

# BODILY CITATIONALITY AND HERMENEUTICAL SEX: TEXT, IMAGE, AND RITUAL AS TOOLS FOR QUEER INTIMACIES<sup>1</sup>

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This article discusses queer images of traditional Jewish clothes and objects—the prayer shawl, the ritual undergarment, and the phylacteries—in contemporary photography and novels, in relation to the biblical and rabbinic texts (the Hebrew Bible, Talmud, and Midrash). The selected cultural productions of the turn of the millennium that represent the intersections of Judaism and male-male desire include works of fiction and visual art from Canada, the United States, Israel, and Germany. Michael Lowenthal’s *The Same Embrace* (1998), set in the early 1990s, follows Jacob, a secular and openly gay Jewish man, who, while visiting his religious twin brother Jonathan, becomes infatuated with Ari, an Orthodox yeshiva student who is his brother’s study partner. Evan Fallenberg’s novel *Light Fell* (2008) depicts a passionate romance between two Jewish male scholars in the 1970s: Yoel Rosenzweig, an Orthodox rabbi, and Joseph Licht, a university professor. André Aciman’s *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) delineates a love relationship between two Jewish men in the 1980s: Elio, a professor’s son, and Oliver, a doctoral student and Elio’s father’s research assistant.<sup>2</sup> In all of these works, Jewish religious references serve to establish the immediacy and totality of the intimate connection between male lovers. The photography of Benyamin Reich, produced between 2005 and 2020, and of Oscar Wolfman, produced in 2010-11, employs biblical and rabbinic tropes to represent contemporary Jewish queer experience. Sarah Rosen’s and Tom Stokes’s blog *Porn4Jews*<sup>3</sup> and Duncan Pflaster’s *Naughty Jewish Boys Calendar* (2015) introduce eroticized Jewish religious references and ritual objects into the contemporary popular culture.<sup>4</sup>

Drawing upon the works of queer theorists such as Judith Butler and José Esteban Muñoz, I propose to look at these literary and artistic productions as examples of subversive citationality and (dis)identification that construct queer subjectivity by rethinking traditional religious images and cultural practices across texts and

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genres, through particular modes of intertextuality and cultural translation. Like a number of works in Jewish critical scholarship (see e.g. Lefkovitz; Pellegrini), I approach Jewish identity, along with gender and sexual identities, as a performative category enacted in cultural productions through interpretation and reworkings of earlier texts. Judith Butler's description of identity as performative ritual includes the notion of bodily inscriptions, which, through compulsory citationality, establish textual authority as a form of conventionality and normativity. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler defines sex as "citational practice" (71-72). She understands citation as a way of accumulating "the force of authority" through "a prior, authoritative set of practices" (171-72) in which the law is produced through citation (xxiii). Citation produces the norm (xxii), yet it also produces "a viable subject" (177). Butler makes a distinction between "forced citations" and "subversive citations" (232). The very mechanism of sex being "produced as reiteration of hegemonic norms" (70) allows a possibility of "a form of cultural iterability or rearticulation, a practice of resignification" (70). Citation can invite reappropriation and recontextualization (169). The texts and works of art that cite the tradition differently could be seen as examples of such subversive citations, as instances of bodily citationality through queering biblical and rabbinic texts and religious rituals associated with these texts. The classical religious texts are cited in liturgy, performed in ritual, and enacted by, with, and upon the queer male bodies through subversive erotic performance. When discussing his art, Benyamin Reich draws a parallel between religious ritual objects and sexual fetishes: "Fetish [...] is connected to holiness. In religion, fetish is when a person makes *kid-dush*, if he puts *tefillin* [...]. You take an object, and you make of this object much more than what it is. This is the whole idea of art" (*Schmoozing* 3:54-4:24). The similar roles of imagination in erotic fantasies and in religious concepts bring together sexual practices and religious rituals.

This strategy of queer reclamation of traditional images could be understood in light of José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentifications. In his discussion of the relation of queers of colour to their mainstream, traditional cultures, Muñoz describes disidentifications as a queer hermeneutical strategy that "works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously" (5) shifting between reception and production, and "decoding a cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy" (25). The culturally expected, assimilatory, conforming forms of heteronormative identification negate one's sexual subjectivity; in its turn, the oppositional queer counter-identification, rejection of the norm, and escape from the traditional formations erase one's ethnoreligious subjectivity. In addition, an attempt to escape the mainstream symbolic system creates "a structure that validates the dominant ideology by reinforcing its dominance through the controlled symmetry of 'counterdetermination'" (11), since minority isolationism is necessary "to maintain the status of the dominant order" (14). Instead, the strategy of disidentification, in Muñoz's theory, "nonlinear or non-normative modes of identification" (30), participates in the formation of multiple,

hybrid identities by working on, with, and against a dominant cultural form (3-8, 30). This strategy transforms a cultural logic from within, enacting structural change through a transformation of the mainstream images and identificatory sites, through reading “oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject” (Muñoz 11-12). The process of reworking the traditional images does not dismiss, repress, or whitewash the damaging effects of heteronormative, misogynistic, or racist components of the identification; rather, it subverts these elements, shows their contradictory character, restructures their logic, and reimagines them in new terms, reclaiming traditional images for new contexts. Some works in Jewish scholarship point to a similar strategy of cultural (dis)identifications in Jewish contexts. For instance, Naomi Seidman shows that “the homoeroticism of sexual segregation [...] was part of the literary critique of traditional life from the very outset of the *Haskalah* project” (274), which took a new turn in the works of modernist Jewish writers of the early and mid-twentieth century, such as *An-sky*, S.Y. Agnon, Sholem Asch, Dvora Baron, and Isaac Bashevis Singer. In their resistance to Western bourgeois gender and sexual norms, these writers rediscovered the queer spaces of traditional Judaism, “the traditional Ashkenazic distribution of sexual energies between the two connected spheres of a partially eroticized homosociality and a partially deeroticized heteronormativity” (Seidman 18). As the examples that follow demonstrate, many Jewish writers and artists at the turn of the new millennium are developing this cultural work further, discovering new queer possibilities in traditional Jewish experience, and creating new Jewish queer spaces in more radical ways.

