

**At the Intersection of Judaism and Sexuality:  
Looking at the LGBTQ Experience through the Lens of Jewish  
History, Liturgy, and Theology**

Study and Discussion Guide  
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5780 New York 2020

## **Introduction**

In the introduction to *Mishkan Ga'avah: Where Pride Dwells*, Rabbi Denise Eger explains, "This collection of prayers and blessings portrays the LGBTQ experience for what it is and as what it should be acknowledged as: an integral part of Jewish community life. This is what true inclusion looks like." This study guide is meant to help clergy, educators, and lay leaders open the Jewish conversation to the LGBTQ experiences voiced in the book.

Through lesson plans, activity guides, and discussion questions, this guide offers creative ways to use *Mishkan Ga'avah* for adult and teen Jewish education, interfaith learning sessions, inspiration for sermons, and the celebration of Jewish life in all of its colorful variations.

The study guide may be used for a six-session class as follows:

### **Session 1: LGBTQ Jews and Their Place in Jewish History, Storytelling, Law, and Liturgy**

#### Part 1: Creating Inclusive Liturgy (sessions 2–4)

**Session 2:** Comparing *Mishkan T'filah* Prayers with *Mishkan Ga'avah* Prayers: Weekdays and Shabbat

**Session 3:** Comparing *Mishkan T'filah* Prayers with *Mishkan Ga'avah* Prayers: A Calendar for Jewish LGBTQ Life

**Session 4:** Non-binary Language for God and Us: Expanding Our Notion of God and Gender

#### Part 2: LGBTQ Theology and Jewish History (sessions 5–6)

**Session 5:** Gender Fluidity in Jewish Text

**Session 6:** Same-Sex Relations across the Centuries

## Session 1: LGBTQ Jews and Their Place in Jewish History, Storytelling, Law, and Liturgy

**Theme:** LGBTQ Jews and their place in the Jewish experience

**Quote:**

“I sprint toward it—our past, our present, our future—  
and, with all my might, break the door off its hinges.

I pant, breathless, on the other side.

I want to scream, but instead, I whisper: “*We are here. We are here.*”

—from “We Have Always Been” by Dave Yedid, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 152

**Goals:**

This introductory session is meant to open a conversation with and about LGBTQ Jews and Judaism, and their place in Jewish history, storytelling, law, and liturgy. It can be a standalone 80- to 90-minute session, or the beginning of a full series on LGBTQ theology, history, and experiences.

**Materials:**

- Eger, Rabbi Denise L., ed. 2020. *Mishkan Ga'avah: Where Pride Dwells*. New York: CCAR Press.
- Sienna, Noam, ed. 2019. *A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century to 1969*. Philadelphia: Print-O-Craft Press. (Excerpts provided below)
- Copies of the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, found here: <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/> (Excerpts provided below)
- Frishman, Rabbi Elyse D., ed. 2007. *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur*. New York: CCAR Press.
- Large poster paper
- Markers

**Conversation and Activity Guide:**

**Introduction:** How do we speak to and about LGBTQ Jews and Judaism in our communities? How much space do we give to their voices? How can our liturgies reflect their needs and lives? Up until recently, Jewish LGBTQ experiences have largely been erased and hidden from Jewish historical accounts, yet, as Dave Yedid writes, “we have always been.” To begin this potentially challenging conversation, start by posting four large poster sheets around the room. On each one, write one of the following statements:

- “Gay life is spiritual life. Queer life can be holy life.”—Loren Ostrow (*Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. xxiii)
- “Jacob placed upon his arms Esau’s sheepskins / closeting himself in his brother’s masculinity in that / famous lie to Isaac. / But, years later, they would embrace / and Esau would cry on his neck.”—from “A Prayer for Closeted Individuals” by Dave Yedid (*Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 33)
- “Sexuality is God’s life-giving and life-fulfilling gift.”—from “A Responsive Reading (Based on the Religious Declaration for Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing)” by The Religious Institute (*Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 135)
- “How good it is to gather in a rainbow of affections and orientations, in *beit Adonai*, the house of God, who loves each of us as we are created, who loves without limit and forever.”—from “In the House of God: Addition to *Mah Tov*” by Rabbi Denise L. Eger (*Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 168)

Each participant should receive a marker as they walk in. Explain to the class that they will have time to walk around the room, read the quotes, and fill in the rest of each poster paper with answers to the following questions:

- Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- What images or thoughts does it conjure up in your mind?
- What do you think the author is trying to tell us? What are they responding to?

Allow 10–15 minutes for this activity, depending on the size of the group.

Once participants have had a chance to respond to the prompts, they should reconvene to read some of the responses out loud. Allow time for the group to discuss the kinds of questions and thoughts that the prompts raised. Did anything make them feel uncomfortable? Have there been any LGBTQ issues in the news recently? Do they believe there is a need for “a celebration of LGBTQ Jewish life and ritual” in the current climate?

We suggest that the rest of the lesson be set up as stations, each with its own table and materials. Participants will break into small groups of 3–4 (depending on the size of the class) and will get 10–15 minutes per station. Topics will revolve around LGBTQ history and Jewish theology. Participants will be invited to speak about their assumptions of Jewish LGBTQ experiences and the ways those might nourish liturgical creativity.

### **Station 1: Medieval Homoerotic Poetry**

What did Jewish LGBTQ experiences look like in past centuries? Although we may use different terms and language for LGBTQ experiences today, medieval Jewish poetry provides some examples of historic LGBTQ love stories. Some of those poems follow the Arabic poetic form of *ash'ar al-ghazal*, a genre of love songs. Although we have a letter from a prominent tenth-

century rabbi forbidding Arab influence on Jewish liturgical music, this form was an important part of Jewish culture for hundreds of years (*A Rainbow Thread*, p. 51–52).

Read the following poems out loud and discuss the guiding questions:

- What do you think the poet is trying to say in each excerpted poem?
- What metaphors and images are used in these love poems?
- Which one are you drawn to? Why?

1. Shmu'el Hanagid

Spain, Eleventh Century:

“Change, my God, the heart of that chick that checked  
My sleep, and make him give it back to me  
A fawn who swore by Your name to give  
His love to me, a gift of his own free will,  
And then betrayed me; lovers all betray.  
Forgive his sin—or wipe me out, I pray.” (*A Rainbow Thread*, p. 55)

2. Yitshaq Ibn Mar Sha'ul

Spain, Eleventh Century:

Lovely of eyes like David,  
    he has slain me like Uriah.  
He has enflamed my passions  
    and consumed my heart with fire.  
Because of him I have been left  
    without understanding and wisdom. (*A Rainbow Thread*, p. 53)

3. Qalonymos ben Qalonymos

Provence, 1323:

“You changed Dinah in the womb of her mother to a girl,  
...Who would then turn me from a man to woman?  
...If my Father in heaven has decreed upon me  
and has maimed me with an immutable deformity,  
then I do not wish to remove it....  
Blessed are you, O Lord,  
who has not made me a woman.” (*A Rainbow Thread*, p. 80-81)

**Station 2: Reform Jewish History**

At this station, participants will read through and analyze a crucial document of American Reform Jewish history: the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform (see the link above). This will give them a sense of Reform Jewish history, which will help contextualize the uniqueness and importance of newer publications such as *Mishkan Ga'avah*. Participants should read through the document carefully, noting anything that might surprise them, or anything they find that rings true today. After reading through the full document, the following questions will guide them through specific principles of the platform.

