

Yona-Dvir Shalem, Noy Katsman

Orit Avishai, 2023: *Queer Judaism: LGBT Activism and the Remaking of Jewish Orthodoxy in Israel*. New York: New York University Press. 320 pages. \$94.00

---

*Queer Judaism* by Orit Avishai discusses the intersections of non-heterosexual attractions and conservative religious societies through an analysis of the “Kadag” (Hebrew acronym for Proud Religious Community, קדג). It is based on four years of fieldwork, including more than 120 interviews, physical and digital ethnography, as well as archival research accumulating to six chapters.

The first chapter, “Making a Social Movement”, describes the rise of religious gay and lesbian organizations, primarily “Havruta”, a group for gay men from religious backgrounds, and “Bat Kol”, the leading lesbian religious organization. These organizations evolved from online forums where gay religious people could freely discuss their identities. Chapter 2, “Unliveable Lives”, examines the experiences of gay and lesbian individuals growing up in Orthodox societies and the unique challenges they have faced, unable to imagine living in the community. Chapter 3, “Orthodox Queer Worldmaking”, shows how Orthodox gay and lesbian individuals reconcile their conflicting identities by interpreting religious terms according to their experiences. The fourth chapter, “Educating our Rabbis”, analyzes the relationship between religious authority and lesbian and gay organizations, analyzing the change in attitude over the years, which has become more tolerant but still lacks legitimacy for LGBTQ+ people. The narrative framing of religious gay organizations is described in the fifth chapter, “Telling Stories, Making Space”, using the term “politics of authenticity” to show how lesbian and gay people are a part of the Orthodox national religious community and should therefore be accepted equally. Chapter 6, “The Battle for Judaism’s Straight Soul”, completes the picture by addressing the polarization in the national religious community between a more liberal approach that tends to accept gay people and a conservative stream that sees them as an existential threat. In the conclusion, Avishai argues that the “Kadag’s” assimilation politics have a radical potential by challenging the fundamentals of Orthodoxy and its boundaries.

In *Queer Judaism*, Avishai employs ethnographic methodology, conducting in-depth interviews and participant observation within Orthodox LGBTQ+ communities. She examines how these individuals reconcile their queer identities with traditional Jewish norms drawing on queer theory and sociology to analyze identity negotiation, agency, and resistance. The different agents in the Orthodox network and their conflicts are carefully outlined, especially in the fourth chapter, which highlights the main power structures in the Orthodoxy, emphasizing the role of the rabbis and how the LGBTQ+ community negotiates with them.

While the book aims to provide a detailed portrait of the Proud Religious Community, it primarily focuses on homosexual men and women. Therefore, many identities within the broader queer Jewish community are erased (p. 21). Yet, Avishai chooses

to use the term “LGBT”, even though it is a fig leaf. Consequently, the book’s focus resembles gay and lesbian scholarship from the early 2000s, before the increased representation and significance of other identities within the queer community.

At the same time, the book subtly criticizes the coexistence of the Israeli queer religious struggle and the “movement’s thunderous silence regarding Israel’s poor human rights legacy on the Palestinian question” (p. 20). The book should be considered as research in the study of religion, in which queer identity is a test case. As such, it belongs in the same category as other current books on religious developments, specifically in the Israeli context. Readers wishing to expand their knowledge of recent developments in the Israeli context will find this book to be a fascinating read. It utilizes multidisciplinary methodologies that would also be relevant to scholars of religion and its intersection with queer studies.

Nonetheless, some definitions remain unclear, for instance the naming of the group as “Orthodox”, which is a translation of the term “Dati” in Israel, literally meaning “religious”, and is used as a shortening of the subgroup “Dati Leumi”, which translates to “National Religious”. Bringing the Ashkenazi, American-centric concept of “Orthodoxy” into this discourse may be a blind spot that is easily lost in translation and adds to the erasure of other kinds of queer Jews in Israel/Palestine such as Mizrahi and other forms of new-age religiosity. Thus, Avishai’s analysis delicately pushes aside the nationalistic nature of the groups discussed instead of using it as a clarifying lens. It focuses on the dynamics between two nationalist groups, one liberal and the other conservative.

