

UNHOLYEMOTIONS: JUDAIC SPIRITUALITY AND HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY IN BRAZIL

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Resumo: Uma das questões religiosas mais controversas, levantadas pelos construtores internacionais da modernidade judaica, se manifesta na tensão entre proibições tradicionais e liberdades modernas, exemplificada neste estudo com foco na condenação persistente da homossexualidade aludida no Levítico 18:22 da Torah. Examinando os desafios da modernidade ao Judaísmo tradicional, este ensaio retrata como o Judaísmo foi historicamente forçado na sua diáspora a remodelar-se em meio a novos espaços, ideologias e culturas, especificamente no Brasil. Apresentando uma aguda análise de *Uma leve simetria*, de Rafael Bán Jacobsen, mostra que, quando se justapõe a identidade homosexual à ortodoxia judaica, não parece haver solução, especialmente quando as forças opostas e intensas da homossexualidade e da espiritualidade colidem, resultando em emoções consideradas sacrílegas.

Palavras-chave: Judaísmo; Espiritualidade; Homossexualidade; Identidade; Rafael Bán Jacobsen; *Uma leve simetria*.

Abstract: One of the most controversial religious questions raised by international builders of Jewish modernity is manifested in the tension between traditional prohibitions and modern liberties, exemplified in this study with focus upon the persistent condemnation of homosexuality as alluded to in the Torah's chapter, Leviticus 18:22. Surveying modernity's challenges to traditional Judaism, this essay depicts how historically Judaism was forced in its diaspora to refashion itself

within new spaces, ideologies and cultures, specifically in Brazil. Presenting an acute analysis of Rafael Bán Jacobsen's *Uma leve simetria*, Vieira shows that when juxtaposing homosexual identity with Jewish orthodoxy, there appears to be no resolution, especially when the opposing and intense forces of homosexuality and spirituality collide, resulting in emotions considered to be unholy.

Keywords: Judaism; Spirituality; Homosexuality; Identity; Rafael Bán Jacobsen; *Uma leve simetria*.

“You shall not lie with a man as with a woman: that is an abomination.”
Leviticus 18:22; *Bible*

“Without the sacred, there can be no secularity. Just as without the Sabbath, the days of labor are pointless.”
Haim Nahman Bialik. *Revelment and Concealment: Five Essays* (1915-1934]

“Proud men blacken my name with
lies, //yet I follow thy precepts with all my heart;”
Psalm 119, 69; *The New English Bible, Oxford Study Edition, 1976: 657*

The religiosity emanating from the above epigraphs serves as a reminder of the sanctity of G-d's Law, especially in the longest prayer, Psalm 119, replete with effusions of sorrow and joy but also suffused with profound religious sentiment. On the other hand, these quotations in addition contain challenging or unacceptable contradictions for a majority of contemporary secular as well as devout Jews, tensions influenced by socio-religious changes engendered by the ages of enlightenment and modernity. Moreover, for deeply spiritual and orthodox Jews, these contradictions provoke endless soul-searching buffered by powerful forces of ritual and spirituality, therein providing some emotional sustenance. However, as possible solutions or answers they remain almost as inscrutable and unfathomable as G-d. Nevertheless, for devout Jews, the persistent quests for answers do not wane in view of the social, psychological and identity roadblocks testing their faith and sense of self. Within the context of these conundrums, particularly when juxtaposing homosexual identity with Jewish orthodoxy, there appears to be no resolution, especially when the opposing and intense forces of homosexuality and spirituality collide, resulting in emotions considered to be unholy.

