

Live & Learn

# Book gives queer perspective on Torah

By RITA POLIAKOV  
Staff Reporter

**G**regg Drinkwater has a unique interpretation of the Torah.

When reading the weekly passages, he sees the possibility of Adam being created as both male and female. And when hearing about the story of Jacob and Joseph, he can understand why some might call Joseph “the queerest of all Genesis characters.”

Drinkwater, the executive director of Jewish Mosaic: the National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Denver, Colo., is one of three editors who put together *Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible*.

The book is a collection of essays that analyze the Torah through a LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) perspective.

And it’s also the inspiration for York University assistant professor Aviva Goldger’s new four-week course.

The course, which is run through Congregation Shir Libeynu, Kolel, Kulanu Toronto, and the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre was formed after the Canadian book launch of *Torah Queeries* in November 2009. It ran every Tuesday in February and explores several essays and themes presented in the Torah, such as Leviticus and the story of Jacob and Joseph.

“I think it’s revolutionary because there’s been nothing of its kind until now,” Goldberg said of the course and the book. “It has taken awhile, but the ‘gay revolution’ in a political sense is also taking place in a theological and religious sense.”

Goldberg is the spiritual leader of Congregation Shir Libeynu, an inclusive and unaffiliated congregation in downtown Toronto. She sees the course as a continuation of the Jewish tradition.

“What we’re seeing more and more are gay and lesbian rabbis who are bringing both traditional commentary [on the Torah] and expanding it through their own lens,” she

said. “I think it’s part of our tradition, rabbis traditionally have said... it’s our responsibility in every generation to examine [the Torah.]”

Sharoni Sibony, the interim managing director of Kolel: The Adult Centre for Liberal Jewish Learning in Toronto, sees Toronto as a community that has room for improvement.

“It seems that the Toronto community isn’t so open LGBT,” she said, adding that this isn’t necessarily the case in the United States.

“In the States, they have... gay congregations that have over time created a new way of liturgy, a new way of thinking about community,” she said.

This is what she hopes will happen with *Torah Queeries*.

“It may start from queer readings or LGBT perspectives, but it’s really asking us to think about... the lessons we can extrapolate from these readings that will make the communities much more inclusive,” she said.

For Sibony, the course isn’t just about education, it’s about dialogue.

“If we can just sort of create a conversation where people actually listen to each other and understand the hu-

manity in everybody and the Jewishness in everybody,” she said. “People are always searching for that sense of belonging.”

Sibony learned this at Kulanu Toronto dinner, Toronto’s only Jewish LGBT social and education group, where she spoke to a girl who “said the Pride parade was the only day of the year when she wasn’t embarrassed about being gay. That’s just startling to me,” Sibony added.

*Torah Queeries* initially started as a web project called Jewish Mosaic: Torah Queeries, Drinkwater said. The website features LGBT perspectives on Torah passages.

Eventually Drinkwater, along with Joshua Lesser and David Shneer, turned the website into a book.

“I think it serves two purposes. One is to bring more LGBT Jews to the text or to deepen their connection to the text,” he said. “They’re not really engaging with the Torah right now at all. It’s one of my missions to change that,” Drinkwater said.

The book’s other purpose is to provide different perspectives to heterosexual Jews, Drinkwater, who is part of the LGBT community, said.

“The opportunity to work with LGBT people opens up a whole new realm of the Torah,” he said.



From left, Daniel Tyberg, Matthew Cohen, Noah Ross and Aubrey Maltz (sitting), Grade 7 students at United Synagogue Day School’s Bathurst campus, determined in a study of Cain and Abel how different disciplines contribute to the judicial system in deciding an appropriate punishment for crimes.



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