## TRADITIONAL SOURCES

Many traditional Jewish sources represent hermeneutics as comparable with sexual activity, sometimes transgressive, and the text as analogous to a sexual partner. The Babylonian Talmud and Midrash generally conceptualize marriage and Torah study as related and competing commitments. The ancient rabbis often imagine Torah as their female lover and the process of learning as isomorphic to lovemaking (Yoma 29a; Sukkah 49b; Eruvin 54b; Pesakhim 49b; Berakhot 27b-28a and 57a; Sanhedrin 99b; Ketubot 63a; Bava Metsia 84b; see also Boyarin, *Carnal* Chapter 5; Rubenstein Chapter 6). As well, the erotic hermeneutics of medieval Jewish mysticism conceptualizes biblical exegesis as isomorphic to the conjugal sex, understanding the structure of the two experiences as identical (Wolfson 320). Wolfson points to “the zoharic understanding of text as body, which provides the mechanism by which the body is understood as text” (259). Some exegetical Jewish traditions emphasize “the depth of possibilities [...] latent in the text” (Fishbane 38; see also Alter 153-54; Harris 262-63; Stern 1) by describing the process of analyzing the text as metaphorically undressing the Torah, removing its semantic garments to uncover the naked meaning of the text,

in this way conceptualizing engagement with the text in erotic terms.

Jewish ritual clothes traditionally worn mostly by men,<sup>5</sup> such as the prayer shawl (*tallit*), the ritual undergarment (*tallit katan*, “small tallit”), and phylacteries (*tefillin*), bear homosocial and homoerotic meanings, signifying both religious experience and bodily experience. As identity markers that represent specific Jewish laws or customs, these items point to religious practice, traditional masculinity, and a cultural home. As pieces of clothes, they can also mark erotic desire and sexual practices. The Jewish customs of wearing the prayer shawl and the ritual undergarment have been derived from the biblical prescription to attach ritual fringes (*tzitzit*) to one’s clothes. The sexual meaning of this concept is evident in its biblical formulation, as the following wording from the New Jewish Publication Society translation demonstrates:

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The LORD said to Moses as follows: Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages [...] That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of the LORD and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge. (Num. 15:37-40; *The Jewish Study Bible*, Second Edition)

This biblical passage, from Numbers 15, exhibits anxiety around male sexual desire. It attempts to control sexual behaviours (“so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge”) through the symbolism of clothes, objects attached to the body (“fringes on the corners of their garments”). In this sense, the prayer shawl and the ritual undergarment are the most sexualized ritual objects in Jewish tradition: like circumcision, they produce a form of citationality by literally inscribing a sexual discourse of the biblical textual tradition upon one’s body. These items perform the function of what Foucault would call putting transgressive sex into a discourse (21-22, 73). Like the prayer shawl and the ritual undergarment, the phylacteries perform an act of bodily citationality by literally attaching biblical verses, written on pieces of parchment and placed in wooden boxes, onto the head and the arm by leather straps, as a rabbinic way of understanding the biblical dictum to bind these verses “as a sign on your hand” (Deut. 6:8) and to “let them serve as a symbol on your forehead” (Deut. 6:8; cf. Deut. 11:18; Ex. 13:9 and 13:16).

To some extent, the contemporary tradition of queer reading draws upon some traditional forms of hermeneutics, what could be called homoeroticizing exegesis, found in the Talmud, Midrash, and Jewish mystical literature. Some rabbinic traditions demonstrate a mechanism of homoerotic sexualization of the symbolism of the biblical prescriptions. For example, a talmudic discussion emphasizes the sexual meaning of *tefillin* by drawing parallels between not wearing phylacteries and engaging in sexual transgressions, categorizing both activities as “sinning with one’s bodies” (Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 17a). The following example from a midrash on the Song of Songs develops this theme. The biblical erotic love poetry describes sexual intimacy between two lovers, a male and a female: “His left arm is under my head, His right arm embraces me” (Song 2:6). The ancient rabbis comment on this verse as follows: “His left arm is under my head”—this is *tzitzit*. ‘His right arm

embraces me’—this is *tefillin*” (Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah 2:6). This rabbinic commentary draws parallels between the bodily acts of wearing the clothes with the ritual fringes wrapped around the head or the images of the *tefillin* wrapped around the arm on the one hand, and the acts of lovemaking depicted in the Song of Songs on the other hand. Using heteronormative biblical imagery, the midrash imagines wearing these ritual clothes and objects as a sexual embrace between the male God and the male worshipper.