To contextualize the expression of Judaic spirituality and homosexual identity in modern Brazilian literature, one has to appreciate the emergence of Jewish contemporary heterosexual fiction that is on the rise in Brazil owing to a generation of prolific young authors whose publications have achieved increasing notoriety as well as national, and in some cases, international awards. Nonetheless, the recent generation of contemporary writers emerges notably after their twentieth-century iconic predecessors--Samuel Rawet, Moacyr Scliar, and Clarice Lispector, particularly if one acknowledges the latter's prose and its Judaic trace. Furthermore, emerging Jewish voices appearing in the international magazine GRANTA,¹ be they referentially Jewish or not, represent an ever-growing presence in Brazil's publishing market, with this reality being particularly impressive in view of Brazil's Jewish, primarily Ashkenazi, population numbering around 100,000 individuals. Consequently, it is safe to state that today's Jewish literature from Brazil is mapping a Jewish artistic space never before registered in the history of modern Brazilian literature. More so, if one recalls Brazil's colonial past of labeling Jews as New Christians, reflecting their enforced simulation as Christians and their covert dissimulation as Crypto-Jews due to censored and oppressive colonial conditions. The increasing number of contemporary heterosexual Jewish voices also instigates the old debate between tradition and modernity, the latter representing the intense and universal crisis or dilemma of Jews having to grapple with social, cultural, racial, and religious questions that intersect with and challenge Jewish codes, laws and rituals customarily believed to be inviolable.

One of the most controversial religious questions raised by international builders of Jewish modernity is specifically manifested in the tension between traditional prohibitions and modern liberties, one example featured in this study with the focus upon the persistent condemnation of homosexuality as alluded to in the Torah's chapter, Leviticus 18:22, interpreted as to' evah, an abomination, unholy. In his book *Wrestling*

¹ In the magazine GRANTA #9 is dedicated to Brazilian writers under 40, entitled *Os melhores jovens escritores brasileiros* [The Best Young Brazilian Writers], approximately one third of this heterogeneous Brazilian pool contains writers of Jewish heritage.

with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition (2004), Rabbi Steven Greenberg states at the outset:

Since Orthodox Jews believe that the Torah is the word of God, the Levitical prohibition against sex between men has the full weight of divine authority. On the basis of ancient rabbinic teaching, same-sex male relations were not only prohibited but deemed particularly abhorrent and dangerous. The security of the family, the community, and even the cosmos might be threatened if men had sex with men. (...) While contemporary Orthodox rabbis differ in their stridency, most have judged recent openness toward gay and lesbian people as a sign of social decline and decadence. They insist that while the world may change, the law does not. (3)

As a slightly different response to this problem, in 2013 the Israeli Orthodox gay Jewish Rabbi Ron Yosef¹ referred to this prohibition as one of the starting points for gay Jews to re-examine their commitment to the Talmud and the Torah. In Hebrew, these tensions between tradition and modernity are commonly framed by *Halachah* (Jewish Law) and *Haggadah* (Biblical stories retold, folklore). According to the poet and philosopher Haim Nahman Bialik, *Halachah* and *Haggadah* are “two things which are really one, two sides of a single shield” (Bialik, *Revelment and Concealment* 46). Albeit a reminder of the “two-sides-of-the-same-coin” expression, Bialik’s developed exposition is nonetheless addressed to modern man who, given the focus here on sexuality, could apply this paradoxical viewpoint to ancient codes of sexuality primarily characterized as rigid and to Jewish modernity possibly interpreted as flexible. Consequently, a gay modern Jewish man would inevitably pose the question--how can commitment to halachic norms co-exist with the prohibition of same-sex relations? In his essay addressing the inherent contradiction between law and culture, Bialik states:

Halachah wears a frown, Aggadah a smile. The one is pedantic, severe, unbending--all justice; the other is accommodating, lenient, pliable--all mercy. The one commands and knows no halfway house; her yea is yea, and her nay is nay. The other advises, and takes account of human limitations; she admits something between yea and nay (45).

In this vein, alluding to Bialik’s words within the context of modern Jewish queers, the solution has to lie somewhere between “yea and nay,” a frustrating answer that frequently settles for compassion but inevitably results in ambiguity and silence.

In an article by Nissan Strauchler, Rabbi Yosef, Director of the now-dismantled Hod independent Israel-based organization run by and intended for Orthodox Jewish homosexuals, was quoted regarding a document of rabbinical agreement of principles

about the social-halachic approach to the intensely religious Haredi homosexual population. With this document, gay Jews aspire to create a broad consensus among a group of rabbis “towards acceptance of the other and stopping hatred and homophobia” (Strauchler 1). Here, Rabbi Yosef also states “It is clear to me that lying with another man is forbidden, and our starting point is commitment to halacha and Torah. The goal is not to seek permission. But you need to give us a shoulder and support” (Strauchler 1).