**Science and Torah:** “We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domain of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age, and at times clothing its conception of divine Providence and Justice dealing with men in miraculous narratives.”

- To which “miraculous narratives” might the article be referring?
- Do you agree with the statement that scientific research does not oppose “the doctrines of Judaism”?
- What significance or influence might Judaism hold for us even if its stories do not seem realistic or historical?

**Modernity (3):** “We recognize in the Mosaic legislation [the laws of Moses] a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.”

- What relationship do the authors have with “Mosaic legislation”? What do you think it might symbolize to them?
- What is your own relationship with Jewish law? How do you navigate being a Jew in the modern world?

**Peoplehood/Israel (5):** “We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.”

- What is the difference between a “nation” and a “religious community”?
- When this document was written in 1885, the authors could not have known the future of the Zionist movement, but they did later change their view on Israel and peoplehood. What does Jewish peoplehood mean to you?<sup>1</sup>
- Do you think this principle makes the Jewish community more inclusive or less so? Why?

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see the Columbus Platform of 1937: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170824181230/http://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/guiding-principles-reform-judaism>.

**Justice (8):** “In full accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relations between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.”

- Do you think Reform Judaism still stands by this principle of social justice?
- How do we go about solving “the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society”?

### **Station 3: *Mishkan T’filah* Scavenger Hunt**

In his foreword to *Mishkan Ga’avah* (p. xiv), Loren Ostrow writes, “Ever since the Temples in Jerusalem were destroyed and the Jews dispersed from the Land of Israel, Judaism has marked itself in the world by a focus on words, written and oral, and the continual reinterpretation of those words: the words of the *Torah*, the *Mishnah*, the *Talmud*, prayer books. But for LGBTQ people, those words did not necessarily address their realities and their celebrations.”

There should be copies of *Mishkan T’filah* available at this station. For this activity, the participants will be guided through a close reading of the following texts in *Mishkan T’filah*, including both the Hebrew prayers and their English translations on the right side of the page, as well as the alternative texts on the left side of the page. After participants read through the prayers individually, they should share their reflections with the rest of the group and answer the guiding questions.

1. Read through *Yotzeir Or* on page 228. Find at least three different names for or descriptions of God (Hebrew or English) used in this blessing.
  - What is your preferred name for God? Why?
  - Why do you think we have so many names for God?
2. Read through these three alternative English readings, and choose one that particularly speaks to you: “This is an hour of change” on the bottom of page 149, “Create a pure heart within me” on the top of page 181, and “I am a Jew” on page 203.
  - What stood out to you about your chosen reading?
  - Look at the Hebrew version (or English translation) of this prayer. How is the alternative different? How might it be more inclusive?
3. Read through the ancient and famous words of the *V’ahavta* prayer in Hebrew or English on page 234.
  - Does this prayer align with your own values and theology? How so?

- To what extent is this prayer inclusive to a diverse congregation? What people might feel most comfortable with the language? Who might feel excluded?

**Closing:** To close this session, facilitators can bring the class back together to debrief after the stations and review what they have learned. The participants have at this point studied a few examples of homoerotic medieval poetry, a snapshot of early American Reform Jewish history, and a handful of prayers from the current Reform siddur. To bring these divergent texts together, the closing discussion may evolve around the following guiding questions:

- Based on the poems, documents, and prayers you examined, what would you say are important Jewish values?
- Do you think of Judaism as a dynamic, adaptable religion? Which texts pointed you to your answer?
- Did you find parallels between anything you read today and your personal practice or knowledge of Judaism? Did anything surprise you?

Although this class may be used as a standalone session, this would also be a great time to introduce the next few sessions and lay out the framework for this curriculum.



## Part 1: Creating Inclusive Liturgy

### **Session 2: Comparing *Mishkan T'filah* Prayers with *Mishkan Ga'avah* Prayers: Weekdays and Shabbat**

**Theme:** Exploring the need for LGBTQ weekday and Shabbat liturgy.

#### **Goals:**

Whether participants are familiar with the weekly or Shabbat prayers or not, this session will explore how LGBTQ spirituality and language can broaden and deepen their Shabbat experience. This lesson plan may be used as part of a larger unit on Jewish liturgy, culminating in the participants creating their own creative service outlines.

#### **Materials:**

- Eger, Rabbi Denise L., ed. 2020. *Mishkan Ga'avah: Where Pride Dwells*. New York: CCAR Press.
- Frishman, Rabbi Elyse D., ed. 2007. *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur*. New York: CCAR Press.

#### **Conversation and Activity Guide:**

**Introduction:** In this and the following lesson, we will do a side-by-side comparison of some central prayers in *Mishkan T'filah* and in *Mishkan Ga'avah*. The prayers in *Mishkan Ga'avah* broaden and deepen the theological metaphors of this liturgy to speak to and about Jewish LGBTQ experiences and theologies.

Depending on time, the facilitator may provide some historical context to Reform Jewish liturgy, explaining the changes to the liturgy that originally took place in Germany at the birth of the Reform Movement, and tracing its development to the prayer book we have today.<sup>2</sup> These include cutting most mentions of the personal Messiah, angels, or the Temple to better fit with the rational theology of the first Reformers, as well as shortening services by taking out liturgical repetitions. The facilitator may create a list of theological paradigms and practical concerns that guided the work of the early reformers.

Building on these historic decisions, read, analyze, and discuss the provided sources. Participants may want to work in partnership or small groups and then come together to share their findings and reflections.

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<sup>2</sup> For an extensive introduction into the topic, see Meyer, Michael A. 1998. *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

1. One of the first things we do to bring in Shabbat on Friday nights is light the Shabbat candles, reciting this blessing:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שַׁבָּת.

*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu l'hadlik neir shel shabbat.*

“Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to kindle the light of Shabbat”

—*Mishkan T'filah* p. 120

*Mishkan Ga'avah* offers us several additions to this blessing. Read through these versions on pages 4, 50, and 129 of *Mishkan Ga'avah*:

**A Prayer before Candle Lighting: A Blessing of Gratitude for a Life Lived with Friends, Family, and Partners of Many Genders and Sexual Orientations** by Rabbi Sonja K. Pilz, PhD, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 4

**A Prayer before Candle Lighting: Prayer before Coming Out** by *anonymous*, twenty-one years old, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 50

**Candle Lighting for Pride Shabbat** by Rabbi Denise L. Eger, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 129

Discussion questions:

- What does each of these prayers or blessings add to the ritual of lighting Shabbat candles?
- Which readings are geared towards specific times of the year, and which ones could be used year-round?
- How could you imagine using any of these readings?

