



JEWISH MOSAIC THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY

P.O BOX 18743 DENVER, CO 80218 T: 303.691.3562 F: 303.557.6211 WWW.JEWISHMOSAIC.ORG

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.

And Jacob came out...

by **Maggid Jhos Singer**

Parashat Vayetzei – Genesis 28:10-32:3

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Do you remember the first moment you stumbled out of the closet? I don’t mean the first moment that you privately realized you were queer (and by ‘queer’ here I mean whatever differentness you might manifest that isn’t readily apparent to a casual observer), or even when you first acted on your queer tendencies. What I’m thinking of is the first moment that you actually stood in the light of day, as it were, being totally out—just you showing up fully, unhidden, true. You know, your first Meg Christian concert or the first time you marched in an LGBT Pride Parade, the first time you wore a yarmulke/kippah out in the general public, or the first time you corrected a stranger who assumed you were something that you’re not. Thrilling wasn’t it? Scary, but really incredible, right? I remember feeling broken open and alive in a way that was totally new, awesome, and powerful. While it feels kind of corny to admit it, it really was a spiritual experience.

For many of us, this first coming out happens in the most unlikely of places—in a bar with a floor tacky with spilled drinks, during a song with abysmally PC lyrics, in a small bland meeting room with florescent lighting, or in a synagogue that we finally got up the courage to enter. One moment the dark closet door was closed and the next moment, **BLAM**, it burst open and the light flooded in. I remember the rush of that moment, I could feel the past fluttering wildly like a ribbon whipping in the wind, and spread out before me lay the wilderness of my truth and a future that exceeded my wildest dreams...

In this week’s parasha, Vayeitzei, the Torah offers all who are weird, odd, visionary, queer, misunderstood and outcast, a most dramatic and accurate coming out story. Our anti-hero, Jacob (Ya’akov in Hebrew), finds himself running for his life after he bamboozles his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing that rightfully belonged to his brother, Esau. It’s a horrible moment: not only has Jacob filched his brother’s blessing, but he has done so at the insistence of his mother, Rebecca.

The classical interpretation of why this deceit occurs is as follows: Rebecca knows that it is Jacob, not Esau, who is destined to continue the fledgling spiritual vision of his father and grandfather. No one else sees it, so Rebecca must orchestrate the deception of her husband. On the surface Esau is the strong, capable firstborn son. He can hunt, provide, and protect. Jacob? Oy, he’s the original ‘mama’s boy’. He hangs out with the women, he putters around the tent, he’s a 45 kilo weakling and he’s kind of a brat. He scams, he connives, he cheats, he follows treacherous orders, and then, he runs. On the surface, Jacob is anything but noble—a lousy

brother and a disgrace to his father. But that is before he experiences that moment in which total darkness finally shatters. In that moment of shattering, he is freed from a limited identity. Somehow, Rebecca knows that he has something great inside, and she sets the events into motion that will afford him the opportunity to ‘come out.’

“Vayeitzei Ya’akov” (“and Jacob came out...”) – Genesis 28:10

The action that begins this week’s scriptural installment is when Jacob ‘comes out’ of his old patterns, his home, his family. He is in the wilderness, totally out of his element, alone and scared. He could run back and trick his brother into forgiving him. He could find a way to stay safe back in familiar surroundings. But this time he doesn’t rely on his old tricks; instead he enters uncharted territory without any of his normal defenses. He runs away from everything he has known. He finally collapses* “at a place”—the sun has faded, he is in the dark, he lays down there, he sleeps and he dreams. In his dream, Jacob sees a ladder reaching from the earth to heaven, and there are God-workers climbing up and down on it. God is standing beside him telling him that the land that he is laying on is going to be his and his descendents, that he will have descendents like the dust of the earth, that those descendants will spread out and bless the earth, and that God will always be with him. He wakes up the next morning and he says, “Surely there is God in this place, and I, I did not know!” He is in total awe, and in this somewhat altered state, his journey of transformation begins. After one night alone in the wilderness, Jacob emerges as a visionary, a sojourner, a lover. He brings forth movement and strength, passion and patience. It is truly an amazing story.

And it is our story. Many of us can pinpoint the moment when we “arrived at a place” terrified, heart pumping, alone and anxious, but from which we finally did not run. Like Jacob, it is only after we ‘enter’ the darkness that we realize how easily darkness is shattered. Queer folks have been accused of being small, weak, perverse people. When we try to hide, when we use deceit and lies to cover up our truth, we can become small and weak. But, like Jacob, when we come out we show the world a wisdom and strength that all people are blessed by. For each of us, when we choose our dreams over our fear, when we accept our own experience and no longer let others define who we are, a moment comes. We step out of that concert or club or synagogue or meeting; we walk away from a conversation with our integrity intact; we show up awake and amazed, mumbling to ourselves that surely God is in this place, this closet, this darkness and we, we did not know. But now we do...

Surely there is God in this place.

*The text says, “Vayif’ga ba’makom” sometimes translated as “and he came upon a place” (JPS translation). The verb ‘pagaw’ is much more swirly than that, however. It could mean, he encountered/hit/struck/hurt/begged/prayed at a place.

About the Author:



Maggid Jhos Singer received ordination/semicha from Rabbi Gershon Winkler in 2002, and has served the [Coastside Jewish Community](#) in Half Moon Bay, California, as their rabbi/maggid since 2000. Jhos holds a degree in music from UCLA and when he isn’t preaching to the flock he is playing and singing with them. Maggid Singer especially loves teaching on the paradoxical, profound, perilous and paranormal ways of the Jewish path. Being transgender, Maggid Singer is well suited to understand and transmit the Torah’s many contradictions and complexities with insight, love, deep faith and good humor. Singer lives in Berkeley, California, where he tends a clutch of young children and enjoys a wonderful relationship with his bashert.