Ostensibly, Rabbi Ron Yosef² and his discussion about the acceptance of homosexuality by the Rabbinat continues and affirms: “I presume they don’t like the phenomenon, but are trying despite this to deal practically with the difficult questions of homosexuals in the face of *halacha*” (Strauchler 1). In this vein, a critical look at modern versions of social variables like ethnicity, family, class, gender, culture, institution, ritual, and power can reveal the intersectional forces or axes preying upon daily circumstances, predicaments, and practices. For example, ideological conflicts and their subsequent affects between tradition and modernity, between hegemony and subalternity, and between straight vis-à-vis gay become insidiously complicated via the crossing influences of the above social variables especially upon staid binary-gender behavior, paradigms or positions, commonly advocated by a traditional patriarchal society such as Brazil’s. As an insightful lens, the reference to “intersectional” can in part serve here as one of the illustrative pathways toward a critical reading of social inequalities and injustices also played out in gender-queer as well as in straight fiction written by contemporary Jewish authors from Brazil. In other words, sexuality alone does not shape an individual’s identity because other social experiences and forces constantly enter into the equation. Moreover, power relations can intersect with the manifestations of sexuality, racism, class,

² <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3849500,00.html>. In this article by Nissan Strauchler, Rabbi Yosef, Director of Hod, is quoted regarding a document of rabbinical agreement of principles about the social-halachic approach to the religious-haredi homosexual population. With this document, gay Jews aspire to create a broad consensus among a group of rabbis “towards acceptance of the other and stopping hatred and homophobia.” In this article Yosef also states “It is clear to me that lying with another man is forbidden, and our starting point is commitment to halacha and Torah. The goal is not to seek permission. But you need to give us a shoulder and support.”

and ethnicity, resulting in inequality and injustice. In a predominantly hetero-normative Christian patriarchal society like Brazil's, one may beg the question--to what degree are alternative sexualities being intersected simultaneously by religion, family, ethnicity, and class?

The founder of Brazil's openly gay and lesbian Jewish group, known as Jewish Gay Brazilians (JGBR), Ari Teperman, speaking about the paucity of public discourse on Brazil's gay Jews, stated in 2005: "We are not currently engaged in the fight for civil rights, but rather for Jewish identity" (Around the Jewish World in Brazil, Gay and Lesbian Jews Struggle for Jewish Acceptance (02) at <http://www.jta.org/2005/08/02/archive/around-the-jewish-world-in-brazil-gay-and-lesbian=jews-struggle-for-jewish-acceptance>>).

In the same article, Teperman stresses that JGBR is not a religious group: "We don't intend to preach Judaism for gay Jews. Our goal is to promote social inclusion in the Jewish community" (Around... 03). A milestone for gay Jews in Brazil, emerged during the Conference of the Jewish Communities of the Americas, held in May 2004 which became their first open and "off-line" venue of social exposure. This event created opportunities for more space and dialogue within the Jewish Communities of Brazil. Nevertheless, Teperman's article underscores that Jewish culture places paramount value upon the traditional hetero-affective family. Consequently, homosexuality may surface as a powerful taboo within the Brazilian-Jewish family. The same article quotes a homosexual Jewish architect from Rio de Janeiro who explains the difficulty of being gay and Jewish: "A Jewish parent is still not able to picture his son or daughter making up a traditional family without getting married. For religious families, (...) it's even worse, since certain biblical passages are seen as prohibiting homosexuality" (Around... 02). In the midst of taboo restrictions and disparaging rubrics that preclude the manifestation of any form of sexual difference beyond heterosexuality, it is undeniable that staid categories of "normative" sexual identity within Brazil's Jewish communities still foster for the most part a form of strict male/female gender-binary paradigm.

This brief overview of modernity's challenges to traditional Judaism, especially its imposition of the universal values of the Enlightenment and the political ramifications of