2. Read through the *Nisim B'chol Yom*, “Blessings for Daily Miracles” in *Mishkan T'filah* (p. 36–40). Then read the blessings in *Mishkan Ga'avah* (p. 18, 20–22):

**A Blessing for Chest-Binding for Trans, Non-binary, and/or Gender Non-Conforming Jews** by Rabbi Elliot Kukla and Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 18

**A Morning Prayer for LGBTQ Jews: I Am Unique** from *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav* (p. 191), *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 20

**A Morning Blessing for Non-binary Jews** by Rabbi Ahuva Zaches, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 21

**A Morning Blessing for Transgender Jews** by Ariel Zitny, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 22

Discussion questions:

- What did the authors in *Mishkan Ga'avah* add to the blessings laid out in *Mishkan T'filah*?
- How do you see your own experiences reflected in these blessings?
- If you were to write your own morning blessing, what would it be?

3. The *Asher Yatzar* blessing helps us give thanks for the openings and closings that make our body function. Compare the text for this prayer in *Mishkan T'filah* (p. 194) with the adaptation in *Mishkan Ga'avah* (p. 19):

**An *Asher Yatzar* (“The One Who Forms”) Blessing for Many Genders** by Rabbi Elliot Kukla, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 19

Discussion questions:

- How do gender and body images play into contemporary formulations of this prayer?
- The Jewish value of *b'tzelem Elohim* teaches us that we are all made “in the image of God.” How do the different versions of this prayer reflect this value?
- Who is responsible for the act of creation in this prayer? What do you believe?

4. One of our central daily prayers is the *Sh'ma*, which is traditionally recited several times a day. Take a look at the text of the *Sh'ma* in *Mishkan T'filah* (p. 10–11) and read it out loud. Then read the alternative or additional *Sh'ma* in *Mishkan Ga'avah* (p. 24) out loud:

**The *Sh'ma*** by Rabbi Emily Langowitz, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 24

Discussion questions:

- Did the experience of reading the *Sh'ma* out loud influence your understanding of the prayer? How so?
- What do you think is the shared message of both of these versions of the *Sh'ma*? How are they different?
- Why do you think the *Mishkan Ga'avah* adaptation of the *Sh'ma* ends with *shoma'at ha'emet*, “who hears my Truth”? What does this add to the prayer?

### **Create Your Own Service Outline**

Each prayer service has certain sections with set prayers included in that section. Based on *Mishkan T'filah* or a liturgical chart provided by the facilitator, put together your own creative outline for a Shabbat service, listing the parts of the service you would do and any changes you would make. Incorporate at least two readings or alternative prayers from *Mishkan Ga'avah*.

**Closing:** In closing the session, the facilitator may guide a conversation based on the following summarizing questions:

- What are the theological paradigms that govern the liturgy of *Mishkan T'filah*?

- What are practical concerns that govern the liturgy of *Mishkan T'filah*?
- What are the theological paradigms that govern the liturgy of *Mishkan Ga'avah*?
- What are practical concerns that govern the liturgy of *Mishkan Ga'avah*?

In addition to these overarching questions, the facilitator may ask the participants what they learned from the session. Did anything surprise them about the liturgy? How can they use this knowledge of liturgy to create more diverse, inclusive spaces in the future?

### **Session 3: Comparing *Mishkan T'filah* Prayers with *Mishkan Ga'avah* Prayers: A Calendar for Jewish LGBTQ Life**

**Theme:** Thinking creatively about inclusive Jewish liturgy

**Quote:**

“Judaism was not the exclusive purview of a society that deemed it theirs but was available to whoever understood and loved what Judaism offered to the human condition.”

—Loren Ostrow, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. xiv

**Goals:**

Following session 2, this class will explore central prayers of the Jewish LGBTQ calendar and lifecycle, one of the innovations of *Mishkan Ga'avah*.

**Materials:**

- Eger, Rabbi Denise L., ed. 2020. *Mishkan Ga'avah: Where Pride Dwells*. New York: CCAR Press.
- Frishman, Rabbi Elyse D., ed. 2007. *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur*. New York: CCAR Press.

**Conversation and Activity Guide:**

**Introduction:** In this session, participants will be encouraged to think about the unique perspectives of LGBTQ Jews. Within the context of life-cycle events and Jewish holidays, how can we broaden our liturgies and rituals to include, reflect on, and celebrate LGBTQ experiences?

Participants will compare ritual sections of *Mishkan T'filah* and *Mishkan Ga'avah* dedicated to specific calendrical or lifecycle prayers or rituals and then write their own prayer for their favorite holiday or life-cycle event. Participants may choose one of the following sections: funerals, *b'nei mitzvah* celebrations, Passover, or weddings. For each section, they will compare *Mishkan T'filah* and *Mishkan Ga'avah* prayers, blessings, and rituals.

1. Funerals

- *Kaddish* (*Mishkan T'filah*, p. 598)
- *Kaddish* section (*Mishkan Ga'avah*, pp. 79–83)

**When the End of Life Is Near: Who Will Say *Kaddish* for Me?**

*Mishkan Ga'avah*, pp. 79–80 (author unknown)

**For One Who Has Lost a Partner [A]: Left Behind** by Janet Winans, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 81

**For One Who Has Lost a Partner [B]: My Body** by Carol Allen, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 82

**Kaddish** by Allen Ginsberg, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 83

## 2. *B'nei Mitzvah* celebrations

- Traditional call to the Torah for *b'nei mitzvah* students
- Call to the Torah, gender non-conforming alternatives (*Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 89–90)

Traditionally, there are two calls to the Torah:

For a man:

תַּעֲמוּד הַבְּכוֹר הַבָּר מִצְוָה, \_\_\_\_\_ בְּנוֹ \_\_\_\_\_ וְ \_\_\_\_\_ לְעֹלְיָה לַתּוֹרָה. חֲזַק וְאַמְצִי!

For a woman:

תַּעֲמוּד הַבְּכוֹרָה הַבַּת מִצְוָה, \_\_\_\_\_ בַּת \_\_\_\_\_ וְ \_\_\_\_\_ לְעֹלְיָה לַתּוֹרָה. חֲזַקִּי וְאַמְצִי!

*Ya'amod habachur/habachura \_\_\_\_\_ ben/bat \_\_\_\_\_ v' \_\_\_\_\_ la'aliyah laTorah.*  
*Chazak v'ematz/Chizki v'imtzi.*

Please rise, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, \_\_\_\_\_ son/daughter of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ for an *Aliyah* to the Torah. May you be strong and courageous!