A similar mechanism of homoeroticizing exegesis is evident in the rabbinic commentary on another verse from the Song of Songs: “Ah, you are fair, my darling, Ah, you are fair” (Song 1:15). The ancient rabbis comment as follows: “‘Ah, you are fair, my darling’—in prayer and reciting the Shema; ‘Ah, you are fair’—in *tefillin*” (Midrash Song of Songs Rabba 1:15). In the biblical text, the adjective *yafah*, “beautiful” (in NJPS translation, “fair”), refers to the female protagonist, who is addressed by her male lover in an erotic exchange of the mutual admiration of each other’s beauty. The midrash reinterprets this image of the female object of desire as Israelite males in relation to their male lover, God. While men are imagined as women, the *tefillin*, as a perceived marker of Jewish masculinity, becomes an erotic object that participates in the sexual play between God and Jewish men.

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Some later Jewish texts and rituals continue this ancient tradition of homoeroticizing exegesis. Joseph Caro’s *Shulhan Arukh*, the most authoritative Jewish legal code, produced in the sixteenth century, associates the arm-*tefillin* with the heart and with control of physical desires and pleasures (Orah Hayim 25). Following the seventeenth-century kabbalistic tradition, Jewish liturgy inserts in the ritual of putting on *tefillin* the recitation of a verse from the biblical Book of Hosea that constructs an image of a wedding between a male worshipper and a male God: “And I will espouse you forever: I will espouse you with righteousness and justice, And with goodness and mercy” (Hosea 2:21). Jewish males traditionally wear the ritual undergarment, *tallit katan*, the entire day under their shirts. In contrast, the prayer shawl, *tallit*, and the phylacteries, *tefillin*, are only put on during the morning prayer, thus marking specific moments of religious experience, the moments of heightened intimacy with God. By employing the biblical trope of God’s relationship with Israel as erotic love and marriage, the act of putting *tefillin* on the male Jewish body becomes a metaphorical betrothal to the male God,<sup>6</sup> reimagining the hand phylacteries, *tefillin shel yad*, wrapped around one’s finger, as a wedding ring.

Homoerotic images of body covering in ancient Jewish literature can also be found in the context of legal precautions against sexual transgressions. For instance, an early rabbinic tradition states: “Two bachelors shall not sleep under one *tallit*;<sup>7</sup> but the sages permit it” (Mishnah Kiddushin 4:14). The sexual assumption of this traditional image of two unmarried men sharing one *tallit*, again, in Foucauldian terms, puts sex between Jewish males into a discourse.<sup>8</sup> There is a tension within the very formulation of this rabbinic ruling: the repressive force of the interdiction (“shall not sleep”) is juxtaposed with the alternative rabbinic traditions that challenge the prohibitive

law (“but the sages permit it”). Some other layers of the rabbinic discussion add a normative rationale for the prohibition: “Israel is not suspected of male-male sexual intercourse” (Tosefta 5:10; Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 82a). These ambivalent legal formulations represent rabbinic anxieties around the Levitical ban on sexual acts between males (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13). The talmudic rationale attempts to erase the social reality of non-heteronormative sexual practices among Jews.<sup>9</sup> The text draws upon the rhetoric of sexual othering, contrasting the alleged Jewish sexual self-control against the alleged Greco-Roman sexual excessiveness.<sup>10</sup>

## QUEERING THE PRAYER SHAWL (TALLIT)

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Figure 1. Duncan Pflaster, *Untitled*. 2015. *Naughtyjewishboys.com*.  
Courtesy of Duncan Pflaster.

As a photograph of a nude man wrapped in a *tallit* from Pflaster’s *Naughty Jewish Boys Calendar* demonstrates, some contemporary cultural productions imagine *tallit* as an erotic object (Figure 1). In Aciman’s novel *Call Me by Your Name*, Elio’s fantasies of sex with Oliver translate into Elio’s sexual play with Oliver’s clothes and bedsheets. While masturbating in Oliver’s bed, Elio recalls sharing a *tallit* with another man during Yom Kippur services in the synagogue. The memory of the intimacy of a religious ritual participates in Elio’s sexual fantasies and in his sexual acts that express his desire for intimacy with Oliver:

I brought the bathing suit to my face, then rubbed my face inside of it, as if I were trying to snuggle into it and lose myself inside its folds—So this is what he smells like [...] On impulse, I removed my bathing suit and began to put his on. [...] I wanted to come in his suit, and leave the evidence for him to find there. Which was when a crazier notion possessed me. I undid his bed, took off his suit, and cuddled it between his sheets, naked. [...] the smell of him was all around me, wholesome and forgiving, like the strange scent which had suddenly come over my entire body when an elderly man who happened to be standing right next to me in a temple on Yom Kippur placed his *tallis* over my head till I had all but disappeared and was now united with a nation that is forever dispersed but which, from time to time, comes together again when one being and another wrap themselves under the same piece of cloth. I put his pillow over my face, kissed it savagely, and, wrapping my legs around it, told it what I lacked the courage to tell everyone else in the world. Then I told him what I wanted. It took less than a minute. The secret was out of my body. (Aciman 61-62)

The image of the *tallit* here represents homoerotic desire. Elio's recollection of his erotic experience of priestly blessing during Yom Kippur services is intertwined with his sexual fantasies about Oliver during his autoerotic play. For Elio, religious experience is an erotic experience, and vice versa. While standing under one *tallit* with another man in the temple, Elio is aroused by the intimacy of the moment, by the closeness of the bodies, by the warmth, and by the scents. Placing his homoerotic desire in the larger context of Jewish history, Elio subverts the rabbinic image of two unmarried men sharing one cloak. These two episodes, one depicting private and transgressive sexual practice in bed (Elio masturbating with Oliver's bathing suit) and the other depicting normative intimacy during a public religious ceremony in the synagogue ("when one being and another wrap themselves under the same piece of cloth"), respond to rabbinic anxieties by affirming same-sex intimacy as part of Jewish tradition and Jewish life. Elio experiences the moments of homoerotic intimacy during a religious service as central points of his Jewish identity, as shaping his sense of belonging. The homoerotic image of two bachelors sharing one *tallit* becomes a symbol of personal and national union, a symbol of connection and home.