decolonization with the eventual emergence of nation-states and their internal and external migrations, shows how historically Judaism was forced to refashion itself within new spaces, ideologies and cultures such as in the kaleidoscopically-cultural nations of Latin America.³ If one follows this line of thinking, then how does this pathway manifest itself more specifically among Latin American Jewry regarding modernity and sexual identity? A possible response to this question may indirectly lie in the book by Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Jews and Words* (2012) which captures the spirit of today's secular proclivities within modern Jewish society when the authors critique an unquestioned tranquility stemming from an unconscious belief in salvation solely through G-d which according to them risks the invaluable freedom of consciously knowing one exists: "Self-conscious seculars seek not tranquility but intellectual restlessness, and love questions better than answers. To secular Jews like ourselves, the Hebrew Bible is a magnificent human creation. Solely human. We love it and we question it" (4). In this sense, they remind the modern reader that secularism does not signify the separation of the Bible from Judaism or Jewish culture. And so the tenets and values echoing from the Bible along with Jewish cultural patterns explain why Oz and Oz-Salzberger undeniably declare that "Ours is not a bloodline but a textline" (1). This "textline" (reading, education and interpretation) represents the cultural mainstay or linguistic tapestry of Jewish modernity since it crosses all dimensions of Judaism, secular and non-secular, as experienced throughout the modern Jewish Diaspora which of course includes Latin America.

The dilemma of existing ethically as both Jewish and gay arises in several contemporary Brazilian novels, however, the interest here lies with the notable uniqueness of one Brazilian-Jewish gay novel by Rafael Bán Jacobsen. Jacobsen is a physicist, professor, pianist, and writer who conducts research on cosmology and nuclear physics at the Federal

³ Rabbi David Ellenson interviewed by Manfred Gerstenfeld, "How Modernity Changed Judaism" in *Changing Jewish Communities*, *The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, n. 36, provides an insightful view on Jewish Modernity from an enlightened modern rabbi.

University of Rio Grande do Sul. He has also published short stories and two other novels, *Tempo & Costumes* (1998) and *Solenar* (2005).

Jacobsen's religious and gay novel, *Uma leve simetria* (2009) [A Delicate Symmetry] vividly recreates the fraught scenario of tradition vs. modernity by juxtaposing the expressions of strong sexual desire alongside fervent religious orthodoxy without promoting dogmatic social precepts or didactic religious preaching. Instead, the first-person narration balances equitably the core of each belief system or practice (religious and sexual), thereby enabling the reader to experience the complexity and intensity of the human condition. The tension, dramatized in Jacobsen's courageous novel, focuses upon an unconsummated homosexual love story between two Jewish adolescents within an Orthodox community. The narrative is earnestly voiced by the gay Orthodox Daniel, a very mature and orphaned young teen, who is devoted to Adonai, to ritual, to his Judaic community/neighborhood, and especially to its synagogue. However, Daniel desperately finds himself inextricably in love with one of his handsome classmates, the seemingly "straight" but clueless Pedro. This love story takes place in the capital city of Porto Alegre of the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, home to the third largest Jewish community in Brazil as well as to its overt masculine heritage based upon a folklore of gaúcho cattle-raising and agricultural culture. *Uma leve simetria* dramatizes this gay love story, actually two, one set in contemporary Brazil and the other taking place during biblical times, ergo the suggestion of similarity evident in the novel's title--"A delicate symmetry." The contemporary story is narrated from the point of view of the sensitive and devout Daniel, while the biblical, a version of the love between the iconic biblical David and Jonathan, is told in free verse by an omniscient voice, appearing in italics as if to evoke ancient script.

The modern love story told by Daniel appears to be a first-person seemingly reliable narrator, his reliability being enhanced by his sincere, devout, moving, and lyrical portrayal of adolescent despair, grappling with the experience of first love. This stance is fortified by Daniel's narration in the form of a sincere monologue rendered silently to his beloved classmate Pedro. Given Daniel's religious ethos, he interprets his problem as an insurmountable paradox complicated by his strong orthodox fervor and passionate

homosexual attraction to Pedro. Moreover, each chapter dedicated to Daniel's narration is alternated with the poetic and dramatic italicized version of the apocryphal "love" story between the young David and King's son, Jonathan. Thus, the novel's title evokes an almost symmetrical link between the biblical past and the Judaic present, thereby implying the timelessness or endurance of this type of love. Furthermore, by delving into a reading of the novel and the beauty of its brave inclusion of Jewish faith coupled with forbidden homosexual love, it behooves the contemporary reader to be attuned to trenchant family and religious codes as well as to societal attitudes and behavior vis-à-vis non-binary practices so as to appreciate the full dimensions of this novel's juxtaposition of religion and sexuality.