נָא לַעֲמוּד \_\_\_\_\_ מִבֵּית \_\_\_\_\_ לְכְבוֹד הַתּוֹרָה!  
שֵׁם פְּרָטִי שְׁמוֹת הַהוֹרִים

## The Call to the Torah: *Mibeit* (“From the House of”)

*Na la'amod \_\_\_\_\_ mibeit \_\_\_\_\_ lichvod hatorah!*

Please rise \_\_\_\_\_ of the house of \_\_\_\_\_ in honor of the Torah!  
*first name names of the parents*

—by Rabbi Sonja K. Pilz, PhD, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 89

## The Call to the Torah for a Non-binary *Brit Mitzvah* (“A Covenant of Sacred Obligations”) Celebration

נָא לְעִמּוּד \_\_\_\_\_ מִבֵּית \_\_\_\_\_ לְכַבּוֹד בְּרִית הַמִּצְוָה!  
שֵׁם פְּרָטִי שְׁמוֹת הַהוֹרִים

*Na la'amod \_\_\_\_\_ mibeit \_\_\_\_\_ lichvod hatorah!*

Please rise \_\_\_\_\_ of the house of \_\_\_\_\_ in honor of your *brit mitzvah*!  
*first name names of the parents*

—by Rabbi Sonja K. Pilz, PhD, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 90

A non-binary call to the Torah is also included in *Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe* (CCAR Press, 2015).

### 3. Passover

- “The Ten Plagues” (*A Passover Haggadah*, p. 51)

“An LGBTQ Passover Theology” and “

***Otot Umofetim—אותות ומִפְתִּים—Signs and Wonders***

- ” (*Mishkan Ga'avah*, pp. 110, 114)

### The Ten Plagues

<i>Dam</i> , Blood	דָּם.
<i>Tzfardeyah</i> , Frogs	צַפְרָדַע.
<i>Kinim</i> , Lice	כִּנִּים.
<i>Arov</i> , Wild Beasts	עֲרוֹב.
<i>Dever</i> , Blight	דֶּבֶר.
<i>Sh'hin</i> , Boils	שִׁחִין.
<i>Barad</i> , Hail	בָּרָד.
<i>Arbeh</i> , Locusts	אַרְבֶּה.
<i>Hosheh</i> , Darkness	חֹשֶׁךְ.
<i>Makat B'horot</i> , Slaying of the First-Born	מַכַּת בְּכוֹרוֹת:

—*A Passover Haggadah*, p. 51

### An LGBTQ Passover Theology

Passover’s story of liberation and the Exodus lends itself to a deepened understanding of the LGBTQ experience. During Passover, we remember our escape from the enslavements in Egypt by the rescuing hand of God.

God’s rescuing hand can be a hopeful and encouraging image for a person deep within the enslavement of the closet. The Exodus journey from the narrow places of Egypt to the expansiveness of the wilderness is like the journey out of the constricting closet into the wilderness and freedom of being your authentic self as an LGBTQ person.

The *Haggadah* teaches us that Passover will lead us *mignut l’shevach* (מִגְנוּת לְשִׁבְחָה), “from degradation to praise.” This is our hope: that we will create a society and world where all LGBTQ people are equal and seen and accepted and loved.

In this section, we present some seder rituals to celebrate LGBTQ Pride and experiences.

—by Rabbi Denise L. Eger, *Mishkan Ga’avah*, p. 110

### *Otot Umofetim*—אֹתוֹת וּמִוִּפְתִּיִם—Signs and Wonders

Ten plagues devastated the Land of Egypt. The plagues were intended to get Pharaoh’s attention and accept the quote for justice and liberation. The Egyptian people suffered because of Pharaoh’s stubbornness.

*We remove a drop of juice from our cups as we recall each plague— ancient and contemporary.*

<i>Dam</i>	דָּם	Blood: Murder, violence, and other hate crimes committed against LGBTQ persons.
<i>Tz’fardei’a</i>	צְפַרְדֵּיִעַ	Frogs: Suffocating rigidity when it comes to gender expressions.
<i>Kinim</i>	כִּנִּים	Lice: Insidious hatred by those who view the other as vermin.
<i>Arov</i>	עֲרוֹב	Beasts: The physical and emotional violence and abuse that we inflict on one another.
<i>Dever</i>	דֶּבֶר	Disease: The pervasive presence of illness like AIDS, mental illness, and cancer.
<i>Sh’chin</i>	שָׁחִין	Boils: Loneliness and the break-down of community connections.
<i>Barad</i>	בָּרָד	Hail: The (mis)use of religion to oppress and discriminate against LGBTQ persons.
<i>Arbeh</i>	אַרְבֶּה	Locusts: As life for LGBTQ persons begins to spring forth, they are at risk of being devoured.
<i>Choshech</i>	חֹשֶׁךְ	Darkness: Constricting the identity expressions of transgender and gender non-conforming children.
<i>Makat B’chorot</i>	מַכַּת בְּכוֹרוֹת	Slaying of the firstborn: LGBTQ teen suicide.



4. Weddings

- *Sheva B'rachot (L'chol Z'man V'eit: For Sacred Moments: The CCAR Life-Cycle Guide*, pp. 163, 166)
- "A Contemporary Version of the *Sheva B'rachot*" A and B (*Mishkan Ga'avah*, pp. 188–189)

***Sheva B'rachot (Options A and E, for a Man and a Woman)***

- 1 בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי הַגֶּפֶן.
- 2 בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהַכֹּל בְּרָא לְכַבוֹדוֹ.
- 3 בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, יוֹצֵר הָאָדָם.
- 4 בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצִלְמוֹ,  
בְּצִלְמֵ דְמוּת תְּבִיטוֹ,  
וְהִתְקִין לוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ בְּבִין עֲדֵי עַד.  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי, יוֹצֵר הָאָדָם.
- 5 שׁוֹשׁ תְּשִׁישׁ וְתִגַּל הָעֵקֶרֶת, בְּקִבוּץ בְּנֵיהַ לְתוֹכָהּ בְּשִׂמְחָה.  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי, מְשַׂמַּח צִיּוֹן בְּבִנְיָהּ.
- 6 שְׂמִיחַ תְּשַׂמַּח רַעִים הָאֲהוּבִים, כְּשִׂמְחָה יִצְרָךְ בְּגֵן עֵדֶן  
מִקֵּדָם. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי, מְשַׂמַּח חֲתָן וּפְלָהּ.
- 7 בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר בְּרָא שְׁשׁוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה, חֲתָן וּפְלָהּ  
גִּילָה רְנָה, דִּיצָה וְחֻדוֹה, אֲהַבָּה וְאַחֲבָה, שְׁלוֹם וְרַעוּת.  
מִהֲרָה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יִשְׁמַע בְּעָרֵי יְהוּדָה וּבְחֻצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם  
קוֹל שְׁשׁוֹן וְקוֹל שִׂמְחָה, קוֹל חֲתָן וְקוֹל פְּלָהּ,  
קוֹל מְצַהֲלוֹת חֲתָנִים מְחַפְּתִים  
וּבְעָרִים מִמְּשִׁתָּה בְּגִינָתָם.  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי, מְשַׂמַּח חֲתָן עִם הַפְּלָהּ.

