

Wrestling with Steve Greenberg
Jay Michaelson

"I believe we are living in an age in which the shechinah is becoming visible," Rabbi Steve Greenberg says. "There are questions we can ask now that we have not been able to ask before."

Greenberg is "the openly gay Orthodox rabbi." That's the way he's referred to in the press, definite article included, and it's a destiny which he did not choose, but which he has come to accept. Featured in *Trembling Before G-d*, Greenberg joined filmmaker Sandi Simcha Dubowski on a worldwide journey in support of the movie, and is now on book tour for *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition*, the most comprehensive treatment of the subject in publishing history. His book, well-researched, well-argued, well-written, may change the lives of thousands of men and women. Greenberg thinks his case is so urgent not just because of humiliation and marginalization within the Jewish "religious" community, not just because of 60,000 gay teenage suicides a year, and not because of basic Jewish values of equality or dignity – but because gays and lesbians can help us do Torah better.

Greenberg's book is an apology for so many different ideologies that it's sometimes hard to know where the rabbi himself stands. It is, overtly, a plea for Orthodox Jews to take a more inclusive attitude toward their gay and lesbian members. It is also a plea to queer Jews not to leave Orthodoxy behind, or relegate it to the dust-heap of exclusionary fundamentalisms. Greenberg recognizes – and invites Orthodox and Conservative Jews to recognize – that "for many gay Jews, it is Judaism, and not homosexuality, that is in question." And so, even as he recognizes the homophobia and intolerance within the Jewish tradition – ideologies which existed alongside gay and lesbian Jews, and the ethos of effeminate masculinity so capably documented by Daniel Boyarin, Sander Gilman and others – Greenberg goes about rescuing the halachic process, condemning many of its foremost proponents, but also engaging with them. For example, the brutal homophobia of Rav Moshe Feinstein is raised, acknowledged – and then, in a curious way, agreed with. (Rav Moshe, in a vitriolic letter which many readers believe protests a bit too much, said that we should not even enter into a discussion of the homosexuality taboo, because to explore the reasons for it suggests that the taboo might one day, somehow, be lifted. Greenberg agrees, and then explores the reasons.)

Ultimately, Greenberg's thesis is that homosexuality is a form of misogyny, that what Leviticus 18:22 says is "Don't make a woman out of a man." We've mistaken a statement about violence and humiliation – that's what's meant by 'to be made a woman' – as a statement about anatomy.

Greenberg's reading is linguistically persuasive, and, ironically, succeeds precisely because it condemns. We've got a much bigger problem here, Greenberg seems to be saying. And only now, only now that gay and lesbian voices can be

brought to the table, can we see it clearly. Our lives are "new information" to the halachic process; we are helping Jews to understand Torah better.

I sat down to interview Steve Greenberg for the Forward – my review of his book was published on April 30. But I sat down with my own agenda and concerns also. I've memorized the citation of Leviticus 18:22. I've written a short story about it, led seminars about it, talked about it with teenagers, adults, queers, straights, Jews, and gentiles. I've analyzed its puzzling grammar and concordance-checked its key words. And I've come to different conclusions from Steve: substantively, and tactically. Our interview became almost a jousting match, albeit one between two allies who both know that, ultimately, our cause is the same, and our enemy – fear – is the same as well.

I read Leviticus 18 as being about idolatry. I think the Hebrew word "toevah" is the key, and I think that word essentially means "taboo." I think the verse is about ritual homosexuality, widely practiced in the Ancient Near East (with cultic prostitutes known as k'deshim and enjoying a minor resurgence today among the Radical Faeries, Body Electric, and other groups in which I myself have participated. Loving sex between two men, and especially two women, is as closely related to the toevah of Leviticus as lighting a campfire is to the "strange fire" of Nadav and Avihu.

More importantly, I see the campaign to end institutionalized Jewish homophobia, which I consider to be a mild form of genocide, as requiring two critical elements. The first of these is a recognition that people are dying. Lives are being mutilated, and suicides are being encouraged by the shamefully ignorant pronouncements of rabbis who should know better. These rabbis, who pretend to be "just trying to understand the meaning of this verse," turn a blind eye to the violent tortures and deaths of the closet, as they prattle about lifestyle choice. I recently read a sermon given by a member of the Conservative Movement's law committee which analogized homosexuality to the choice of getting a tattoo.