Reflecting the tension between gay sexuality and Brazilian Judaism, Rafael Bán Jacobsen sensitively creates the religious Daniel perhaps an indirect allusion to the Daniel of the Babylonian diaspora, unsurpassed in piety and good deeds and diligent in his adherence to the Law. On the other hand, the modern and Orthodox Daniel neither doubts his taboo gay sexuality nor his covert love for Pedro. Initially, Daniel appears to represent what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks affirms: "In a bold and original challenge to humanity, the Torah invites those who heed its call to combine sexuality with spirituality" (Rapoport, viii). Sacks further explains: "The Torah forbids homosexual activity as such (...). It does not condemn a homosexual disposition, because the Torah does not speak about what we are, but about what we do. It does, however, ask of one who has such a disposition to suppress or sublimate it and act within the Torah's constraints" (Rapoport, viii-ix).

The orthodox Daniel confidently, but secretly, harbors his own homosexual disposition. Furthermore, by unexpectedly and inadvertently revealing his sexual proclivity to his rabbi, Daniel is coerced, by the prescient Rabbi Levi to continue to remain publicly silent. As an ironic and indirect but not too subtle reference to the biblical Levi, the sage and rabbi with a prophetic bent, the contemporary Levi is accommodating and inclusive but intransigent about Daniel suppressing his sexuality, just as Rabbi Sacks affirmed above. While the synagogue's members of the Jewish neighborhood stand in as

Daniel's protective family, they seemingly remain unaware of his sexual proclivity. Interestingly, Sacks reminds us of another Judaic principle/precept: "Stereotyping, homophobia and verbal or other abuse are absolutely forbidden. Jewish law and teaching condemn in the strongest possible terms those who shame others" (Rapoport, ix). Clearly the rabbi does not condemn Daniel and behaves as a protective shield against any possible abuse directed at the boy but nonetheless simultaneously and emphatically he indeed endorses and promotes silence.

The overpowering forces of religion, family and community serve as pivots affecting Daniel. In so doing, the narrative can be read as a revelation of dominant family, religious and socio-cultural powers exerting their controlling forces over the vulnerable individual via diverse forms of pressure groups. For example, once Daniel's attraction to Pedro is inadvertently discovered (again by mistake), this time by Pedro's religiously fanatical and strict mother Martha, she wrongfully, according to Jewish law, exerts verbal and shameful abuse toward Daniel. Moreover, she forbids Daniel seeing her son, even though no homosexual act has taken place. Daniel obeys but never wavers internally despite the seemingly unrequited reality of his love for Pedro, who appears to be sexually ambivalent in Daniel's eyes. As a first-person narrator, Daniel's single-minded pursuit of Pedro at first suggests the possibility of narrative unreliability, at least in terms of Daniel's unrelenting interpretation of Pedro as potentially unaware or closeted. However, this subtle possibility of unreliability is dismissed given Daniel's pervasive honesty, that is, Daniel's religious passion alongside his sexual passion, thereby strengthening his own ethical stance in spite of the precarious situation of being a gay Brazilian Orthodox Jew.

While the repeated social pressures or pivots are obviously religion, family and community, interestingly the novel's dual structure also pivots with itself via the implicit dialogue between the alternating and ultimately interacting chapters—those of Daniel/Pedro's present time and that of the omnisciently rendered love story between the biblical David and Jonathan. Although the latter love story is an apocryphal literary tale inspired by biblical allusions, the David-Jonathan relationship does imply a *delicate* symmetry with the modern Daniel-Pedro story, both narratives calling attention to the

universal power of love as well as to the precariousness of social exposure. At one point in the biblical story, Jonathan confesses to David: “Temo que dedos acusadores me apontem, que perversos me julguem.” [I fear that accusatory glances point to me, that the perverse judge me] (89). Similarly, after being forced to hide literally in a dark cubicle/closet at school in order to avoid discovery, the modern Daniel steps out and decries: “O mundo que lentamente, meus olhos voltavam a ver não era o mesmo de antes: era um lugar bem mais perigoso” (126). [As my eyes slowly became adjusted, the world was not the same as before: it was a place even more dangerous]. Remarkably, the biblical story of religious and homo-affective love intercutting with the modern love story, set within a close-knit Orthodox Brazilian Jewish ambiance, nevertheless suggests the “inclusion” of a positive “spiritual” acknowledgement of homosexuality. This reading argues for seeing the novel as a game-changer for gay religious Jews in Brazil in comparison to gay Jewish narratives usually treated in a secular mode. This observation recalls another view exploring these issues vis-à-vis North American separatist and assimilationist postures: “as ‘queer’ and ‘Jewish’ come to inform one another, queer Jews are not as compelled to seek out separate space, but instead to create space within established institutions” (*Queer Jews*, 5). Notably, Jacobsen’s novel decidedly stands as a benchmark of inclusiveness for homosexuals Jews in Brazil.