1

We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

2

We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, Creator of all things for Your glory.

3

We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, Creator of man and woman.

4

We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe,  
who creates us to share with You in life's everlasting renewal.

5

We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who causes Zion to rejoice in her  
children's happy return.

6

We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who causes {bride and groom/brides/  
grooms} to rejoice. May these loving companions rejoice  
as have Your creatures since the days of creation.

7

We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe,  
Creator of joy and gladness, bride and groom, love and kinship,  
peace and friendship.

O God, may there always be heard in the cities of Israel  
and in the streets of Jerusalem:

the sounds of joy and happiness,  
the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride,  
the shouts of young people celebrating,  
and the songs of children at play.

We praise You, our God,  
who causes the {bride and groom/brides/grooms} to rejoice together.

—*L'chol Z'man V'eit*, Marriage, pp. 27, 30

### **A Contemporary Version of the *Sheva B'rachot* [A]**

1. As we celebrate with \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ on this wonderful occasion, we give thanks for the sweetness of their love and the sweetness in all nature.
2. We fully honor God when we live our lives with integrity and honesty. We rejoice in the courage and commitment that \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ express today and throughout their relationship.
3. “Just to be is a blessing; just to live is holy.” Today we open ourselves to the beauty and wonder in all life.
4. All humanity was created in God’s image. Today we are awakened to the preciousness of the Divine Spark within each of us, and we marvel at the manifold beauty of each creation.
5. & 6. We dream of a time when all the People of Israel will celebrate loving, caring relationships such as this one. We will work for a time when the love of a woman for a woman or a man for a man will be cause for rejoicing among our people. May the day soon come when Israel will welcome all its people, when all refugees and exiles will be oppressed no longer.
7. We rejoice with \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ in complete joy, and we echo the tradition in thanksgiving for the creation of joy and gladness, pleasure and delight, love and harmony, peace and friendship. May the whole world soon join in wholehearted celebration and rejoicing in all loving relationships.

—by Rabbi Leila Gal Berner, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 188

### **A Contemporary Version of the *Sheva B'rachot* [B]**

1. We look to our ancestors for guidance and ask God’s blessings: Praised are You, *Adonai*, Ruler of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.
2. Just as Sarah brought new life into this world, may God bless us with the ability to create a new life together—a life full of joy and laughter and happiness.
3. Just as Rebekah, at the well, satisfied Eliezer’s thirst, may God bless us with the flow of generosity and loving-kindness that permeates our home.
4. Rachel and Leah, as sisters, were the same yet different. May God bless us with the gift of respecting each other’s capabilities and help each other grow in strength.
5. Just as Miriam helped lead her people to freedom, may God bless us with the power to inspire others to sing and dance freely.
6. Just as Deborah was a prophet and a judge, may God bless us with eyes to see the good and

bad in this world so that we may be partners with God in *tikkun olam* (repairing the world).

7. And Ruth, who in love and devotion declared, “For wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people and your God shall be my God.” May we be strengthened in our commitment to one another as we journey from year to year.

—by Rabbi Denise L. Eger, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 189

Once participants have read through the prayers in the section they chose, they should answer the following questions either in *chavruta* or in writing on their own:

- How do the readings and prayers of *Mishkan Ga'avah* expand on the theology of the blessings, prayers, and rituals in *Mishkan T'filah*?
- Why do you think the author wrote this prayer? What need might it fulfill?
- What is the format and style of this prayer? For example, you may look at how the stanzas are broken up, whether the language seems contemporary or ancient, whether there is a rhyme or pattern in the text, or where the climax of each prayer lies.

Each participant will then have an opportunity to write their own prayer for the life-cycle or calendrical event they chose. They may draw inspiration from the poetic style of one of the prayers they analyzed, or they may begin from scratch.

**Closing:** To end, the facilitator may invite participants to share their prayers with the group. What new theologies and personal perspectives do these prayers add to our liturgy? How might these prayers change our celebrations of these days going forward?

## Session 4: Non-binary Language for God and Us: Expanding Our Notion of God and Gender

**Theme:** Traditional and creative Hebrew names for God along the lines of gender and inclusivity

### Quote:

“מְקוֹר הַחַיִּים, *M'kor hachayim*, Source of life, You have blessed each of us with Your spirit. In Your wisdom, You have made each of us a unique treasure. מְעַיֵן חַיִּינוּ, *Ma 'yan chayeinu*, Wellspring of our lives, cause us to flow with courage, strength, compassion to live our stories openly, proudly, and joyfully.”

—from “A Blessing for Pride” by Rabbi Joshua Zlochower, Rabbi Erica Steelman, and Dr. Gloria Becker, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 130

### Goals:

This class aims to expand participants’ awareness of gender usage in the Hebrew language, especially as it relates to God. The materials are designed to be accessible to participants of all Hebrew levels and may also be used as part of an introductory Hebrew course or a course on Jewish theology.

### Materials:

- Eger, Rabbi Denise L., ed. 2020. *Mishkan Ga'avah: Where Pride Dwells*. New York: CCAR Press.

### Conversation and Activity Guide:

**Introduction:** Unlike English, the Hebrew language is gendered, meaning that every word falls into either a “feminine” or “masculine” category. This makes it much more difficult to create gender-neutral terms and phrases to address and describe God. However, there is a growing movement to create gender-inclusive and gender-neutral words in Hebrew. While God is traditionally considered outside of and beyond gender, most of our liturgy uses masculine names and descriptions of God. The few examples of traditional liturgy that use more gender-creative (though still masculine) names for God include the prayer for redemption, *Tzur Yisrael*, which uses the name *Tzur*, or “Rock,” for God (*Mishkan T'filah*, p. 72). At the end of the *Yishtabach* blessing on weekday and Shabbat mornings, we describe God as *chei haolamim*, the “eternal life” (*Mishkan T'filah*, p. 56). The funeral prayer, *El Malei Rachamim*, includes the feminine aspect of God, *shechinah*, which evokes images of a comforting mother in times of hardship. Many times, our English translations of the Hebrew God language play down the masculine gender of the liturgy, translating *melech* as “Sovereign” instead of the more accurate “King,” or

leaving terms like *Adonai* untranslated, though its literal meaning is “my Lord.” To counter the predominance of the patriarchal tradition and make our liturgy more inclusive, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, through the pioneering efforts of Rabbi Efrat Rotem, introduces several innovative names for God, pushing us to expand our spiritual vocabulary and understanding of God.

1. Before handing out the following chart, participants may write down any names for God that they can think of, both in Hebrew and English, and share their ideas on a white board or large poster paper. For the Hebrew names, include the “grammatical gender” of each word (masculine or feminine), and then the “perceived gender” of the word (whether it connotes a masculine or feminine image of God).

