

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXXXII, Number 30, 3 March 2008 — Queering the (Jewish) Faith [ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

## Queering the (Jewish) Faith



IRA  
STUP

THE PROBLEM  
WITH NORMAL

I was the super-cool president of my Jewish youth group during high school, so I am no stranger to large conventions featuring a load of Yarmulke-clad kids singing songs, pouring out their Hebraic souls, and being instructed in the ways of the Jewish persuasion. (You go to Columbia—stop pretending right now

that you were any cooler in high school.) Yet when I participated in a similar event a few weeks ago, something was quite different. Instead of being fed a pre-approved religious program, I found myself singing Shabbat songs on a Saturday afternoon with an observant gay transgender Jew with a Hebrew tattoo. This was all compliments of the annual conference of the Nation Union of Jewish LGBTIQQ Students (NUJLS), hosted this year by Columbia and the Jewish Theological Seminary.

NUJLS in many ways embodies some of the greatest developments of the queer Jewish world. A grassroots outgrowth of a dire need for a space for LGBT Jewish students, NUJLS is one of the few student-run organizations in the Jewish community. Even more importantly, it is an incubator for new ideas and expressions of Jewishness that are particularly unique to queer Jewish life. As LGBT Jews have been confined until recently to the periphery of the Jewish establishment, gay Jews have had to define Jewish expression within a unique context: outsiders in a community of outsiders. While the Jewish world was busy obsessing over growing numbers of disaffection among its youth, LGBT Jews were left on the sidelines to redefine for themselves how Jewish and queer identities could fit together in new, fresh, and often quite radical ways.

Let me not romanticize the situation. Being on the sidelines is not necessarily a cause for celebration, but

a queer understanding of history might show that it's not such a terrible thing either. For example, the rejection of same-sex relationships has provided the LGBT community an opportunity—welcome or not—to reconsider heterosexual norms and seek out what are sometimes more meaningful and self-rooted alternatives. So too does a queer Jewish identity often necessitate this type of creative recreation of traditional identities and behaviors.

The outgrowth of these often conflicting identities leads not just to struggle, but to a unique creative tension that is often the basis of great artistry. Those pushed to the periphery are regularly the ones responsible for some of the most innovative creations in contemporary Jewish life—everything from Manhattan's array of diverse prayer groups, to spirituality retreats attracting all types of people, to innovative literary magazines. Gay Jews often breathe new life into otherwise routine and pre-prescribed traditions by having to wrestle with and redefine these ritual expressions. Marriage ceremonies, coming out rituals, AIDS memorials, and other overlooked life cycle events have been re-crafted by queer people, morphing the traditional and the radical into the same. Time-honored texts are being reinterpreted for a reader unsatisfied with ancient answers. While many in the Jewish establishment concern themselves with sparking interest in conventional communal life, it would seem worthwhile, if not paramount, to consider the contributions of alternative Jewish space and identity, much of which occurs largely outside and in spite of the establishment. In the words of the author Paul Monette, "It's the outlaws who know where the spirit resides."

It is for this reason that Columbia's NUJLS conference, co-hosted by JTS, was so historic. After years of debate over the status of gay Jews, the conservative Jewish movement along with JTS, its flagship clergy school, opened its doors to openly gay and lesbian Jews just one year ago. For the first time in its history, America's second-largest Jewish denomination allowed openly gay students into its rabbinical and cantorial academies. And JTS, once a symbol of disenchantment for many LGBT

Jews, leaped forward in its attempt to integrate and welcome gay students. Recently, a number of openly gay people have been elected to administrative positions, and the school has come a long way in identifying safe spaces for its students. In an incredibly powerful statement, the new dean of the JTS Rabbinical School officially welcomed the participants of the NUJLS conference to apply to the once closed-off academy. Never before had such a contingent of LGBT Jews come to JTS, and they had come not to debate their legitimacy as queer people and Jews, but to celebrate it.

Within this cautiously celebratory context, new and intriguing questions arise. As newly welcomed members of the establishment, where do we go from here? Is it possible to maintain the distinctive voices that have been created outside the boundaries of communal norms? What happens when the establishment is confronted with more radical queer identities? And what does it even mean to be a queer insider?

Sitting and singing traditional songs with my observant transgender friend—a Jew with a resoundingly unorthodox but authentically traditional identity—perhaps illuminates some answers. LGBT Jews can approach situations like the one found today at JTS with two goals in mind. First, to appreciate new possibilities from within the establishment, with the ever-present vigilance that it not be at the expense of the unique history and relevance of queer Jewish identity. And second, to offer JTS and its fellow institutions new insight into the distinctive and satisfyingly real paradoxes which often define LGBT Jewish life and Jewish life in general—a sense of radicalism, subversiveness, relevance, and tradition all at once. As JTS and others continue the process of accepting and teaching new LGBT students, queer Jews must continue to teach and transform JTS through rich and inspired insight into the LGBT Jewish experience.

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