

# **Queering the Library: The importance of including GLBT resources in Jewish Libraries**

**By Andrea M. Jacobs, PhD**

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The title of this paper, “Queering the Jewish Library,” refers to a process that has as its goal the creation of Jewish communities and institutions that are welcoming and inclusive of all Jews in today’s diverse and multi-faceted Jewish world. As librarians, you hold one of the most important keys to this

process: the development of a collection of books and other resources that is truly representative of the full spectrum of Jewish voices and identities that are found in the contemporary Jewish reality.

So what exactly is this process of “queering the library”? What does it mean in the context of mainstream Jewish institutions? Let me start by examining the word “queer” as both a noun and a verb. For some the use of the word “queer” in this context may be familiar, but I suspect that for others the use of “queer” in a positive sense, let alone as a verb, may be new. So for the sake of clarity, let us briefly examine the history of this term and how it has come to be used in contemporary gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) contexts.

Historically, the term “queer” was used as a derogatory word for homosexuals or for anyone who did not fit into Western society’s concepts of normative gender and sexual identity. If you look the word up in a standard dictionary it is listed as synonymous with “odd, strange, or funny”; in other words, out of the ordinary and not

necessarily in a good way. But since the late 1980s with the advent of “Queer Nation” a gay rights activist organization, gay, GLBT people have been reclaiming this term. Over the past ten years, there has been an explosion of positive uses of the term, from Queer Studies programs in academia to political and community organizing groups. For younger generations, “queer” has become an empowering and affirming term used to describe an identity that does not fit neatly into other existing labels used to define sexual and/or gender identities.

That is the noun “queer.” But what does it mean when used as a verb? In his essay, “Out at School: A Queer Jewish Education,” David Shneer, states:

*“Queering”* is about breaking normative models of Jewish values, heroes, and history and emphasizing different aspects of Jewish culture and tradition. In this, queering has much in common with feminist efforts to change curricula in order to remake what it is to be Jewish.<sup>1</sup>

The process of queering is not necessarily intended to replace more traditional interpretive modes for Jewish text, but rather to push the boundaries in ways that are consistent with the text and allow GLBT Jews to find themselves and their stories in Jewish sources.

Queering is the active process of engaging with and challenging our concepts of what is normative, and whom we are including when we speak about “the Jewish community.” With respect to your roles as Jewish librarians, queering means opening your collections and your institutions to the full range of perspectives on homosexuality and gender identity to reflect the multiplicity of voices on these topics within the contemporary Jewish community. Queering is also about creating an historical corrective, because GLBT people, and the issues of inclusion of GLBT people, are topics that Jews

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<sup>1</sup> Queer Jews. 2002. Aviv, Caryn and David Shneer. P.143 -144.

and Jewish communities have been discussing and wrestling with for centuries. And, while many of the traditional sources are either critical or condemnatory, the fact that the conversations took place at all is, in and of itself, evidence that GLBT people have been part of the community throughout Jewish history. The challenge today is to bring the texts and resources that present more positive and affirming perspectives into our libraries and collections.

Queering is also about responding to a very real need in our community, a need for us to include the voices of those who feel marginalized because their experiences are not reflected in what are presented as the canonical texts of Jewish thought and culture. In the 2003 LGBT Awareness and Education in Jewish Day Schools Report conducted by the LGBT Education Collaborative in San Francisco, a survey of the climate in seven Jewish day schools across the country showed that students, teachers, and families that identified as GLBT and their allies felt a “deafening silence” on the place of GLBT Jews in their communities. This silence is not just experienced at day schools or Hebrew schools but is also felt on college campuses at Hillels and within Jewish Studies departments. This is not to say that every Hillel, Jewish Studies department, day school, or synagogue is silent or hostile – we know that is not true – but rather that many GLBT Jews and their families continue to feel excluded despite the increasing tolerance of GLBT people in secular and Jewish contexts. The question is why. What is the gap between tolerance and inclusion? And what can Jewish librarians do to bridge it? In this paper, I attempt to answer that question in a way that is meaningful to the librarians of our community.

