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Transgression in Jewish Literature*

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Abstract: Jewish library collection policies as they relate to Jewish gay and lesbian issues are discussed. Questions considered are whether a book about gay Jews or a book written by a Jewish gay author should be included in Judaica collections. The issue is placed within a historical Jewish literary tradition which includes authors such as Grade, Ozick, Miller, Roth and Rukeyser—who write about such transgressive themes as sexuality, assimilation, self-loathing, agnostic rabbis, etc. Through personal examples drawn from her collection of Jewish short stories, *Hot Chicken Wings*, the author makes a case for including books with Jewish lesbian content. Also considered are the consequences of excluding such works and the ultimate arbitrariness of banning works with gay content from the Jewish library shelf.

The author also comments on the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Angels in America*, written by a gay Jewish man, Tony Kushner. Even though *Angels* is being touted as an AIDS play, it is replete with Jewish characters, questions about assimilation, and Jewish self-loathing as exhibited by the lead character Roy Cohn. The play derives from a long tradition of Jewish avant-garde writing dealing with the nature of Jewish identity. For this reason, the author uses *Angels* to make a case against censoring gay themes in Judaica collections. Jewish literature throughout the ages has had a transgressive bent, and gay themes must be read in this context and viewed by Jews as legitimate literary material worthy of reading by Jewish communities.

*A slightly different version of this talk was presented at the 28th Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries (June 22, 1993) as part of the panel, Library Collecting Policies: The Social, Political and Historical Context. Part One: Gay and Lesbian Jewish Literature.

Transgression in Jewish Literature

Jewish literature is the history of transgression. From the story of Abraham smashing the idols to Sigmund Freud's *Power Of The Unconscious*; from Herzl's Zionist dream to Jabotinsky's transformation of that dream; from the words of Emma Goldman and Rosa Luxemburg, to the painful truths of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* and Philip Roth's *Goodbye Columbus*; from the stunning poetry of Nelly Sachs and Muriel Rukeyser to Elie Wiesel's first Holocaust narratives: in every generation Jewish writers boldly transgress the boundaries of what Jews are allowed to write and speak publicly about.

When Jews write the truths of our lives, the world cracks open, pushing the pretense of gentility aside. Writing that transgression is about survival in a hostile world and surviving beyond invisibility. To transgress is to dare to name a truth that no one wants to hear. When Elie Wiesel whispered into President Clinton's ear that he had been to Bosnia and he could not sleep, he transgressed and spoke a truth that no one wanted to hear. When African/Jewish-American lawyer Lani Guinier wrote that the Voting Rights Act was not a remedy for inequality in voting, she too transgressed the borders of permissible speech.

Saturday evening I sat in the Walter Kerr theatre listening to the character of Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz speaking at the funeral of Sarah Ironson. As the Rabbi spoke, I started to cry. I thought of my 98-year-old grandfather, born in a *shtetl* in Russia; he, too, would be nodding his head in agreement. For three-and-a-half hours, I watched the 1993 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Angels in America*, by Tony Kushner. *Angels* is a very Jewish play, although from all the promotional hype, one would never know it. *Angels* is about assimilation and the self-loathing of Diaspora Jews; it is about the abandonment of a moral vision.

As I listened to the Rabbi's words, I shuddered. I knew that this play might never make it onto the shelves of most Jewish libraries, no matter how many grand prizes it wins, because it is also a play about AIDS and homosexuality. Instead, *Angels* will be reduced in meaning and stature because its characters wrestle with sexual preference. But this is a play of our times. And in every generation there are questions that need to be asked and doors that need to be opened. Each generation of Jews asks the questions for those who follow; our survival depends on this truth-telling.

So *Angels In America* becomes a form of god-wrestling. Tony Kushner wrestles with belief and disbelief, faith and abandonment, in the exact same way that Abraham wrestled with his faith as he prepared to abandon Isaac on the altar. Kushner's voice is young, gay, brilliant, and Jewish; the questions he asks belong to all of us. His writings are not sexual orgies or glorifications of sexual promiscuity. *Angels In America* is about lost Jewish souls searching for a place to call home. Jews today must know Kushner's work.

Judaica Library Collection Policies

If *Angels in America* is not included in Judaica collections because it includes gay characters, we need to ask: *Where do we draw the line and what are the consequences?* Do we also exclude Isaac Bashevis Singer's homoerotic *Yentl*? Do we deny that our beloved, Nobel Prize-winning author, in all his mystical wisdom, sought to explore the social construction of gender within his stories? Do we exclude Marge Piercy's monumental epic novel *Gone To Soldiers*, about racism, antisemitism and the Holocaust, because out of a cast of 25, two characters are gay? Or do we exclude Vivian Gornick's powerful autobiography, *Fierce Attachments*, about a Jewish mother and her daughter coming to terms with each other, because on one page, in one paragraph, there is a discussion of a boyhood friend

who turns out to be Jewish and gay? Where do we draw the line? Do we exclude works by gay and lesbian Jews simply because of who they are? Do we exclude works by heterosexual Jews when they include gay and lesbian themes? Ultimately this process of exclusion is arbitrary.