The second critical element in our struggle, it seems to me, must be to learn and then teach just what it is that GLBT Jews have to offer. Whether it is a recognition of the disproportionate number of mystics and artists who were, and are, gay, or whether it's a queer-theory grounded appreciation of difference, or whether it's just a simple "gorgeous mosaic" of love, queer Jews need to say to our non-queer Jewish brethren "We're here, we're queer, and we've got a lot to offer."

A smart scholar once said: When a man and a woman walk down the street holding hands, they're saying something about their love. When two men do it, they're saying something about their sex life. This is still how many, and I would wager most, see the struggle for GLBT equality – as an impolite, perhaps disgusting, revelation of that which should be kept private. As if wedding rings, marriage benefits, pregnant wives, honeymoons, dating shows, romantic

comedies – as if all of these are somehow "private" and not heteronorms drilled into our heads every day.

Rabbi Greenberg is more moderate than I am. Since writing his pioneering, pseudonymous essay in 1993 (available online at www.indegayforum.org), he has made communication the hallmark of his work. He wants to remain in dialogue with people who think that he's chosen his sexuality, and chosen wrongly. I want to tell them to go to hell. I no longer have any patience for these shame-filled people, and I feel dirtied when I come into contact with them. I spent the month of February writing a thirty page response to the Roth Tshuvah on homosexuality, and I have never felt so polluted in my life. Not even when I cried to God, begging him to change me, one Purim night in Jerusalem. Not when I sought anonymous sex in the dark. For a while, it was very important to me to be accepted. Now, it's very important for me not to care.

Greenberg, then, is probably a much better activist than I am. Maybe he's just dealt with his stuff better – surely having a life-partner helps – and so he's able to sit down with these people without feeling nauseated. I also feel like, precisely because Steve is more reticent about his own spirituality, he is a more effective advocate in a religious world where spirituality is often seen as suspect. These spiritually-closeted rabbis, they don't understand – only my love of God sustains me in the face of their hatred.

"The first mistake in creation is aloneness," Greenberg said at his book launch, a few minutes after our interview concluded. "It's the first time God says 'lo tov.' So clearly gay people are not meant to be alone now either."

That's it, I wanted to say. That's what they have to understand. That we are fulfilling God's Desire by expressing love. That, since all is God, what looks like wrestling is really a loving embrace of the One with the One. Who is closer to God – the gay man who loves another gay man, or the straight man who analogizes that love to bestiality?

Steve and I began our conversation at the Manhattan JCC, a few minutes before the book launch event.

Z: So, we're sitting down to talk in the midst of controversy: the President just announced his support for a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage. How are these recent developments affecting how you present the book?

SG: Well, it's good fortune for me as a writer. I've been working on this book for years, and this is just a fortunate coincidence. I think what the controversy is showing is how important it is to not write either for the "yea" or the "nay" side. It's easy to do that, but you're preaching to the choir.

Z: "Wrestling with God and Men" is very overt in speaking to multiple audiences. It even offers different arguments for each.

SG: The only way I could handle this task was by making a conscious effort to speak in different frames for different purposes, and make it clear what I was doing. I'm modeling how two different communities can find a way to live together, with different halachic methodologies but both with commitment to Torah. One group must be willing to risk a methodological jump, and the other group must be willing to risk their hearts and souls. Both take a risk in being partial. But it's more important to find a policy to live together than to be right. Being right, right now, is probably a kind of hubris that we can't afford.

Z: I find it frustrating that non-gay people are trying to tell gay people what gay means. I'm reminded of something that Joseph Kramer, the founder of Body Electric said. He was asked what, if anything, he fears, since he's done so much pioneering erotic and spiritual work. He said he fears toxic, shame-based people, because just being around such people, they affect you. How are gay people supposed to risk their hearts and souls in this way?

SG: Let me ask another question. I think Orthodoxy is going to evolve on this issue. But we're used to thinking about the next three months, the next year. What do you do if it's going to take ten years? The halachic process is not going to move quickly. But the process begins by bringing people to a table, rather than screaming at each other and walking away, in which case neither of the consciousnesses are affected.

Z: "Wrestling with God and Men" is, in some sense, a political book. It is an argument. What are you trying to achieve?