48 Figure 2 (left). Benyamin Reich, *Chasid in Love*. 2018. *Alexanderochs-private.com*.  
Courtesy of Benyamin Reich.

Figure 3 (right). Benyamin Reich, *Akedah, Terra Sancta*. 2007. *Advocate.com*.  
Courtesy of Benyamin Reich.

Similarly to Aciman's novel, Reich's photograph *Chasid in Love* alludes to the rabbinic image of two young men sharing a *tallit*. We see two young nude Hassidic men wrapped in one *tallit* that covers the lower parts of their bodies (Figure 2). *Chasid in Love* reclaims and subverts the repressive force of the rabbinic interdiction. By affirming Jewish queer visibility, Reich's photograph responds to the denial of Jewish queer existence, to the totality claim of this categorical heteronormative presumption. *Chasid in Love* subverts the traditional manner of prayer when the worshipper covers himself with the *tallit*. The sexual and romantic interaction between two men covered by one *tallit*, implied in this photograph, becomes an act of Jewish prayer, to which the *tallit*, the prayer shawl, refers. The prayer, in its turn, represents erotic and romantic intimacy—not with God, but with a fellow worshipper.

Reich's *Akedah* is based on the story of Abraham's (near-)sacrificing, or binding (Hebrew *akedah*), of Isaac described in Genesis 22. Reich's photograph depicts Isaac as a half-naked young man lying down on the pile of wood in the Judean desert, wrapped in a *tallit* (Figure 3). He is wearing a white head covering, which resembles traditional Arab clothes, and a Jewish *tallit*. The two pieces of clothing intertwine around his neck, complicating his identifications. Isaac's pose alludes to Crucifixion. This photograph suggests an interrelation between Jewish, Christian, and Islamic textual traditions, pointing to a difficult relationship between Jewish and Arab inhabitants of the land and to the narratives of belonging that are at once competing and intimately interconnected. While the *tallit* points to the religious background of the man, the tattoo on his leg, which transgresses Jewish religious law, suggests a secular lifestyle. The eroticism of Isaac's body, exposed to the viewer, along with the sexual connotations of binding that allude to BDSM subculture, suggests the



theme of homosexuality. This image of Isaac simultaneously belongs to several different worlds, identifying with Orthodox Jews, Palestinian Arabs both Muslim and Christian, secular Israelis, and queers; each of these multiple identities and identifications demands sacrificing the other ones. The *tallit* wraps and simultaneously exposes Isaac's body to the sun, to the reader, and to the invisible knife of his father, Abraham, whose God demands the sacrifice. The *tallit*, a symbol of Jewish tradition, is flying away; yet, it is also wrapped around Isaac's neck like an anchor, simultaneously connecting Isaac to the land and binding him to the wood that is intended to burn his body in the sacrifice.



Figures 4 and 5. Oscar Wolfman, *Elation*. 2010-11. *Queengallery.ca*. By permission of David Townsend. The prints are held in the Leslie Lohman Museum, New York.

Whereas Reich's photographs discussed above depict youths, Wolfman's works focus on the older male body. Wolfman's series *Elation* shows overlapping images of a nude man in a *tallit* (Figures 4 and 5). Wolfman represents prayer as dance, with the prayer shawl resembling the wings. The technique of overlapping images, which emphasizes the theme of movement, along with the closed eyes, suggests the motifs of autoeroticism and fantasy of intimacy. The movement and the changing poses allude to sexual play. The photograph teases the viewer by at once showing and concealing the man's genitals. Prayer becomes an erotic and religious performance of the artist's Jewish gay identity.

## QUEERING THE RITUAL UNDERGARMENT (*TALLIT KATAN*)



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Figure 6 (left). Duncan Pflaster, *Untitled*. 2015. *Naughtyjewishboys.com*.  
Courtesy of Duncan Pflaster.

Figure 7 (right). Duncan Pflaster, *Untitled*. 2015. *Naughtyjewishboys.com*.  
Courtesy of Duncan Pflaster.



Figure 8. Benyamin Reich, *Friday Water, Terra Sancta*. 2005-07. *Regiamag.com*.  
Courtesy of Benyamin Reich.

Two photographs from Pflaster's *Naughty Jewish Boys Calendar* show a correlation between the ritual undergarment and underwear. In Figure 6, which pictures a nude man whose sole piece of clothing is a *tallit katan*, the ritual undergarment partially performs the function of the underwear, covering the man's genitals, and partially reveals his nude body. In Figure 7, which shows a man wearing white underwear and a *tallit katan*, the ritual undergarment and the underwear are depicted together, as two white intimate pieces of clothing that parallel one another.