To illustrate the importance of books and libraries, I want to share two stories that reflect the experiences of GLBT Jews searching for themselves and their place in Jewish community. The first story is meant to illustrate the point that the books we have in our libraries do indeed shape the way Jewish youth understand themselves and to underscore the care we need to take in deciding what we include. Yonatan, a 13-year-old boy just weeks before his bar mitzvah, went to the *Encyclopedia Judaica* to look up the word homosexual in hope of finding answers to his own questions. What he found – the only thing he found – was an article by Rabbi Norman Lamm that pathologized homosexual desire and homosexuals in accordance with the conservative perspective prevalent at the time. What the *Encyclopedia Judaica* told Yonatan was that he was sick, abnormal. He carried this view of his emerging sexual identity with him to the bima on his bar mitzvah day. After Yonatan chanted from the Torah and gave his first d’var Torah, the rabbi spoke of welcoming him as an adult into the Jewish community. Yet Yonatan could only think to himself, “if they knew what I really was, they would not be saying those things, they would not be welcoming me into the community.”

Yonatan’s story takes place in the late 1970s and certainly since that time, both Jewish and secular perspectives about homosexuals and homosexual desire have changed. But the reality is that there are still many libraries where a Jewish teen questioning his/her (hetero)sexuality will not find texts that offer affirming and positive images of gay Jews. By contrast, s/he will encounter sources that send the message: what you are isn’t natural, isn’t right; the Jewish community does not embrace you as your full self.

The second story is more contemporary. It concerns Shulamit Izen, the protagonist in the documentary film *Hineini: Coming Out in a Jewish High School*. In the opening scene of the film, Shulamit describes the role that books played when she was first coming to identify and understand her sexual orientation:

I didn't know any lesbians. I didn't have anyone to help me understand how I was feeling. So, I found the support I would've gotten from people in the books in the library. I would go with my mom. My mom would be downstairs looking at the magazines, and I would go curl up with the books on "what does it mean that you think you're gay," and you know, "a gay teen resource guide," just reading it, trying to figure out if this was me, if there were other people out there, if anyone was Jewish and gay?

Unlike Yonatan, Shulamit got support from the books she found. Alone in the library stacks, she spent hours looking at books that affirm what she was feeling as healthy and normal. These books gave her the strength to seek support from adults and peers in her community. Ultimately, this initial encounter with positive representations of GLBT identity and experience set Shulamit on a path to effect transformative change in her own Jewish community.

The generational gap between Yonatan's experiences in the late 1970s and Shulamit's in the late 1990s can account for the fact that Shulamit's search produced supportive and affirming books. But there are similarities in their stories that are relevant to you as librarians of Jewish institutions. At a time of uncertainty, both Yonatan and Shulamit turn to books in their attempt to understand themselves and their experiences. This should not be surprising to us as Jews; it makes sense sociologically, culturally. Jews have always turned to books, to the writings of previous generations and of our contemporaries to situate ourselves in society and to understand ourselves in the

community and the world. The books that Yonatan and Shulamit found – and did not find – left them wondering if, and how, their Jewish communities had a place for them. What would it have meant to Yonatan and Shula if they had found even one text in their Jewish libraries that reflected the existence of gay Jews in a non-condemnatory way? How many other young Jewish men and women go searching in the libraries of their Jewish schools or institutions only to find a profound absence of texts and resources that can speak to them as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender Jews? Both Yonatan and Shulamit's stories speak to the need to have texts in our Jewish libraries that reflect the reality that there are many queer Jews and multiple entry points for GLBT Jews into Jewish community and tradition.

Yonatan's story is also a cautionary tale about being sure that we include a multiplicity of voices and perspectives on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues and experience in our collections. In every library, there are texts that reflect strict patriarchal or ethnocentric visions of the Jewish world, visions that do not include the experiences of women, Mizrahi or Ethiopian Jews, or Jews by choice. We do not purge these texts from our libraries; that would be dishonest and short-sighted. What we do instead is to include other texts that speak from the experiences of these Jews: texts that stand as counters to earlier, more limited concepts of Judaism and Jewish community. As Jews, we engage with text, and when the existing texts do not seem to address the contemporary experience we see around us, we create new texts, offer new interpretations that resonate with both history and the present.

Of course there are those who will criticize you for including books on GLBT topics in your library. There are those who will say that these texts have no place in a

Jewish library; that you should not be presenting gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender identities as something positive; that you should not be showing queer Jews who lead happy, integrated lives. To these critics, I encourage you to remind them that it is the library's role to be a compendium of literature reflecting the reality of people's lives, the full range of Jewish thought and expression, past and present. You can point out that your library includes texts representing traditional Jewish views of homosexuality and explain why it would be dishonest not to include texts that represent progressive views as well.