SG: I'm trying to be able to daven in a traditional community, to learn in the community. If the goal is to win a battle, we might as well not try. But part of what changes the law is the hearts and minds of people. Gay people need to be visible in traditional social environments. Admittedly, this is a partial step. We want not to be humiliated, and to be honest. That is the first step.

You don't attempt challenging Halachic methodology when you don't have a need – when you don't have real human problems with real human impact. So the first step is about making those people, and their problems, visible.

Z: I want to ask you about something I call the 'Huck Finn' moment. In the novel, Huck is traveling down the Mississippi with Jim, the runaway slave. He intends to turn him in. He's been told that if he doesn't turn him in, he's going to go to hell. But Huck gets to know Jim, and comes to a choice between his conscience and the system of morality he's been taught. And he says, in this crucial, coming-of-age moment, "Well, I guess I'll go to hell then." For me, having my own Huck Finn moment was crucial. I had to confront what I saw as a choice between religion and happiness. I said to God, "Well, God, I can't be miserable anymore, so I guess I'll go to hell then." And then I found that God was willing to

go to hell with me. But that choice, I feel, is so important, and I feel like your book wants to avoid the choice, to say, well, sort of, here's a compromise.

SG: The trouble with the 'I'm going to hell' moment is, what do you do next? It's a binary choice. Either you deserve hell, or religion is nonsense. That's not acceptable to me. When I came out, I knew I would have to leave the rabbinate or make sense of it. I chose to make sense of it. The trouble is, rebellion doesn't help shape the terrain. It doesn't tell you where to go – only where you're not going to go. I wanted to remain in conversation with the traditional world. I want to say: 'We want you to understand that the tradition requires you to engage with us more authentically.' I'm not trying to convince them – I want to obligate them to come up with something themselves. No religion can claim to exclude 7% of the population and claim that it's not a club. So, for the sake of the vibrance and life of the Jewish people itself, I wanted to remain in the conversation. Rebellion doesn't allow you to do that.

Now, I definitely did move through guilt, and frustration, and anger. That process is critical. But I think there is a unique opportunity here. Our willingness to be naked to the text makes the text naked to us. When I took the aliya on Yom Kippur, I realized that these verses had never been understood because gay and lesbian people haven't been at the table to interpret them and give their testimony. These verses are not known. And that is a tremendous opportunity.

Z: But you recognize that most Orthodox rabbis will not accept your interpretation.

SG: Yes, which is why I also offer a way for such rabbis to accept gay and lesbian people in their community. It's alright for an Orthodox rabbi to have a limited perspective of me, as long as he doesn't expect me to have that perspective of myself. He must know that I don't have to internalize that I'm an obsessive-compulsive, but I have to accept that that may be his view. I want to open up the possibility of remaining in the community. And I want to ask how one might read texts in a way that the traditional community cannot help but find a way to embrace gay and lesbian people.

Z: Your book is subtitled "Homosexuality in the Jewish tradition," but the sources and figures in it are almost completely Orthodox ones.

SG: This is my read of the Jewish tradition. Look, I'm an Orthodox rabbi. As long as I share who I am and provide a frame for my bias, I think I've gone far enough. But I did want to construct a conversation that would speak not only to traditional Jews. I hope I've achieved that.

Z: I notice that in the "rationales" section you didn't include one of the rationales that's most popular these days, both in pop culture and also in the Roth tshuvah that is widely accepted in the conservative movement: that homosexuality is, in some way, "unnatural." Of course, Roth has to backtrack

because homosexuality is found throughout the animal world, but he claims that it's not natural for humans. Why did you choose not to include this 'rationale' in the book?

SG: I don't think that term is helpful, and I don't think the argument makes sense. First of all, it's not offered anywhere in traditional Jewish sources. It's a contemporary argument only. "Natural" is not a halachic category, and the arguments that make use of them – I don't think they're very Jewish. In a way, homosexuality is as natural as any sin. Eating pork is natural. Circumcision, on the other hand, is unnatural; brit milah violates the "naturalness" of the human body. So, Jewishly speaking, naturalness is not an order that commands.

Z: If the book is political, what's your vision of success?

SG: Success is when a 16-year-old gay Orthodox kid has a life trajectory that's pretty good. No advocacy from the community, but also no humiliation and no lying. Hearts and minds change first – the law is the last thing to change in a social movement.