A photograph from Reich's series *Friday Water*, which shows a Hassidic man undressing before (or dressing after) his immersion in the ritual bath on the Sabbath eve, positions the ritual undergarment next to the underwear (Figure 8). The *tallit katan* is at once contrasted with and analogous to the intimate meanings of the underwear. The *tallit katan* hanging on the wall becomes a twinned image that mirrors the naked body of the man putting on/taking off his underwear and his ritual undergarment. While the underwear can suggest a sexual meaning, the ritual undergarment synthesizes erotic and religious meanings. The *tallit katan* serves as a literal inscription of the tradition upon the body, an inscription that one can take off or put back on. The phallic stream of water next to the nude man emphasizes the eroticism of the image. The non-horizontal, diagonal composition of the three symmetrical elements—the *tallit katan*, the underwear, and the water stream—alludes to the biblical image of Jacob's Ladder that connects earth and heaven, with angels "going up and down on it" (Gen. 28:12). The pose of the man holding his underwear suggests the act of stepping upward on this invisible ladder.

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In Lowenthal's novel *The Same Embrace*, the yeshiva student Ari's ritual undergarment bears a special erotic significance for Jacob, a secular gay Jewish man. Ari's *tallit katan* participates in a variety of sexual activities between the partners, ranging from a quasi-BDSM sexual play to oral sex (Lowenthal 83-85). The erotic act of undressing the partner is at the same time an act of reviewing Jewish laws of undressing: "While he worked on the shirt, Jacob pried off Ari's shoes, wondering if there was a proper Jewish way for their removal as for their tying: right, then left; left, then right" (Lowenthal 82-83). The queer sexual desire and practice here are associated with Jewish religious practices and with traditional patterns of Torah study. The act of undressing, however, is never complete: "'Take off your clothes,' he ordered. 'Everything but the *tallis*'" (Lowenthal 85). The ritual undergarment is the only piece of Ari's clothes that Jacob wants to stay on during sex. The eroticized body of a yeshiva student, the *Yeshiva Bokhur*,<sup>11</sup> is simultaneously revealed and concealed. The *tallit katan* that stays on Ari's body becomes a sexual fetish, a focal point of Jacob's and Ari's sexual play. Due to its religious significance and to its intimate character, the "secret religious underwear" (Lowenthal 82) has an erotic appeal on its own; it also promotes sexual desire and pleasures by participating in the various elements of the sexual play between the two men. The *tzitzit*, the fringes of the *tallit katan*, which are supposed to remind the wearer of the sexual prohibitions of the Torah, perform their intended role of erotic memory, but in a subversive way: these fringes remind Jacob and Ari about the sexual possibilities present both in the Levitical law and in the homoerotic world of the yeshiva. For Jacob, this piece of clothes also creates a feeling of home, of a fulfilled lifelong yearning: "But lifting the corner of the *arba kanfos*,<sup>12</sup> then whipping once more with the ritual fringe, Jacob understood it wasn't just the immediate attraction that impelled them together. True, he had known Ari less than a week; but for months, maybe years, he had wanted to have who Ari was" (Lowenthal 83). By enacting a sexual fantasy of intimacy with a

yeshiva student who is also his twin brother's study partner, Jacob attempts to connect his life of a gay man to his family and to Judaism. In the scene of sex between two Jewish men, Jacob and Ari, sexual acts and Jewish religious acts merge in an undivided continuum. During his sex with Ari, Jacob's sexual imagination is imbued with questions about Jewish law, such as questions about proper blessings for certain occasions. An act of exchanging bodily fluids is at once an act of inquiry about the Hebrew blessings associated with the body. After licking and swallowing Ari's semen out of his *tzitzit*, Jacob, "collapsing onto Ari's chest [...] wondered if there was some Hebrew blessing, some prayer for the imbibing of this precious fluid. *Baruch atah adonai*, he began silently, but he had no idea how to finish" (Lowenthal 85; emphasis in original). Elements of Jewish learning, the Hebrew blessings associated with the body, the Jewish laws of undressing, the Jewish clothes and ritual objects—all these become sexual objects that participate in the erotic performance through sight, voice, touch, kiss, and taste, while still preserving their religious symbolism.

- 52 Similarly to the undressing scene in Lowenthal's novel, in Fallenberg's *Light Fell* the practice of undressing one's sexual partner bears both erotic and Jewish religious meanings. In both novels the ritual undergarment becomes a focal point of this act, though it performs different functions in each of the narratives. In Lowenthal's book, the *tallit katan* is the only piece of Ari's clothes that Jacob wants to remain on his partner's body throughout the entire sexual interaction. More so, he turns it into a central object of their sexual play. In contrast, in Fallenberg's novel, in the scene of Yoel undressing Joseph, the *tallit katan* has to be removed from the body, separated from the sexual interaction, since it represents the normative, repressive Levitical sexual discourse, a conflict between the sexual and the religious, between the gay and the Jewish:

He paused briefly when he reached the *tallit katan* and seemed poised to kiss the fringes of this holy ritual undergarment. Joseph knew he was contemplating the daily admonition not to stray after one's heart. He could see behind the wise, saddened eyes the centuries of rabbinical commentaries and moral tales and *midrashim* and *aggadot* about that passage that must have been rushing through the genius rabbi's brain, and certainly many others about the evil inclination. But Yoel banished these thoughts; Joseph could feel the weight of centuries of learning and tradition being rolled heavily to the side. Yoel removed the fringed garment resolutely, but more carefully than all the others, and placed it atop the pile. (Fallenberg 47)