This terminological shift simplifies the complexity of Israeli religious identities and obscures the racial and geopolitical hierarchies embedded in those categories. The connection between Israeli nationalism and LGBTQ+ rights has been well researched<sup>1</sup>, leading to the following question: Is the acceptance of gay and lesbian people in the “Dati Leumi” movement actually an attempt to be part of the Israeli general society through pinkwashing? This question is not explicitly discussed in the book.

For example, Avishai describes an activist who “hung a Jewish pride flag, with a Star of David superimposed on the rainbow stripes, outside his childhood home in Shilo, an Orthodox West Bank settlement” (p. 194). The author depicts the flag as a *Jewish* pride flag and not an *Israeli/Zionist* one, thus avoiding the possible nationalist intent of the flag. The former may be how the individual sees the flag, however, its location within a settlement may also suggest other meanings. The merging of LGBTQ+ identity with national religiosity can be seen as an attempt to become part of the national body<sup>2</sup>, achieved through pinkwashing. Instead of standing in solidarity with other minorities in Israel, this choice seems to align with nationalism.

Building on the previous point, the relationship to the conservative and reform movements is rarely mentioned throughout the book. Avishai mentions the negative conno-

1 See, for example, Atshan, Sa’ed (2020). *Queer Palestine and the empire of critique*. California: Stanford University Press. <http://doi.org/10.1515/9781503612402>

2 It has been shown that portraying Palestinians as a common enemy offers an opportunity for LGBTQ+ individuals to be part of the Zionist body. See, for example, Ritchie, Jason (2014). Black skin splits: The birth (and death) of the queer Palestinian. In Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman & Silvia Posocco (eds.), *Queer necropolitics* (pp. 111–128). New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203798300>. Literally, taking part in pinkwashing is the prerequisite for entering the Zionist body.

tation these movements have for Orthodox Jews (p. 19). At the same time, comparative analyses with the conservative movement have been conducted in the past.<sup>3</sup> Thus, their influence on the “Kadag” is lacking, even though many of their ideas are deeply influenced by the conservative movement, as seen in the Proud Minyan (p. 46).

*Queer Judaism* is the first comprehensive written history of the “Kadag”. As such, it stays loyal to the narrative of the people who create and form this community today. At the same time, it allows for very few critical perspectives, which might not satisfy discerning readers. Reading the book in 2025, it is difficult to ignore the current reality. In this context, the lack of intersectional voices – both critical and proactive – could be seen as a further silencing of the violence done in the name of Judaism through homonormativity. “Your whole life, you know what it means to be Orthodox. Then, you find out that you’re a lesbian and you need a new story” (p. 104).

Ultimately, *Queer Judaism* tells a powerful story, but its subjects may not recognize it as such. Is a story that reproduces and reinforces existing power dynamics a *new* story? In response to Avishai’s question “Is it even possible to speak of tolerance and inclusion in this irredeemably illiberal setting?” (p. 192), we propose focusing on critical perspectives of the ethnonormative society led by Israel’s pinkwashing policy (Atshan 2020: 6), which pushes both religious and non-religious queer individuals into it. Some by coercion and some by choice.

### Authors’ details

*Yona-Dvir Shalem*, \*1996, Ph.D. student of Theology at the University of Nijmegen, and an academic fellow at the University of Jewish Studies in Heidelberg. Research focus: Gender Studies and Interreligious & Queer Theology.  
Email: yona-dvir.shalem@hfjs.eu

*Noy Katsman*, \*1996, M. A. student of Gender and Culture Studies at the Open University in Israel. Research focus: queer politics and methodology.  
Email: kaavino@post.openu.ac.il

---

3 See, for example, Irshai, Ronit (2018). Homosexuality and the “Aqedah Theology”: A comparison of Modern Orthodoxy and the Conservative Movement. *Journal of Jewish Ethics*, 4(1), 19–46. <http://doi.org/10.5325/jjewiethi.4.1.0019>