2. Hand out the chart of Hebrew names for God below, and have participants read through the different names, noting the grammatical and perceived gender of each. Note that although some names denote a non-binary, or gender-neutral, image of God, every name has a grammatical gender in Hebrew. Participants may then choose their favorite two or three names, and look at them in the context of the prayers in *Mishkan Ga'avah*.

- Which names stood out to you from the chart? Which ones were you drawn to? Why?
- Were you surprised by any of the differences between grammatical and perceived gender for the Hebrew names?
- For the names you looked at in the context of their prayers, why do you think the author chose that name for God?

Hebrew Name for God	Transliteration	English translation	Grammatical Gender	Perceived Gender	Context/Pg. in <i>Mishkan Ga'avah</i>
”	<i>Adonai</i>	Adonai	M	M	Traditional (pages 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 15, 21, 22, 23, 38, etc.)
אלהינו	<i>Eloheinu</i>	Our God	M	M	Traditional (pages 4, 7, 9, 11, 21, 22, 23, 38, etc.)
מלך העולם	<i>Melech ha'olam</i>	Sovereign of the universe	M	M	Most common (pages 4, 9, 23, 38)
יוצר העולם	<i>Yotzeir ha'olam</i>	Creator of the universe	M	NB*	<i>L'cha Dodi</i> (7), Blessing in Celebration of Living as Non-binary (39)
מקור הברכה	<i>M'kor hab'rachah</i>	Source of all blessings	M	NB	Blessing for My Gay Son (11)
כוח העולם	<i>Ko'ach ha'olam</i>	Power of the universe	M	NB	Morning Blessing for Non-binary Jew (21)
בוראת העולם	<i>Boreit ha'olam</i>	Creator of the world	F	F	Morning Blessing for Transgender Jews (22)

Hebrew Name for God	Transliteration	English translation	Grammatical Gender	Perceived Gender	Context/Pg. in <i>Mishkan Ga'avah</i>
יָהּ	<i>Yah</i>	You	F	NB	The <i>Sh'ma</i> (24), Blessing after Making Love (40), Prayer after a Loved One Came Out as Transgender (59), Prayer before Top Surgery (65)
אֱחָדוּת הָעוֹלָם	<i>Achdut ha'olam</i>	Oneness of the World	F	NB	The <i>Sh'ma</i> (24)
מָגֵן אַבְרָהָם וְעֶזְרַת שָׂרָה	<i>Magein Avraham v'Ezrat Sarah</i>	Sarah's Helper, Abraham's Shield	M	M	Blessing for My LGBTQ Ancestors (29)
עֵין הַחַיִּים	<i>Ein hachayim</i>	Source of life	F	NB	Blessing for Coming Out (36)
רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם	<i>Ru'ach ha'olam</i>	Spirit of the world	F	NB	Blessing after Making Love (40), Blessing on Seeing a Non-binary Person (44), Prayer after a Loved One Came Out as Transgender (59), Blessing for the First Time Shaving (64), Blessing for a Bisexual Community (148)
מְקוֹר הַרְפוּאָה הַשְּׁלוֹם הַחַיִּים	<i>M'kor... har'fu'ah Hashalom hachayim</i>	Source of... healing peace and wholeness life	M	NB	Prayer after a Painful Coming-Out (51)
הָאֱלֹהוֹת	<i>Ha'Elohut</i>	The Divine	F	F	Prayer before Beginning Hormonal Treatment (63)
מְקוֹר הָעוֹלָם	<i>M'kor ha'olam</i>	Source of the universe	M	NB	Prayer for Pregnancy (76)
רִבּוֹן הָעוֹלָם	<i>Ribon ha'olam</i>	Sovereign of the universe	M	M	Adopting a Child: Prayer for Beginning the Adoption Process (77)
אוֹהֶבֶת הָעוֹלָם	<i>Ohevet ha'olam</i>	Lover of the universe	F	NB	Lesbian Pride (105)
שְׂכִינָה שֶׁל אֲהָבָה	<i>Sh'chinah shel ahavah</i>	Presence of love	F	F	Blessing for Pride (130)
רוּחַ הַשְּׁלוֹם	<i>Ru'ach hashalom</i>	Spirit of peace	F	NB	Blessing for Pride (130)
מְעַן חַיֵּינוּ	<i>Ma'yan chayeinu</i>	Wellspring of our lives	F	NB	Blessing for Pride (130)

\*NB: non-binary

**Closing:** After everyone has had a chance to look through the chart for themselves and think about the various names for God in their prayer contexts, the group may come together to reflect on what they have discovered.

- What are the names we choose for God?
- How do we see our own diverse experiences and identities reflected in our God language?
- How do we make our prayers more creative in regard to the gendered Hebrew language?
- Does knowledge of Hebrew (as opposed to just reading the English translation) change your experience of the prayer? How does it enrich your praying experience? How does it challenge you?



## Part 2: LGBTQ Theology and Jewish History

### **Session 5: Gender Fluidity in Jewish Text**

**Theme:** Historical rabbinic texts in conversation with our contemporary understanding of gender and sex

**Quote:**

“Blessed are You, *Adonai* our God, Power of the universe, who has made human beings both masculine and feminine.”

—“A Morning Blessing for Non-binary Jews” by Rabbi Ahuva Zaches, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 21

**Goals:**

Participants will learn about the rabbinic understanding of multiple genders as they were applied to Jewish theology and law. In order to put our current Jewish practices into their historical context, participants will analyze both midrashic and mishnaic excerpts on the topic of gender, and compare them with the contemporary use of gender in *Mishkan Ga'avah*. This lesson is recommended for participants with a basic knowledge of Hebrew and rabbinic text.

**Materials:**

- Eger, Rabbi Denise L. ed. 2020. *Mishkan Ga'avah: Where Pride Dwells*. New York: CCAR Press.
- Sienna, Noam. 2019. *A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century to 1969*. Philadelphia, PA: Print-O-Craft Press. (Excerpts provided below)

**Conversation and Activity Guide:**

**Introduction:** The following lesson plan includes a selection of Talmudic discussions and midrashim in which rabbis address gender fluidity. Biblical figures are imagined outside of the standard categories of male and female, adding new layers of symbolism and meaning to the classic stories. Rabbis dating back to the third century CE have grappled with the application of gender-based mitzvot to gender-nonconforming Jews. These are presented side-by-side with some of the prayers found in *Mishkan Ga'avah*, which were written with gender inclusivity in mind. Start by introducing the range of genders addressed in rabbinic text.

Jewish text describes five genders: (definitions based on *A Rainbow Thread*, pp. 24, 29–30)

1. Male
2. Female

3. Androgynous = a person of ambiguous sex and gender; both male and female sexual traits
4. *Tumtum* = a person not clearly identifiable as either male or female
5. *Aylonit* = a person assigned female at birth, but not showing signs of female sexual development; unable to bear children

Then, have the participants split into pairs or small groups and read the following texts together. If needed, you may want to introduce rabbinic texts such as the mishnah and midrash. Guiding questions may be applied to all of the texts:

- How do the historical texts compare with our contemporary understanding of gender and sex?
- What do you think this interpretation adds to the biblical story of Creation and the story of Abraham and Sarah's family? What question are the commentators trying to answer?
- Which texts are you most drawn to? Why?