This episode refers to the biblical symbolism of *tallit katan* as a means of sexual control, a reminder not to act upon one's, presumably transgressive, sexual desires, "so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge" (Num. 15:37-40). The *tallit katan* here represents Jewish learning and the traditional Jewish sexual discourses, "the centuries of rabbinical commentaries and moral tales and *midrashim* and *aggadot*" (Fallenberg 47) that are localized in the Levitical ban on sex between men and in its interpretive tradition. This tradition, which identifies queer desire with "the evil inclination," stands in opposition to love between men. The terror

of the Levitical prohibition makes it unmentionable (“that passage”). For Yoel, a closeted gay Orthodox rabbi, the only possibility to engage in a sexual interaction with his partner, another Jewish scholar, is to remove the *tallit katan*, to escape the Levitical discourse and to escape Jewish scholarship altogether, by putting aside “the weight of centuries of learning and tradition.” Nevertheless, the sex scene between the two men that follows is depicted as a scene of studying the text:

He spread his arms like the wings of a soaring eagle and touched Joseph’s head and feet. He lay his head on Joseph’s stomach and played his hands up and down his body, stopping to explore and examine. Joseph felt Yoel was learning him, that he was committing the text of Joseph’s body to memory. A genius, an *illui*, so why not this, too? Why not use his gift on Joseph? (Fallenberg 47)

Joel’s erotic play with Joseph resembles studying the Torah, “stopping to explore and examine” the lover’s body parts as though they are phrases and words in the text. Through “learning” Joseph and memorizing “the text of Joseph’s body,” Joel identifies his lover with the Torah. He also transforms the queer sexual practice into an act of shared Torah study, *havruta*. Similarly to the process of learning, the sexual interaction requires Joseph’s intellectual potency of an *illui*, a Talmudic genius. This scene constructs sexual experience between men as Jewish religious and intellectual, hermeneutical practice.

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## QUEERING THE PHYLACTERIES (*TEFILLIN*)

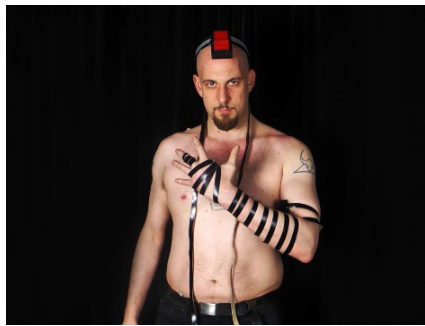


Figure 9 (left). Sarah Rosen and Tom Stokes, *I’m Really into Leather*. 2013. *Porn4Jews.com*. Courtesy of Sarah Rosen.

Figure 10 (right). Duncan Pflaster, *Untitled*. 2015. *Naughtyjewishboys.com*. Courtesy of Duncan Pflaster.

Eroticizing the religious ritual of putting on *tefillin* during prayer in contemporary photography and fiction draws upon the appearance of the *tefillin* and upon the traditional symbolism of this ritual. The leather of the *tefillin*, along with the act

of binding, invites an association with today's sexual subcultures popular in queer communities, such as leather and binding and domination, as the images of men wearing *tefillin* from Rosen's and Stokes's *Porn4Jews* (Figure 9) and Pflaster's *Naughty Jewish Boys 2015* (Figure 10) exemplify. In addition, the traditional metaphor of *tefillin* as a sign of intimacy or marriage between the male God and the male worshippers allows the view of this ritual object as a symbol of same-sex union.

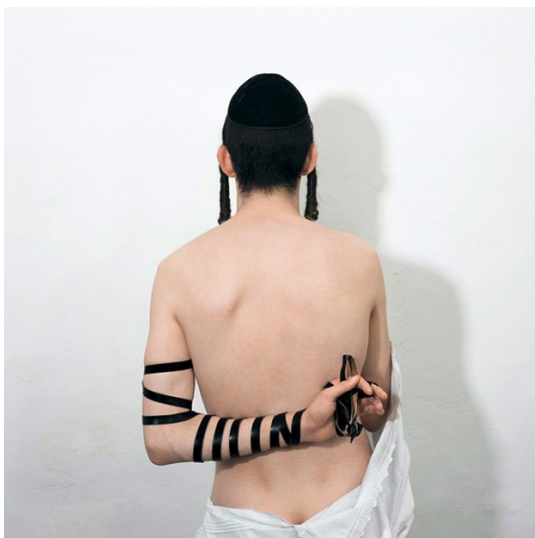
In Lowenthal's novel *The Same Embrace*, the traditional image of *tefillin* as wedding ring serves to express erotic and romantic feelings between men. Jonathan puts his own *tefillin* on Jacob: "He placed the leather, still warm from having been against his own skin, on Jacob's arm" (Lowenthal 60). This image of exchange of clothes, as intimate interaction between two male bodies, the touch and the sense of the warmth of another man's skin, together with the motifs of leather and binding, transforms a normative act of putting on *tefillin* into an erotic act, a moment of intimacy, both sexualized and affective. Jonathan's touch in the act of putting his *tefillin* on Jacob's arm becomes connected to the other moments of homoerotic intimacy and caring that Jacob has experienced: "These were all the same caress, he thought, the same vulnerable laying of one man's fingers on another [...] his embrace now, tangled in leather, added to a single, larger embrace" (Lowenthal 61). This continuum of queer moments of intimacy represents Jacob's intimacy with the entire Jewish people and with Jewish tradition;<sup>13</sup> these moments also represent an interplay of the intimacy between Jewish men and intimacy with the divine. Jonathan, "while carrying the leather strap around Jacob's ring finger," chants the verse from Hosea in Hebrew and then translates it into English, "I will betroth you to myself forever" (Lowenthal 61). Jacob invests this traditional act of reciting the biblical verse while putting on *tefillin*, which Jonathan performs on Jacob's body during the morning services in the yeshiva, with a different, queer meaning: he imagines it as a ritual of union between two Jewish men, the promise of mutual acceptance "with kind justice and love":

The leather he had looped around Jacob's finger was a ring, sanctifying the promise. Jacob closed his eyes and silently composed his own version of the prayer: *I will betroth myself to you, too. We will be joined again, and share our secrets. We will accept each other with kind justice and love.* (Lowenthal 61-62; emphasis in original).