Representing one of the most overtly religious Jewish-Brazilian contemporary gay novels, it warrants reiterating that Jacobsen’s narrative courageously dramatizes and challenges, in an open referential manner, Judaism and its traditions *WITHIN the context of a modern homosexual love story*, and moreover one dialoguing with a biblical tale. The juxtaposition of gay love and religious devotion embodied in the narrator enriches this novel by posing authentically ethical and moral questions about a Jewish ethos or gestalt, and its provocative religious, ethnic and cultural prohibitions and transgressions *WITHOUT the abandonment of faith*.

To appreciate further the affirmation of the novel’s ethical, religious and moral precepts, the aesthetic dramatization of sexuality and religion is deftly reinforced by its unique structure. That is, the originality of its narrative structure is built as an acrostic work

framed by the Hebrew alphabet, thereby affording the novel a profoundly religious and culturally authentic contextualization. The ornamental biblical lettering as framework also emerges via the sequence and insertion of each letter of the twenty-two in the Hebrew alphabet, serving as introductions to the novel's twenty-two chapters. Added to these insertions are selective verses from the longest psalm, the well-known acrostic Psalm 119, placed as epigraphs to accompany each chapter, simultaneously pronouncing praise to G-d as well as emphasizing the supplicant's plea for spiritual support/succor. Moreover, this aesthetic choice furnishes a biblical aura to the contemporary novel, serving as the expression of the sensitive and sincere evocation of Orthodox faith. Therefore, this crisscrossing narrative structure ultimately assimilates the spiritual power of faith into the heart of a gay Jewish love story.

In spite of Daniel suffering the restrictions imposed by his religion, Daniel never rejects G-d or annuls his love for Pedro which Jacobsen insinuates using the biblical style of literary parallelism: "Bendito sejas tu, Adonai, que revelaste ao povo de Israel parte do teu mistério através do amor (...) Bendito sejas tu, Pedro, que revelaste a mim todo o mistério através do amor" (12). [Blessed art Thou, Adonai, who revealed to the people of Israel part of your mystery by way of love. (...) Blessed be you, Pedro, who revealed to me all the mystery of life by way of love]. And on the novel's next page appears verse 8 of Psalm 119 in the voice of the supplicant: "Teus estatutos, quero observá-los; não me deixes, Senhor, desamparado" (13) [Your statutes, I wish to observe them; Father, please do not forsake me].

Recognizing the novel's religious aura, adorned by the Hebrew alphabet, the attentive reader comes to savor the linguistic majesty and meaningful power of the letters as they bestow a sense of completeness evoked by the inclusion of the Hebrew letters as representative of the full Hebraic linguistic system and by extension G-d's words. In addition, the liturgical addition of Psalm 119 of praise, support, gratitude and wisdom commemorating G-d, also underscores human tribulations with the intent of acknowledging the Bible as a fount for an inspiring interpretation of life, its glories and transgressions. In Psalm 119 the reader recognizes the feelings of affliction and loss overcome by the recitation or chanting of the verses of praise to G-d. Each stanza of eight

verses is introduced by a letter, ALEPH being the first letter of the Alphabet, representing infinity, the wholeness and the uniqueness of G-d. Transgression is addressed even before the novel begins as the reader immediately runs up against the famous verse of Leviticus 18:22 that forbids man to lie with another man, thereby forcing the reader to confront head-on the overwhelming void and difficult course to be experienced by Daniel, the pious orthodox Jew who just happens to have a gay disposition.

