



JEWISH MOSAIC THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR SEXUAL & GENDER DIVERSITY
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torah QUEERIES

Welcome to Torah Queeries, a joint project of Jewish Mosaic and the World Congress of GLBT Jews! Check back regularly for creative and incisive “queer” takes on the weekly Torah portion or Jewish holiday, brought to you by some of the Jewish world’s most dynamic scholars, rabbis, activists and lay leaders.

Harry Potter and the Rainbow Connection

by **Chaim Moshe ha Levi (Marc Howard Landas)**

Parashat Yom Kippur – Leviticus 16:1-34; Numbers 29:7-11

on Saturday September 22, 2007 (10 Tishrei 5768)

[with thanks to Kermit the Frog]

(Spoiler alert! Details of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows are revealed below.)

Why are there so many songs about rainbows
and what’s on the other side?
Rainbows are visions, but only illusions,
and rainbows have nothing to hide.
So we’ve been told and some choose to believe it.
I know they’re wrong, wait and see.
Someday we’ll find it, the rainbow connection.
The lovers, the dreamers and me.

This week we observe the most sacred of holidays in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur. A day of self-denial, traditionally one does not eat, drink, bathe, anoint oneself, wear leather shoes or have sexual relations. This tenth day of Tishrei culminates ten days of repentance, the Aseret Y’mei Teshuvah, during which we reflect on our lives. We take account of the past twelve months, especially changes in health, relationships, finances and other everyday concerns. We take special note of those who have been born, married and passed on. We make amends to other people we have harmed and consider how we might lead more productive lives in the year ahead. In the midst of all of this we confront our very souls and our potential mortality.

One of the highlights of this past year for many of us was the publication of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. I, like so many others, had eagerly awaited the mid-July release of the final book in the Harry Potter series. Like many devoted readers, I had guessed at what would happen and,

admittedly, perhaps due to the influence of several things I had read in advance of the publication date, I anticipated a specific plot line.

I knew Harry, Hermione and Ron would be going on a quest. I knew their task would be especially challenging given the death of Harry's mentor, Dumbledore, at the end of the previous novel. Furthermore, I had fully expected Harry to ultimately engage Voldemort in a showdown. What I hadn't known is the toll their adventure would take on them and so many other characters. Likewise, I had fully expected and prepared myself for Harry's death. Although I was concerned about how problematic that event would be for younger readers, I envisioned Harry sacrificing himself to save others from the incarnation of evil itself. I had never expected Harry would survive.

According to tradition, the plot lines of our lives are inscribed in a heavenly book on Rosh HaShana and sent to press, as it were, on Yom Kippur. On this holiest of days, adorned in our robes, or *kittels*, we contemplate our individual and collective humanity and fate. To accommodate this introspection, the day is liturgically replete with prayers and songs intended to repent for physical, emotional, and spiritual offenses against God. Kol Nidrei, the initial prayer on Yom Kippur, concerns itself with annulling future unfulfilled obligations. In this manner, one theme of Yom Kippur is to proactively request that God offer each individual a clean slate for the next year, through next Yom Kippur, so that any slip-ups s/he may make between now and then have already been forgiven. Balancing this is the *Viddui*, also known as *Ashamnu* and *Al Chet*, confessional prayers repeated ten times throughout Yom Kippur, in which we communally confess a full complement of sins already committed during this past year by the Jewish community as a whole. This year, however, since Yom Kippur falls on Shabbat we do not say *Avinu Malkeinu*, since prayers of Selichot, penitential prayers, are inconsistent with the joy of Shabbat.

We enter into Yom Kippur fully aware of God's compassionate nature. Yet it is foolish to deceive ourselves into presuming that absolution is a done deal. Divine mercy does not exempt us from the holy work that must be done in order to earn spiritual favor. Just as the *piyyut* (a type of poem), "Ki Hineh Kachomer," indicates, a favorable relationship with God depends upon our willingness to be malleable. Just as any artisan uses her or his materials to fashion something constructive, we humans, literal clay beings, must acknowledge that for the best to be brought out of us, we resolve to surrender to God's design.

Most people who attend Yom Kippur afternoon services know to expect two things, a Torah portion taken from Vayikra (Leviticus) and the story of Jonah. In traditional congregations the *parasha* is especially problematic for LGBTIQ people, as it labels homosexuality an abomination (Reform congregations traditionally read a different section of Leviticus on this day). I will not get into the nature of Leviticus 18:22. Enough has been written about it to dispel the fire-and-brimstone misheggas condemning LGBTIQ people. Instead, I offer in consolation to those who are angry or unnerved about the passage, the humorous sentiment found on a certain Pride greeting card. It says, "The [Judeo-Christian] Bible contains six admonishments to homosexuals and 362 to heterosexuals. This doesn't mean that God doesn't love heterosexuals, it's just that they need more supervision." As the inside of the card states, "Be proud of who you are."

While much of the tradition of Yom Kippur centers on what not to do, it is within the haftarah read during the morning, in Chapter 58 of Isaiah, that we find an indication of what God truly does want of us.

⁵ Is such the fast I desire,
A day for men to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast,

A day when the Lord is favorable?
⁶ No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock the fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.
⁷ It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.

God wants us to pursue justice, to treat people with the very same compassion that is being afforded us in having both past and future indiscretions wiped clean prior to the closing of the gates at Neilah, the final prayer service of this holiest of days.

We the Harrys, Hermiones and Rons of the world, have a wonderful opportunity to spend this day of At-Onement dispensing with earthy concerns, concentrating all of our attention and efforts in achieving at-oneness with the Divine. Like Ron, or Jonah for that matter, halfway through the journey we can turn tail and run only to discover, later on, that one cannot run from his responsibilities. Like Hermione, even when we are broken of spirit, against all odds, we can endure, relying on intellect rather than emotion. Or, like Harry himself, we can look into the face of Voldemort, facing certain death, and muster up all our courage to confront and eventually defeat whatever form evil takes.

We, LGBTIQ Jews and our straight allies, can commit to doing better in 5768 than we have done in 5767. We can establish a renewed rainbow connection, entering into a renewed covenant with God. Like Harry, we can look forward into the unknown, with head held high, committed to doing what is right at any cost. In lieu of waving wands and casting spells we can do acts of *gemilut chasadim* (loving kindness). We can rely on powers greater than any of those learned at Hogwarts—teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedaka. It is up to us, the Queer Muggles of the world, to determine whether the pages of this next year of history will be full of the ordinary or chock-full of magic.

About the Author:



Chaim Moshe haLevi (Marc Howard Landas) is a secular and religious educator who resides in Brooklyn, NY. A transdenominational Q-Jew, he has participated in Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, and Jewish Renewal communities as a congregant, student, teacher, and worship leader. He has served as panelist at the Queer Urban Retreat at NYU, treasurer of Keshet at JTS, and chevruta at **SVARA—a Traditionally Radical Yeshiva**. A wannabe Rav and hope to be adoptive dad, he is searching for that special someone with whom to share his life.