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This kind of arbitrariness has been used against us as Jews, and we can ill afford to use it against ourselves and our children, for gay and lesbian Jews are writing about Jewish identity in profoundly significant ways. Like our parents and grandparents before us, we inherited the status of outsiders; we, too, have insight into the questions of identity and cultural preservation. In the end, the consequence of excluding writings by gay and lesbian Jews is to deny that such Jews exist in our own families, that they are our brothers, sisters, aunts, and uncles—our rabbis, as well as our teachers—and they are our children. Sometimes, gay and lesbian Jews are even our parents. And so, to deny information, stories, essays, plays, and poetry about lesbian and gay Jews is to create silence and isolation within the Jewish family. In the end, the act of censoring bibliographies and books by and about gay Jews distorts the reality of our lives while continuing to perpetuate a lie.

When I came out to my parents over 15 years ago, there was no contemporary Jewish literature on gay topics for them to read. The silence on the shelves sent a message to my parents that they had no one to talk to. Thus, the Jewish commu-

nity's lack of information about Jewish gays and lesbians made it difficult for my parents and me to reconcile our differences. In this situation, a Jewish librarian could have helped my parents enormously. My mother was a Jewish day school teacher; she wanted to go to her Hillel library to read about other gay and lesbian Jews. She, a Conservative Jew, wanted to study in a Jewish environment the issues causing pain and disagreement in her family. She wanted to read what other Jews were writing about homosexuality. But there was very little written back then and nothing on the shelves.

Today, there are many books by gay and straight Jews that deal with homosexuality and Jewish identity. So the current gap on the shelves of Jewish libraries is actually a huge hole, for it denies the reality of our times. It denies that one of the central questions at this historic juncture concerns the construction of a sexual identity. And Jews need to have access to Jewish material about gender, sexual preference, and homophobia, so that we can talk about the issues.

When Adele Starr, the wife of a rabbi, found out that her son was gay, she turned to what was most familiar to her: Jewish books—books by Jews. She found nothing in her synagogue library to help her; she was already aware of the Biblical admonitions, but she loved and adored her son and wanted information about his lifestyle that would help her accept him. In the end, she took the bold, transgressive step of founding P-Flag, an organization for parents and friends of lesbians and gays. The writing by Rebbetzin Adele Starr about her gay son belongs on the shelves of our libraries; her story is an invaluable tool for all Jewish families.

A Personal Experience

I shall conclude with a brief personal story. In May 1993, I spoke in Chicago, where I had been invited to address the Fifth Annual Jewish Feminist Symposium, sponsored by the American Jewish Congress. I was participating in a panel about mothers and daughters. In the middle of my talk, I mentioned that I was a lesbian and had written a collection of short stories called *Hot Chicken Wings*, which was about Jewish family and identity. When I was done speaking, my books sold out immediately. The members of the audience—heterosexual, married Jewish women between the ages of 40 and 85—were buying three and four copies

each of *Hot Chicken Wings*. In ten minutes, 82 copies were gone. At first, I did not understand what was happening. Then it hit me. These women, who love Jewish literature and whose children are not always continuing to live Jewish lives, were starved for stories about my generation. They wanted to read about their sons and daughters and about themselves. They told me this as I autographed their copies, one after another. Indignantly, they demanded to know why they had never heard of me or my writing; why Jewish book fairs and synagogue collections did not have my work on their shelves; and why the Jewish press was not reviewing my work so they could buy it, tell all their friends, and give *Hot Chicken Wings* to their children. We were laughing and crying at the realization that the invisibility of gay and lesbian Jews within the Jewish community had created a huge barrier between us and had perpetuated hurtful stereotypes.

Because one symposium organizer at the American Jewish Congress had the vision and the willingness to transgress, at least 80 mainstream, heterosexual Jews have access to my work for the first time in their lives. This opportunity to speak opened a door that had been closed for 'way too long. Finally, it was our own mothers, hungry for new information, who pushed through the opening, ready to embrace the message and the messenger.

Jyl Lynn Felman is an award-winning short story writer whose work appears in over 25 different literary journals, magazines, and newspapers. Her writing has been anthologized in such groundbreaking books as The Tribe of Dina, Loss of the Ground Note, Speaking for Ourselves, and A Loving Voice. Ms. Felman received her M.F.A. from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, and is also an attorney who lectures widely on racism, antisemitism, and homophobia. Her first collection of short fiction, Hot Chicken Wings (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1992; distributed by Inland Books), was a 1993 Lambda Literary Award Finalist.