Like the homoerotic imagery of the *tefillin* in the midrash on Song of Songs discussed earlier, this episode represents an instance of bodily citationality of Jewish religious life. This is also an instance of queer reading of mainstream culture: Jacob knows that Jonathan is "simply translating the prayer," a biblical passage, and yet Jacob perceives Jonathan's performance through his own queer sensibilities, "as a personal vow directly from Jonathan." Moreover, Jacob composes "his own version of the prayer," his fantasy of mutual acceptance, love and commitment, intimacy of togetherness and sharing ("We will be joined again, and share our secrets"), expressed through the biblical symbolism of marriage. The image of putting on *tefillin* in Lowenthal's novel participates in the larger picture of the yeshiva as a space that could be perceived as



metaphorical queer family.



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Figure 11. Benyamin Reich, *Tefillin shel Yad*, Judaica. 2006. *BenyaminReich.com*. Courtesy of Benyamin Reich.

Reich's *Tefillin shel Yad* ("The Arm-Phylacteries") reimagines Jewish prayer as an act of undressing, a moment of intimacy, vulnerability, and impossibility of connection. The photograph depicts a young Hassidic man with long curled sidelocks (*peyot*), wearing a black head covering (*kippah*), and a white ritual robe (*kittel*) (Figure 11). *Tefillin shel Yad* recreates the traditional image of Jewish prayer done wearing *tefillin* and facing the wall in direction of the Jerusalem Temple. The man's arm is bare, bound with leather *tefillin* straps, which is typical during prayer. Reich, however, takes a step further from the normative baring of the arm, necessary for putting on *tefillin*, to stripping almost entirely. The rolled-back *kittel*, a traditional groom's garment at Hassidic weddings, reveals the man's body, partially uncovering the buttocks, which transforms the act of prayer into an erotic performance while also suggesting an association with marriage. *Tefillin shel Yad* highlights the arm wrapped in the *tefillin* as an object in its own right. This image emphasizes the association of the arm-*tefillin* with the body; it reimagines *tefillin* as a sex toy or fetish, alluding to the imagery of binding and domination. The intimacy, however, is broken: the viewer cannot see the face of the man. The man is facing his own shadow on the wall, as the only object of his interaction, which suggests the idea of intimacy as fantasy, utterly unattainable. The photograph also alludes to the biblical episode of the binding of Isaac, *Akedah*, from Genesis 22 (see Figure 3 and my earlier discussion), so that Reich represents prayer as a sexual act and as an act of (self-)sacrifice.



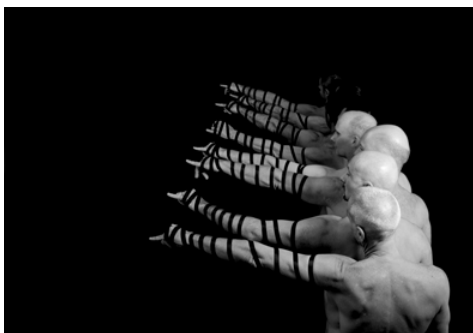


Figure 12 (left). Oscar Wolfman, *Entartete Kunst*. 2011. The Leslie Lohman Museum, New York. Courtesy of David Townsend.



Figure 13 (right). Oscar Wolfman, *Entartete Kunst*. 2011. [Queengallery.ca](http://Queengallery.ca).  
By permission of David Townsend.

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Wolfman's photographs from his series *Entartete Kunst* combine queer and Jewish themes as a response to both homophobia and antisemitism, by reclaiming the Nazi term for modernist art, particularly works of Jewish and/or gay artists, which the Nazis deemed "degenerate art" (*Entartete Kunst*). The black and white photograph in Figure 12 reimagines the traditional images of Jewish communal prayer. A group of nude men, wrapped in the arm-*tefillin* and pointing to an invisible Torah scroll, invokes Jewish and gay sensibilities related to synagogue services, to Holocaust imagery, and to queer eroticism. The colour photograph in Figure 13 replaces the traditional black leather straps of *tefillin* with a glossy red ribbon that alludes to queer culture (Fig. 13). In contrast to the image of a Hassidic youth in Reich's *Tefillin shel Yad*, the nude man in Wolfman's photograph is older, muscular, and secular, as shown by his tattoo and the absence of a head covering. *Entartete Kunst* imagines Jewish prayer as queer performance. It also represents queer life, whether a sexual play or an artistic performance, as a form of prayer.



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Figure 14 (left). Oscar Wolfman, *Zipporah, Midrash*. 2010. *Queengallery.ca*.  
By permission of David Townsend.

Figure 15 (right). Benjamin Reich, *Untitled, Aggada*. 2016. *BenyaminReich.com*.  
Courtesy of Benyamin Reich.



Figure 16 (left). Benjamin Reich, *Abby Stein*. 2017. *Alexandrochs-private.com*.  
Courtesy of Benyamin Reich.