1. *Mishnah, Bikurim 4:1–5*

Land of Israel, third century CE

- “This translation of the Mishnah’s version, by Jewish transgender activist and writer Noach Dzmura, uses a variety of gendered and non-gendered pronouns to highlight the androgynous’ constantly shifting social position.” (*A Rainbow Thread*, p. 30)
- “Rabbi Yosi says, ‘Androgynos is a being created in zir own image and the sages could not decide whether he was a man or she was a woman, but *tumtum* [an indeterminate gender category] is judged either a doubtful man or a doubtful woman.’” (*A Rainbow Thread*, p. 31)

2. Midrash from *B’reishit Rabbah, Parashat B’reishit 8:1*

Land of Israel, fifth century CE

- Rabbi Yirmiyah ben El’azar said, “At the moment when the Holy Blessed One created the first *adam*, God created them as *androginos*, as it is written: ‘male and female God created them’ (Genesis 1:27)” (*A Rainbow Thread*, p. 33)

3. Midrash from *Babylonian Talmud, Y’vamos 64a–b*

Babylonia, sixth to eighth centuries CE

- Rabbi Ammi taught: “Avraham and Sarah were *tumtumim*...” Rabbi Nahman taught, in the name of Rabbah bar Abbuha, “Our mother Sarah was an *aylonit*...” (*A Rainbow Thread*, p. 40)

4. Midrash from *Tanchuma-Y’lamdena, VaYeitzei 8*

Land of Israel, sixth to eighth centuries CE

- “For it is not difficult for the Holy Blessed One to convert females into males and males into females...” (*A Rainbow Thread*, p. 45)
- “Leah arose and pleaded with the Holy Blessed One, saying, ‘If this child [within me] is a male, my sister Rachel will not have as many [sons] as one of the handmaidens.’ Immediately,

the Holy Blessed One heard her prayer and converted the fetus in her womb into a female...” (*A Rainbow Thread*, p. 45)

Though these rabbinic texts show that there was some understanding of gender beyond the binary, contemporary understandings of sex and gender are very different. The following selections from *Mishkan Ga'avah* represent current perspectives on gender, including creative ways of expressing the gender spectrum in the Hebrew language. Depending on Hebrew literacy in the class, participants may read these texts in small groups or all together to ensure that they have a clear grasp of the Hebrew and the English translations. Guiding questions may be applied to all of the texts:

- How do these prayers utilize gender in a creative way (especially in the Hebrew)? What names for God do they use?
- How do these prayers build on the Jewish notions of gender you saw in the rabbinic texts?
- Which prayer are you most drawn to? Why?

#### 1. An *Asher Yatzar* (“The One Who Forms”) Blessing for Many Genders

בְּרוּכָה אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר יָצַרְהָ אֶת  
בְּנֵי וּבָנוֹת אָדָם וְחָוָה בְּחָכְמָה.

*B'ruchah atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha'olam asher yatzrah et b'nei  
uv'not adam v'chavah b'chochmah.*

Blessed are You, *Adonai* our God, who has made me Your partner in daily  
completing the task of my own formation.

—by Rabbi Elliot Kukla, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 19

#### 2. A Prayer for Courage for Those in Transition

בְּרוּכָה אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁנִּתְּנָה לְבָנִים  
אֶת הַיְכוּלָת לְלָבוֹשׁ שְׂמָלוֹת, לְבָנוֹת אֶת הַיְכוּלָת  
לְהִסְתַּפֵּר קָצֵר, וְלֶאֱנָשִׁים אֶת הַיְכוּלָת לְסִטּוֹת  
מֵהֶדְרֵךְ הַדוּ-סִטְרִית.

*B'ruchah atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha'olam shenatnah l'banim et  
hay'cholet lilbosh s'malot, l'banot et hay'cholet l'histaper katzar,  
v'la'anashim et hay'cholet listot meihaderech hado-sitrit.*

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of the universe, for giving boys the ability to wear dresses, girls the ability to cut their hair, and people to stray from the two-way street.

—by Elias Samuel Rubin, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 37

### 3. A Prayer after a Loved One Came Out as Transgender

בְּרוּכָה אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר יָצַר  
אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ.

*B'ruchah at Yah Eloheinu Ru'ach ha'olam asher yatzar et ha'adam  
b'tzalmo.*

Blessed are You, *Adonai* our God, Spirit of the universe, who created the human in Your image.

—by Rabbi Karen Bender, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 59

### 4. A Blessing for a Bisexual Community

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם הַמְעַנֵּיקָה לָנוּ  
פְּתִיחוֹת בְּחַיֵּינוּ הַמְבָרֵךְ אוֹתָנוּ בִּיכּוֹלֵת לְרְאוֹת מֵעֵבֶר  
לְמִגְדָּר וּבְאֵינְסָפוֹר דְּרַכִּים לְהַבִּיעַ חִיבָה לְיַקִּירֵינוּ.

*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Ru'ach ha'olam hama'anikah lanu p'tichut  
b'chayeinu ham'vareich otanu bicholet lirot mei'eiver l'migdar uv'eins'for  
d'rachim l'habi'a chibah l'yakireinu.*

Blessed are You, *Adonai* our God, Sovereign of the universe, who allows us to be open about our lives, see beyond gender, and blesses us with myriad affections to share with our loved ones.

—by Martin Rawlings-Fein, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 148

**Closing:** To bring the two sections of this lesson together, participants may discuss the differences or similarities they found between the classic rabbinic texts and the prayers in

*Mishkan Ga'avah.* What was surprising? How can we best honor the variety of sexes and gender expressions in our Jewish blessings and prayers?

## Session 6: Same-Sex Relations across the Centuries

**Theme:** The underlying emotions and processes in both contemporary and historical accounts of same-sex relations in Jewish texts

### Quote:

“Let us bless the Source of life for giving me the courage to come out and leave the narrow space.”

—from “A Blessing for Coming Out—Over and Over Again” by Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 36

### Goals:

Comparing historical rabbinic texts and *Mishkan Ga'avah* prayers on the topic of same-sex relationships

### Materials:

- Eger, Rabbi Denise L., ed. 2020. *Mishkan Ga'avah: Where Pride Dwells*. New York: CCAR Press.
- Sienna, Noam, ed. 2019. *A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century to 1969*. Philadelphia, PA: Print-O-Craft Press. (Excerpts provided below)

### Conversation and Activity Guide:

**Introduction:** We recommend starting the session by reading the excerpt below:

#### A Blessing for my LGBTQ Ancestors

You, who died of AIDS while fighting for a cure, so that people  
like me might live.

