

GIFTS OF THE QUEERS

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This week's Torah portion is *Terumah*. It is a *parashah* about giving, about generosity. The Children of Israel give gifts in order to build a *mikdash*, a holy place, to conjure a collective holiness. In this hard moment of this desecrated world, reconstituting the sacred is more important than ever. So we are all called to give our gifts, which means noticing the gifts we have to give.

And since my being here is always a good opportunity to do something queer, I decided to offering a short survey of the Gifts of the Queers – not the usual arts-and-culture kinds of things that are the typical go-tos. But instead some of the contributions that queer thinking and activism and lives have made to our communal holiness.

Don't worry, it will be fun. Like Pride Festival, but wildly out of Christmas in July.

If at any point you're overcome with gratitude and need to shout out, "Thank you, Queers," please feel free to do so. No one ever can be thanked enough.

So we will do this countdown style, beginning with:



Gift #7. Love.

Queer people did not invent love. But LGBTQ people have much to say about it. We know what it is like to risk everything for it. We know what it is like to negotiate love without the crutch of gender roles to fall back on. Most of us know what it was like, for many years, to love without benefit of marriage or social recognition. To love despite disapproval. We know what it is like to love lavishly, fiercely, sequentially or simultaneously, without the advantage or constraints of convention. We know love to be of greater importance than a whole mess of shoulds.

And what the world needs now is love – sweet love. It's not the only thing but it is *a* thing that there's just too little of. More love is good for everyone; more love is good for the Jews. When we're doing our interfaith relations, when we're arguing about Israel and Palestine, when we have our tense and traumatized Jewish conversations, wouldn't a little more love be good? Love.



Gift #6. Marriage. It was predicted by some that by allowing gay people to marry, we queer people would, singlehandedly, destroy the institution of marriage. For some of us, that was what made it worth going for.

I am instead amused to announce that we, the queer people of North America, have made marriage great again.

Before the marriage equality movement, marriage was – face it – in a slump. The role models were not good. Britney Spears, drunk in a Vegas wedding chapel. People entered into marriage unthinkingly, impulsively. And half the marriages didn't last. Marriage's stock had plummeted.

But we, in our same-sex marriage quest, with our photogenic octogenarians waiting in line in San Francisco for wedding licenses; with our public testimony and our court battles, we made marriage desirable again, valuable. The US (at least) saw that marriage was worth fighting for. I don't think we notice this quite enough.¹

Same-sex marriage is also a gift to Judaism and I'll tell you how.

Traditional Jewish marriage is based on a model of acquisition. A man acquires a woman or acquires her exclusivity. The ring and the *harei at mekudeshet* language are holdovers of that. Traditional divorce requires him to release her; she has no authority to release him.

Progressive Jews have tried to undo it, to rethink it, to announce that this language is metaphorical without asking why, if it's only metaphorical, we still do it at all. We have tried reciprocity – having the bride say to groom the same language the groom just said to the bride. And in the progressive Jewish world that largely works. But the Orthodox would look at the same ceremony and consider the groom's words to be binding and the bride's words to be noise. And egalitarian straight couples can land in a horribly

1. I am grateful to Anne Tamar-Mattis for this insight.

unequalitarian place if they somehow brush up against the world of Orthodoxy, in Israel or the Diaspora.

And we, on the progressive edge, manage it by not looking too closely. We modify traditional Jewish wedding language and keep our fingers crossed.

But then here we queers waltz into the *chupah* with all our blatant undeniable same-sexedness, and *halachah* is puzzled into silence, unable to discern who is acquiring whom. Obviously the Orthodox world would not recognize our marriages to begin with. But the Jewish world that is willing to marry same-sex couples now at last has to get serious about getting creative. Scholar Rachel Adler has created one good alternative model of marriage built on Talmudic partnership law. And there are other ideas we haven't tried yet. But when we develop something that works for same-sex couples and that we all find beautiful and binding, it will work for everyone. And that will be a gift for everyone.

Okay, after love and marriage, the next gift might logically be:



Gift #5. Family. Here's what we have to offer Judaism and the world about family. Queers have learned how to create family in unexpected and organic ways. Many of us formed families of friends. Having children, for us, requires special thought and planning and technology. And we sometimes bring these children into creative family arrangements – with multiple adults – exes, friends, an army of aunties – all playing a role in raising chil-

dren who will, by the way, never have cause to doubt how wanted they were.

Queer families know the difference between biology and kinship, and that is something we can bring to the Jewish world. We are family because of how we live, who we are, not how we were conceived.