Figure 17 (right). Benjamin Reich, *Tefillin I*. 2020. *Alexandrochs-private.com*.  
Courtesy of Benyamin Reich.

Whereas most of the writers and artists discussed in this article portray white cis Ashkenazi Jewish males, some of them disrupt these dominant narratives. For

instance, Wolfman's series includes women of colour, such as *Zipporah* (Figure 14), and Reich's series includes images of Arab men, such as *Untitled* (Figure 15). In Figure 14, which depicts Zipporah, the wife of Moses, as a black woman dressed in blue,<sup>14</sup> the white scarf resembles the prayer shawl, *tallit*, shown in other Wolfson photographs (see Figures 4 and 5). The white garment of the Arab boy holding flowers in Figure 15 parallels the white robe, *kittel*, of the Hassidic boy in another Reich photograph, *Tefillin shel Yad*, discussed above (Figure 11). The respective titles of Wolfman's and Reich's series, *Midrash* and *Aggada*, suggest connections to the Jewish tradition of hermeneutics, the tradition of creative rearticulation of older tropes for new contexts.

As elements of a culture shaped by patriarchal and androcentric societies, the Jewish ritual objects that I discuss in this article are traditionally associated with masculinity. In his photographs *Abby Stein* (Figure 16) and *Tefillin I* (Figure 17), Reich disrupts the traditional assignment of masculinity to these items by portraying women, trans or cis respectively, wearing *tallit* or *tefillin*. In Reich's photographs, these ritual objects, which are meant to be put on the body, retain their traditional function as gender markers, albeit in a subversive manner. These examples not only attempt to decentre masculinity and whiteness in Jewish religious life, but also challenge the exclusionary narratives of desire.

The contemporary works of fiction and visual art discussed in this article, to some extent, develop the earlier traditional and modern Jewish cultural patterns of queer reading of religious texts and rituals. In contrast to these earlier strategies, however, cultural productions at the turn of the new millennium move from the heteronormative symbolic field imbued with a homoerotic religious subtext to a more radical queer space. These works imagine Jewish text and ritual as tools for queer intimacies, and represent Jewish ritual clothes as sexual objects that participate in the erotic performance while continuously preserving their religious meaning. Reversing the traditional understanding of studying as erotic performance, modern queer Jewish fiction employs the trope of undressing the erotic partner as a means of uncovering the multiple meanings of the text and of the body. These authors imagine intimacy between men as hermeneutical appropriation, performative subversion of Jewish religious life and texts, merging queer sexual acts and Jewish religious acts in an undivided continuum. They bridge the divides between the sexual and the religious, between the queer and the Jewish, and between the personal and the collective. They help rethink the boundaries between bodies, experiences, families, states, and lands.

## NOTES

1. Thanks to Dr. Noa Yaari for her invaluable insights on the artwork included in this article.
2. Aciman's novel was turned into a film of the same title, directed by Luca Guadagnino, in 2017.
3. Selected memes from *Porn4Jews* were published in the collection *Kosher Porn* in 2014.

4. The scope of this article does not allow a discussion of many other contemporary literary and artistic works that employ traditional images of Jewish texts and rituals in queer or erotic contexts, including, among others, works of fiction by K. David Brody and David Bezmozgis in Canada; Jyl Lynn Felman, Tony Kushner, Lev Raphael, Daniel Jaffe, Aryeh Stollman, Maggie Anton, and Andrew Ramer in the United States; and works of art of Lea Golda Holterman (Israel), Adi Ness (Israel), Tobaron Waxman (Canada), and Félix d'Eon (Mexico). I discuss these works elsewhere.
5. For exclusion of women from the rituals of *tefillin* and *tzitzit*, as time-dependent commandments, in rabbinic sources, see Mishnah Berakhot 3:3; Mekhilta DeRabbi Shimon Bar Yochai 13:8-9; Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 34a; Midrash Tankhuma Bo 14. Medieval Jewish legal tradition adopted this approach (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Fringes 3:9; Joseph Caro, Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 17).
6. On homoeroticism in the prophetic marriage metaphor found in the biblical texts such as Hosea and Ezekiel, see Eilberg-Schwartz; Jennings. These works also explore a similar literary device of the metaphorical feminization of men in the midrash on Song of Songs that I discuss here.
7. Here the term *tallit* is used in a broader meaning as a cover, a large cloak that could serve as a blanket or a bedsheet as well as a garment.
8. For analysis of this mechanism in other rabbinic texts, see Boyarin, *Carnal*.
9. This social reality was documented in other talmudic and non-rabbinic texts (see Sienna).
10. See Satlow 244 on sexual self-control as a signifier of masculinity that Greco-Roman and rabbinic cultures shared.
11. On the eroticism of *Yeshiva Bokhur*, see Boyarin, *Unheroic*.
12. *Arba kanfos* (Yiddish and Ashkenazic Hebrew form for *arba kanfot*), “four corners,” is another traditional term for the ritual undergarment, which refers to the biblical commandment that male Israelites wear “fringes on the corners of their garments” (Num. 15:37-40).
13. Compare with Aciman’s *Call Me by Your Name* discussed earlier in this article, in which the image of two men under one *tallit* on Yom Kippur serves as a focal point of multiple queer intimate moments (62).
14. The biblical text refers to Zipporah as “a Cushite woman” (Num. 12:1), which some traditional commentators understood as referring to dark skin or African descent (Rashbam; cf. Sifrei Bamidbar 99; Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 16b; Rashi).

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