic understanding of text as body, which provides the mechanism by which the body is understood as text” (259).
24. “He was ruddy-cheeked, bright-eyed, and handsome. And the Lord said, “Rise and anoint him, for this is the one” (1 Samuel 16:12).
25. “One of the attendants spoke up, ‘I have observed a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite [...]; he is [...] handsome in appearance, and the Lord is with him.’ [...] So David came to Saul and entered his service; [Saul] took a strong liking to him and made him one of his arms-bearers” (1 Samuel 16:14-23).
26. “When [David] finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan’s soul became bound up with the soul of David; Jonathan loved David as himself” (1 Samuel 18:1).
27. In rabbinic literature, the act of looking signifies both mental activity (exegesis) and erotic/sexual practice; for example, the myths of God’s engagement with female Torah in Genesis Rabbah 1:1 and BT Shabbat 89a that includes looking, pleasuring, contemplating, and (pro)creating (see Wolfson 273-274). In the medieval period, the eroticism of the gaze “evolves into a central tenet” of Jewish mysticism (Wolfson 274). In kabbalistic writings, the Torah represents “the textual embodiment of the [divine] name”; the process of learning the Torah and apprehending its inner meaning, is understood as uncovering the text and gazing upon its mysteries “from underneath the garment” (Wolfson 260).

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