Those of you who are librarians in day schools may also be accused of exposing young children to "sex" or "sexuality" by virtue of having books with gay characters or books about coming out or gay identity. To these critics I would reply that by having books or sources in your library that condemn homosexuality you already are exposing children to "sex" and "sexuality." Again, having only these sources would present a skewed, limited view of the lived experience of GLBT Jews and a selective view of Jewish thought on the topic.

Judaism has struggled with the issue of homosexuality and gender identity for generations, and the questions and the conclusions have varied across time, religious perspective, and personal experience. No one answer can meet the needs of every Jew; the more voices we represent, the more likely it is that the next Jewish youth or adult to come into our libraries searching will find affirmation. An inclusive library is not just for those Jews who are questioning or who identify as GLBT or come from families with GLBT members, it is for all of us. The central question that I want you to consider is what kind of Judaism and Jewish community do you want your libraries to represent, a multi-vocal perspective, or one that presents Judaism and Jewish culture as a monolith on

this issue. There are many excellent resources and texts on GLBT issues that should be in your libraries. The list includes texts written by queer Jews, texts by rabbis and other scholars examining the issues of sexual orientation and gender identity from Jewish legal and theological perspectives, historians looking at the contributions of queer Jews to Jewish and secular culture, and the personal stories of youth and adults who are both Jewish and queer.

There are also several “secular” texts that are explicitly about GLBT issues of identity and experience. I think it is important to include these texts in your libraries as well, particularly for those of you who are librarians of school and community center libraries where Jewish children (and adults) come for resources to better understand themselves and their experiences. Having these ostensibly “secular” texts in your libraries sends a clear signal to everyone that this is a topic of concern and interest to members of the Jewish community.

In closing, I want to return to the verb in my title -- “queering” -- and the actions I would like to encourage you to take with respect to your roles as Jewish librarians to create more inclusive Jewish communities. When in a new institution or the home of a new friend, we have all, I suspect, had the experience of perusing the books on the shelves in an attempt to get a better sense of where we are, of who we are dealing with, and of whether or not we have anything in common with the person or the people who have amassed this collection of books. In a very real way, library collections reflect, among other things, how a Jewish institution or Jewish Studies department understands its community and the topics that interest it. Queering the library is not just about adding books or other resources on sexual orientation or gender identity issues. Rather, queering

the library is about challenging, questioning, subverting, and playing with what has been perceived and promoted, actively or passively, as the accepted normative canon of Jewish thought and culture.

Queering is, as I have said, an active process of using our libraries to continue the Jewish tradition of questioning and struggling with what it has meant, and what it now means to be a Jew. It is about acknowledging through our collections and the resources made available, in a manner that may seem simple but I hope through this paper I have shown can be profound, that there are many kinds of Jews, many ways to be a Jew, and many perspectives on how our religion and our culture understand the different issues that confront us. It is also a way of saying that these perspectives, some of which may be in direct conflict with one another, can exist simultaneously and in conversation with one another.

The rabbis, as they debated and recorded their interpretations of Torah, were careful to always include the minority opinion of every argument. This is no accident. It reflects a commitment to preserving all the voices and perspectives. It speaks of the respect they had for the process of struggling with text, and the integrity that all of them brought to that task. I think that as contemporary Jews it is our responsibility to follow their lead, and as librarians, you are uniquely positioned to carry on the commitment of Jews to honoring the pluralism of voices that exists in our contemporary Jewish reality.

### **References**

*Queer Jews*. Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, eds. NY: Routledge, 2002.

*Hineini: Coming Out in a Jewish High School* Directed by Irena Fayngold, produced by Keshet 2005. [www.hineinithefilm.org](http://www.hineinithefilm.org)

LGBT Awareness and Education in Jewish Day Schools. Final Report of the LGBT Education Collaborative of San Francisco. July 2003. Report author, Rachel Timoner.

*For more information about resources by and about gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Jews or to obtain a copy of the bibliography provided as a handout with this talk please contact Andrea Jacobs, Director of Education at Keshet. Email [andrea@boston-keshet.org](mailto:andrea@boston-keshet.org) or phone 617-524-9227.*