Interestingly, in this novel, Psalm 119 represents a type of “school of prayers” that offers models to follow while it also inspires the protagonists and the readers to rethink their most profound feelings and highest aspirations. That is, to express the most secret feelings of one’s own heart, one being religious or not. The ethical and religious codes of Psalm 119 evoke the vivid consciousness of G-d’s supreme and constant power and mercy while at the same time to celebrate the surprising force and will of the human spirit. Along these lines, the novel can indeed emerge as a modern prayer, beseeching understanding on the part of the reader. As a gift to Daniel from Pedro, a copy of the *Book of Psalms*, once belonging to Pedro’s absent father, contains the latter’s notations in Yiddish but at the end of Psalm 119 appears the word tzur (150) in Hebrew meaning “stone,” pedra in Portuguese and thus Pedro’s name. Daniel interprets the gift of the *Book of Psalms* as a symbol, a cry of last resort in which he sees Pedro’s arm outstretched to him. In Pedro’s father’s annotations, Daniel perceives some message he believes is his mission to decipher: “era minha missão fazer os surdos ouvirem e os cegos enxergarem, cabia a mim ir até o fim e desatar os selos” (151). [It was up to me to persist in making the deaf hear and the blind perceive, it was up to me to go til the end and tear off the seals]. The wording in Portuguese recalls a famous dictum by the modern theological philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel, alluding to the powers of reflection, insight and revelation by the biblical prophets: “The prophets knew ‘what to see’ instead of merely knowing what they knew” (*The Prophets*, 1962: xv:).

Later in the novel, from Daniel’s insightful yet anguished past experience with secretiveness, silence surfaces again when he believes that Pedro perceives his own reflection in the Daniel’s eyes. According to Daniel, Pedro becomes petrified not because of Daniel’s sexuality but “quando ele olhou para mim naquele momento, não viu alguém

que o desejava, não viu um outro que se declarava a ele; viu a si mesmo, estupefato de tão impregnado dele que eu estava” (88) [when he looked at me at that moment, he didn’t see somebody who desired him, he didn’t see one who declared his love for him, rather he saw himself, stupefied by how profound was my love for him]. Daniel understands Pedro’s difficulty in dealing with his possibly gay orientation as well as in facing his mother’s brutally aggressive rage and verbal abuse. Martha’s condemnation intersects with the boys’ friendly relationship by repressing and suffocating Pedro with her maniacal and delirious protection, ultimately aggravating Pedro’s serious asthmatic condition. Simultaneously, the rabbi counsels Daniel to distance himself from this cloud of homosexual love because “corres dois grandes riscos: o primeiro, de estar, mesmo que indiretamente, fomentando o que sentes pelo Pedro; o segundo, de ter dissipado a nuvem, deparar-se com algo ainda mais ameaçador que, antes, se achava encoberto” (94). [you are running up against two big risks: the first, albeit even indirectly, of fomenting what you feel for Pedro, and second, of having dissipated the cloud, you will be forced to face what beforehand was found to be concealed] The latter serving as an indirect reference to Pedro’s father’s covert homosexuality. In reaction to the rabbi’s argument for silence, Daniel ponders: “Não é a misericórdia um dos maiores atributos de Deus? Pode, então, ser legítimo a misericórdia alimentada pela mentira?” (95). [Isn’t mercy one of G-d’s greatest attributes? Therefore, how can mercy be legitimate if it is nourished by lies?] Realizing that the rabbi’s threadbare arguments are the same as always and, moreover, preemptive, Daniel perceives that “embora fossem sábios e até carinhosos, eram inócuos perante a obstinação que se apossavam de mim” (95). [although the arguments were wise and even endearing, they were innocuous given the obstinacy that possessed me].

When faced with Pedro’s mother and her uncontrollable religious fanaticism, along with the community’s implied chauvinism, Daniel admits at different stages that these were the primary abusive factors contributing to the tragedy of his unrequited gay love story. Daniel believes that “eu precisava ser mais forte do que meus medos” (117) [I needed to be stronger than my fears]. Nevertheless, suggesting Jewish wanderings, Daniel envisions the desert as a metaphor and struggle for loyalty but also as a wasteland of no support: “Entre todos que vagavam no deserto, sem esteio ou certezas, eu era o andarilho mais

disperso, errante e solitário” (144) [Among all those who wandered in the desert, without help or certainties, I was the most dispersed, errant and solitary vagrant]. At this point, it sinks into the reader’s heart and mind the extent of Daniel’s emotional and sexual exile, engendered by the overwhelming emptiness he experiences by remaining invisible or silent in the midst of his social and religious daily existence.

