

From the Executive Director

The first thing I thought when President Donald Trump issued an executive order on January 20, 2025, his first day in power, in which he declared that the US government would only recognize two genders, male and female, was “Boy, I guess Trump hasn’t read much Talmud recently!” (Ok, maybe that wasn’t the *first* thing I thought; I had a number of other choice words running through my head, but it was near the top.) Things didn’t get much better when newly deputized Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. reinforced Trump’s pronouncement on gender and also declared on February 19 that “this administration is bringing back common sense and restoring biological truth to the federal government.” I guess Kennedy hadn’t read much Talmud either or, for that matter, listened to the AJS’s wonderful *Adventures in Jewish Studies* podcast episode “The Many Genders of Judaism” in which scholars Max Strassfeld and S. J. Crasnow walk listeners through fascinating insights on sex and gender from the Talmud up through today. As Strassfeld and Crasnow explain, Judaism’s understanding of sex and gender extends beyond a simple binary, and in fact, the Talmud sets out seven different gender categories. In fairness, these talmudic categories are rooted more in a discussion of sexual biology and anatomy than how we might currently understand gender, but still, the simple fact that the rabbis of hundreds of years ago were grappling with and acknowledging the fact that the world’s population consists of more than two sexes/genders discounts the idea that the present moment in which we live is always the most enlightened of times.

Earlier this spring, shortly after Trump announced that he was taking over the Kennedy Center and vowing to cancel all drag performances at the venerable

institution, the AJS released another *Adventures in Jewish Studies* episode on the history of Judaism and drag. In the episode, scholars Golan Moskowitz and Naomi Seidman, along with Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie, discuss Judaism’s rich engagement with drag and cross-dressing that extends as far back as the Bible and continues into the present day. While not to downplay the fact that some practitioners of Judaism have not always made life easy for LGBTQ folks, discussions of gender, sexuality, and cross-dressing have long been areas of inquiry in the Bible and Talmud, and not surprisingly, for Jewish Studies scholars today. Especially in this moment in which LGBTQ individuals in the United States are coming under renewed fire from the government, where their rights are being imperiled by legislators who think they can simply use “common sense” to understand the world around them, it’s important to have the work of scholars who can provide a rich, multifaceted, and ever-evolving understanding of sexual and gender categories.

I’m especially proud that the AJS is doing this issue on LGBTQ topics. For some, it might seem overdue, and yet, for me as a scholar and individual, the AJS has long been a place open to and welcoming of queer Jewish scholarship. In fact, the very first conference paper I ever gave anywhere was at an AJS conference in 2003 where I presented work from my dissertation on queer Jewish culture in America. My work was warmly received, and I’ll never forget the positive feedback I especially received from Laura Levitt, who gave me, an inexperienced graduate student, some needed encouragement.

My work was hardly the first (or the last) contribution to queer Jewish scholarship. In Gregg Drinkwater’s

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November 2024 article “Queer and Trans Studies and the Jewish Question: Looking Back, Looking Ahead” in the journal *QTR*, Drinkwater provides a thorough and in some ways surprising literature review that reveals how just how significant and prolific scholarship on queer Jewish topics has been for nearly a quarter century. Starting in 2002 with *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* and then *Queer Jews* in 2003, Drinkwater identifies more than fifty scholars (the majority of whom are AJS members) who have contributed to this rich body of work. The essays in this issue provided by the fellows at the Frankel Center at the University of

Michigan, complemented by the work of other AJS members, are a continuation of this legacy and highlight the next generation of thinkers working in this important and growing field of gender and sexuality studies.

I’m so pleased that the AJS is a place where this scholarship can thrive but also where the organization’s members who themselves identify with a variety of colors in the LGBTQ rainbow can find a home and be out and proud.

Warren Hoffman
Association for Jewish Studies



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