And as we Jews continue our never-ending conversation about *who is a Jew*, maybe we queers can be a gentle vote for a post-biological era, where a child's home and relationships and practices and desires are as or more important in determining their Jewishness than inquiring whose egg and whose sperm were involved, which, by the way, is never an okay thing to do. Trust me. I could tell you stories.

In teaching an expanded notion of family, we don't have to look outside of Judaism's own stories. Consider Ruth and Naomi who, by vow and by practice, created family with each other. So much so that when *Ruth*, at the end of the story at last has a baby, the neighbor women say, "a child is born to *Naomi*." This is a story of kinship that is voluntary, kinship that is recognized by community, kinship that is decoupled from gender and genetics. And while we're mentioning gender...



Gift #4. Freedom from Gender. Queer people, probably without exception, have had to negotiate gender. All queer people have had to question

how binding the rules and requirements of gender would be on them. Some queer people live in a gender they were not raised in. Some queer people are pioneering what it is like to live in a different gender altogether or no particular gender at all. Queer people have been and still are punished for transgressions against gender, and we keep coming back – responding bravely, playfully, cautiously, heroically.

We have taught and we have modeled that gender doesn't have to be this way, so obligatory, so limiting, so insistent. And that, I hope, can be freeing for everyone.

If we gender is dynamic and flexible, and we are all *tzelem Elohim*, the image of the Divine, then how much more dynamic and flexible does our understanding of God become? How freeing not to be stuck in the gendered God-rut, speaking of God as "he" and "king" and "father" and then trying to make up for it by periodically saying "Shechinah" as an antidote. Or dodging gender by going off of anthropomorphic God language so entirely that God is too abstract to love.

Imagine seeing our richer, more varied, experience of gender as the reflection of God in this world. I can practically hear our collective sigh of sweet relief, like our mothers used to make taking off a girdle that was on for too many hours. Gender. Let us unhook it, let our ribs re-expand, so we can at last take a deep, unfettered breath.



Gift #3. Outsider Outlook. Sometimes when you stand in the center, you don't know which way to look. But the perspective of the outsider can bring great clarity. From outside a system, you sometimes see what the mechanics of the system are, the assumptions built in, and you can articulate that.

This is not just a queer phenomenon, but a Jewish one. Jewish humor is all about observing assumptions and revealing them as arbitrary. A favorite Jewish joke goes like this: Malkah and Sonja are talking over the fence. Malkah says, "Sonja, did you hear? We're not in Russia anymore. Now we're in Poland!" Sonja responds, "Thank God. I couldn't stand another Russian winter."

For the non-Jewish world, national boundaries were natural and essential. To Jewish eyes they were arbitrary to the point of comedic. This is the role of the margin: to point to the center and question it. A delicious quality shared by Jews and Queers.



Gift #2. Political Correctness. This one is, admittedly, a tangent. Not specifically Jewish and not specifically queer. But it is something that I think needs rehabilitation.

Queers did not invent the phrase "politically correct" – although it was in queer feminist circles that I first learned it in the 1980s. It was an ironic

borrowing from Stalinist circles where "politically correct" meant following the party line. It was ironic because we on the Left really had no power.

But it referred to our shared and evolving relationship to social change. New voices of disempowered people's experience were bringing new understandings and creating a demand for new actions. We were expected to – and wanted to – take these to heart and employ them in our lives. We joked about this being political correctness; we wanted to do these things, even if it was uncomfortable, and perhaps it was not fair to invent the political correctness barb, because it reflected our privilege, and because it got stolen from us, and it has done damage.

Now it is the Right's favorite critique of the compassion of the Left. Advocating for Muslims or immigrants or people of color or the the right of transgender people to use a public restroom safely – these get you branded as politically corrected, and then instantly dismissed.

So I say is time to reclaim this moral turf. When accused of being PC, it is time to say yes, I am PC: Persistently caring. Proudly compassionate. A channel of Pure Chesed.

And finally:



Gift #1. Joy. Sitting in this dire moment of the world throws me back to the direst times of the AIDS epidemic. We were angry and outraged and still, gay pride festivals were grand celebrations. Celebration remained a re-

quirement. Even our activism was done creatively, glamorously, extravagantly.

The Children of Israel were not instructed to build the *mikdash* after arriving to the Promised Land. Instead. But in the Wilderness, at the beginning of a long and uncertain journey. There, in the fearful not-knowing, they were invited to offer their gifts.

We too must share our gifts now, make beauty now, create holiness now, celebrate and love now. Even in the own desert. We must pour out our gifts, our own gold and silver and acacia wood.

So let us do our hard work in this world, and do it with extra glitter, extra glamour, extra love. Let us all be queer, all willing to adapt and survive and celebrate.

Va'asu li mikdash v'Shakhanti b'tokham – and may the Divine truly dwell among us.