After Pedro succumbs to his illness, presenting the reader with the inevitable queer unhappy ending, in grief Daniel rebelliously commits the ultimate Talmudic transgression by kissing Pedro’s cadaver, thereby concretely defying the ever-present laws of prohibition. Years later, Daniel continues to live within the bosom of the orthodox community where the synagogue’s community does not speak of Daniel’s sexual identity. Well received and respected for his exemplary religiosity, Daniel eventually becomes the president of the synagogue’s council, once earmarked for the deceased Martha, Pedro’s anguished mother. For him, his ethical and conscious stance about his sexuality stems from his persistent self-honesty which he affirms by standing firmly during the Kadish prayer for Pedro and during the rituals of Yom Kippur. As such, the novel neither condemns homosexuality nor does it fully defend all the precepts of the orthodox religion. Rather, the novel’s uniqueness rests upon the creation of a space for religious tradition alongside unshakeable gay love. Although this juxtaposition is nourished by poetic and stirring language, this space still remains harrowing and disheartening in light of several verses embedded in the rendering of the biblical tale:

“O vazio sufoca, onipotente, pois contém a si próprio: todos os medos, dilemas suspiros, gritos, afagos, ódios e vertigens unificados. Nulificados” (145).

[Omnipotent emptiness suffocates, since it contains in itself: all fears, dilemmas, sighs, shouts, caresses, hatreds, and uncertainties, all tied together. Nullified.]

“E nessa condensação sem tempo e sem lugar, sem cheiro ou movimento, transpira, eclode e transborda para inundar o espírito do caminhante solitário.

“O deserto é todo em si, mas não cabe” (146)

[And that condensation bereft of time or place, bereft of scent or movement, exhales, erupts and overflows to inundate the spirit of the lonely wanderer.

The desert is a whole unto itself, but it does not hold].

In conclusion, these last verses underscore the dilemmas raised by Jacobsen between religious and gay Jews, that is, in order to hold a space for both identities. This novel addresses how religion can intersect detrimentally with sexuality, but also how

religion does not necessarily cast aside the queer Jew. Family, religion, gender, community, and cultural ethos remain the principal pivots that intersect with suppressed, queer sexuality. Due to the strict imposition of ritual and cultural norms interacting with alternative sexualities, condemnation and tragedy inevitably ensue as in other Jewish gay novels; for example, those by Jacobsen's contemporaries Cíntia Moscovich and Flávio Izhaki wherein loss, suppression and death hang over the fate of queer Jews in their novels. Remarkably, Jacobsen's novel presents the reader with a new space, despite the continued presence of tragedy, but one where Judaism and homosexuality in the figure of Daniel can co-exist. It is unclear in Jacobsen's novel, to what extent the gay protagonist's sexuality may become more visible within his community but the narrative does indeed end by placing him actively in the heart of his Jewish community. This "placement" recalls the aforementioned quote by the leader of Jewish Gay Brazilians (JGBR), Ari Teperman who stated: "We don't intend to preach Judaism for gay Jews. Our goal is to promote social inclusion in the Jewish community." This fractured stance appears to be the kind of ambiguous space that gay religious Jews from Brazil may still have to cultivate as a starting point for building more inclusion and eventually more open recognition and acceptance of their sexualities. By mapping the intense socio-cultural crossroads in Brazil between religion, family and sexuality that usually lead to complications and injustices, a Jewish author like Jacobsen appears to be confronting boldly the challenges presented by multifaceted LGBTQ identities. At the moment, however, Jewish-Brazilian gay fiction reminds us that the best to be expected rests unsatisfactorily with the ability of religious culture and queer Jews to tolerate ambiguity. Yet, by imploring support from G-d, given this novel's religious frame, lyrical and poetic prose, its style of symmetrical parallelism and thematics, we argue and advocate for reading this novel also as a modern Midrash. That is, to read this gay love as a story within the context of the Bible and the powerful Psalm 119 which beseeches G-d to provide spiritual succor to all readers, including those who find themselves born with alternative sexual emotions unjustly regarded as "unholy."

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