You, who were shot in a massacre while on the dance floor.

You, who could not come out and held your secret until your dying  
day.

You, who were insulted, shamed, beaten, and brutalized, yet kept  
walking.

You, who contributed your fierceness, your originality, your art,  
and your voice to this world.

I walk in your memory.

—by Dave Yedid, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 29

What do you think life might have been like for LGBTQ couples in previous generations? The following rabbinic discussions give examples of possible same-sex relations in previous centuries, spanning from the fifth to the eighteenth. Participants may choose to read all three, or split them up so each group only reads one source. Guiding questions may be applied to all the texts:

- How does the author's understanding of homosexuality compare with your own?
- What has or hasn't changed over the course of history as regards same-sex relations?
- Does this text surprise you or align with your perceptions of LGBTQ Jewish history?

#### 1. Jerusalem Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 6:3

Fifth century CE

- "Rabbi Yudah ben Pazzi left to go up to the upper story of the House of Study, and saw two men coupling with each other. They said to him, 'Rabbi, keep in mind that you are one [witness] and we are two.'" (*A Rainbow Thread*, p. 38)

#### 2. A letter from one rabbi to another at a Dutch Sephardi Yeshiva

Amsterdam, 1674

- "Two upstanding students, Yitshaq Neto and Eliyahu Lupits, were suspected of homosexual relations... [But] I told them that the activities of young men are meaningless [*hevel*], and that there was nothing more for us to do to them than to have them beaten and punished with a rod for bearing false witness." (*A Rainbow Thread*, p. 120–121)

#### 3. Writings of a Sephardi Rabbi

Salonica, 1769

- "Not so with young men, who are always found [together] in one place, and who are not ashamed to be in seclusion with one another, although [the Talmud teaches that] 'Jews are not suspected of homosexuality' (*b. Qiddushin* 82a). Further, they are brash boys and are easily tempted, for they do not have much shame. This is especially true when there are festive events and celebrations, or when they go out for some drinking or traveling; then their inclinations rule over them." (*A Rainbow Thread*, p. 127)

#### 4. Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 65ab

Babylonia, sixth to eighth centuries CE

- "He did not permit them to sleep together"—could we say that this supports the opinion of Rav Huna? For Rav Huna said, "Women who rub [*mesolelot*] with one another are unfit for [marrying into] the priesthood." No, this was not the [motivation]; rather it was so that they should not become accustomed to [sleeping with] a foreign body. (*A Rainbow Thread*, p. 41)

After studying the historical texts above, the participants hopefully have a better sense of the varying perspectives on same-sex relations throughout Jewish history, at least from a rabbinic standpoint. *Mishkan Ga'avah* addresses the ancient as well as the more recent history of LGBTQ Jews, acknowledging that our contemporary awareness of these issues rests on the sacrifices of those who came before us. The following prayers shed a light on the more recent experiences of LGBTQ Jews, reflecting current experiences of sexuality and same-sex relationships. Participants may read and discuss in partnership or small groups.

## 1. A Blessing for my LGBTQ Ancestors

You, who fought to love.

You, who prayed to the same God I do.

You, who insisted on your dignity even when the world said you had none.

You, who died of AIDS while fighting for a cure, so that people like me might live.

You, who were shot in a massacre while on the dance floor.

You, who could not come out and held your secret until your dying day.

You, who were insulted, shamed, beaten, and brutalized, yet kept walking.

You, who contributed your fierceness, your originality, your art, and your voice to this world.

I walk in your memory.

I walk this path, smoothed and chartered by your sacrifice toward justice, toward holiness, toward freedom.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי מִגֵּן אַבְרָהָם וְעֵזֶרֶת שָׂרָה

*Baruch atah Adonai magein avraham v'ezrat sarah.*

Blessed are You, *Adonai*, Sarah's Helper, Abraham's Shield.

—by Dave Yedid, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 29

- Dave Yedid states, "I walk this path, smoothed and chartered by your sacrifice toward justice, toward holiness, toward freedom." What strides and freedoms for LGBTQ Jews have been achieved? What sacrifices led to those changes?
- On Passover, we are commanded to see ourselves as if *we* had come out of Egypt. How do you see yourself as connected to the struggles and challenges of previous generations?

## 2. A Blessing for Coming Out—Over and Over Again



נְבָרְךָ אֶת עֵינֵי הַחַיִּים אֲשֶׁר נָתַנָּה לִּי עֲצֻמָּה לְצֵאת מִן הַמְצָרִים.

*N'vareich et ein hachayim asher natnah li otzmah latzeit min ham'tzarim.*

Let us bless the Source of life for giving me the courage to come out and leave the narrow space.

—by Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 36

- This blessing acknowledges the courage it takes “to come out and leave the narrow space.” When have you felt that you were stuck in a narrow place in your life?
- How can you find “the courage to come out” in any aspect of your life?

### 3. Lesbian Pride

Maker of every world, who creates each person in Your image, we thank You for the gift of women who love women.

“Humans stamp many coins with one seal and they are all like one another; but the Ruler of rulers, the Holy Blessed One, has stamped every human with the seal of the first person, yet not one of them are like another” (Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 4:4). We thank you for the dazzling variety of human beings and for our unique ways of being in Your world.

Thank You for our dignity and worth, the glory of our passions, the strength of our fidelity and trust. Thank You for the capacity of human beings to learn and change; thank You for the strength and patience to emerge into our full selves among our fellow creatures.

Today and tonight, we walk in daylight and lamplight singing our song:

*B'ruchah at Yah ohevet ha'olam haleiv hapo'eim shel kol ha'olamot*

בְּרוּכָה אַתְּ יְיָ אוֹהֶבֶת הָעוֹלָם הַלֵּב הַפּוֹעֵם  
שֶׁל כָּל הָעוֹלָמוֹת בּוֹרְאֵת צְחוּקוֹן שֶׁל כְּלוֹת וּשְׁשׁוֹן  
שֶׁל שְׂתָפוֹת לְמֵאֲבָק.

*boreit tz'chokan shel kalot us'sonan shel shutafot l'm'avak.*

Blessed are You, Lover of the universe, Heartbeat of the worlds, who has made the laughter of brides and the joy of comrades.

—by Rabbi Robin Podolsky, *Mishkan Ga'avah*, p. 105

- Summarize the themes of this blessing in your own words. What are the main ideas and metaphors used?
- Compare this blessing with excerpt 4 in the section of historical texts above (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 65ab). What are the differences between these two approaches to same-sex relations?

**Closing:** Once the participants have gone through the examples from both *A Rainbow Thread* and *Mishkan Ga'avah*, they can debrief all together:

- How would you describe the development, through these few excerpts, of Jewish thought on same-sex relations?
- What parts of the story are missing from these excerpts that you want to learn more about?
- What have you learned over the course of the six sessions?

Closing song:

“Here I Am” by Cantor Juval Porat

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHpcLe84dC4>