Abstract

This thesis explores the unique intersection between Jewish identity and queer identity, as seen through the lens of American theater emerging at the beginning of the AIDS crisis. By analyzing four late 20th-century plays written by gay Jews about gay Jews (*Angels in America, Falsettos, The Normal Heart*, and *Torch Song Trilogy*), the thesis aims to distinguish overlapping elements of these complex identities. The thesis is divided into two primary chapters. The first focuses on the role of masculinity in gay Jewish life, particularly the ways in which a struggle to perform gender according to societal standards has plagued generations of both Jewish men and gay men. The second chapter navigates the dual history of trauma and victimization that shapes the gay Jewish worldview, with a particular eye toward the connection between the AIDS epidemic and the Holocaust in the collective conscience of gay Jewish men.

Theater is an ephemeral medium by definition and the plays in question were meant to be experienced by live audiences. Without the ability to experience the productions live, research for this thesis focused primarily on published scripts, with supplementary attention to cast recordings and film/television adaptations.

WELCOME TO FALSETTOLAND: THE INTERSECTION OF JEWISH AND QUEER IDENTITY IN LATE 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN THEATER

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

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Date: January 2021
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Acknowledgments

The experience of writing a thesis amid a global pandemic is difficult to say the least. I truly would not have been able to complete this process without the assistance and support of my friends, family, and colleagues.

First and foremost, I'd like to thank my advisor, Dr. Wendy Zierler. You've approached this process with an open mind and an open heart, providing me unwavering support and guidance through an unimaginably challenging year. When I decided to focus on this topic, I knew instantaneously that you were the only person to shepherd me through the process. I remain deeply grateful for the wisdom, passion, and kindness you brought to our time together.

I'd like to offer my immense gratitude to the rabbinical class of 2021 on the New York campus of HUC-JIR. While I have learned from each and every one of you over the past five years, I'd especially like to thank Emily Aronson, Erin Binder, Vanessa Harper, Ariel Milan-Polisar, Rachael Pass, and Zach Plesent for keeping me sane throughout this process. Thank you for meetups in Central Park that provided me caffeination and groundedness, for Zoom productivity sessions that kept me focused and motivated, for endless texts and dog photos that made me laugh and reminded me of goodness when the world seemed excessively dark.

Thank you to the clergy team at Temple Israel of Boston for constantly inspiring me and demonstrating what it means to sustain community when they need us most.

Nothing I do in life would be possible without the endless support and unconditional love from my parents and my sister, Samantha. As I write this, it has been almost one year since we have seen each other in person. I miss you every single day.

To my brilliant nephew, Nate, who can brighten my day like no one else in the world. Thank you for your songs and your smiles. I'm sorry that you entered this world into such tumultuous times. I promise to fight with all of my being to make it better for you.

I wrote the entirety of this thesis while living in my uncle's apartment on the Upper West Side. To my uncle, Richard Gold, a gay man from the generation depicted in all of these plays: thank you for your endless generosity, your fortitude, and your abounding love. Thank you for blazing a trail so my generation could live freely. We are indebted.

Most importantly, thank you to the love of my life, Nick. You are my light and my rock. I am so grateful that we live in a time when we can love each other openly and when I can call you my husband. As William Finn wrote in *Falsettos*, "When he sparkles, the earth begins to sway. What more can I say?"

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Introduction

In his introduction to Larry Kramer's groundbreaking play, *The Normal Heart,* playwright Tony Kushner categorizes Kramer's prose as unequivocally Jewish. He writes, "insofar as this plain, tormented speech derives from an absolute, uncompromising fealty to the search for what is true, to the centrality of that search above all others, it is Jewish speech."[1] In many ways, this search for what is true lies at the very core of my own personal interest in this unique intersection of Jewish identity and Queer identity. As a Jew, I have spent countless hours immersed in our sacred texts, attempting to excavate kernels of eternal truth. On a more personal level, as a gay man, it is impossible to overlook the years of my life spent concealing the truth of my identity, grappling with its implications, and ultimately choosing to pursue living my truth despite the ramifications and disadvantages thrown my way. At the nexus of these identities lies a synthesis of the communal and individual pursuits of truth that yield the unique perspective of the gay Jew.

So, who is this gay Jew? Who is this person who sits at the junction of these quintessentially outsider identities? I have lived my life in his shoes, walked through the world with these dual identities, and I have seen the ways in which my Queerness and Jewishness are deeply, inextricably intertwined. Yet, as well-acquainted as I may be with these aspects of myself, there is still an immense power in recognizing oneself in a character on stage. Professor Rita Felski explores this notion of self-recognition through the lens of literature but the principle can be applied to theater as well. She writes about this specific moment of realization:

[1] Tony Kushner, Introduction to *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me: Two Plays*, by Larry Kramer (New York: Grove Press, 2000), xi.

> *Suddenly and without warning, a flash of connection leaps across the gap between text and reader; an affinity or an attunement is brought to light. I may be looking for such a moment, or I may stumble on it haphazardly, startled by the prescience of a certain combination of words. In either case, I feel myself addressed, summoned, called to account: I cannot help seeing traces of myself in the pages I am reading. Indisputably, something has changed; my perspective has shifted; I see something that I did not see before.*[2]

Felski's depiction of self-recognition in a work of literature captures the essence of my experience as an audience member watching Kushner's *Angels in America* on Broadway. While his play takes place largely before I was born, Kushner does not simply portray gay characters and Jewish characters but rather weaves his own experience as a gay Jew into his work, seemingly speaking directly to his kindred spirits in the audience (I count myself among them), saying, "I see you in your entirety. Use this play to help you see more of yourself." The result of such an experience? As Felski powerfully articulates, "I feel myself acknowledged; I am rescued from the fear of invisibility, from the terror of not being seen."[3] This can certainly happen in a solitary moment of reading, listening to music, or studying a painting. But these moments of self-recognition "resonate with special force when individuals come together to form a collective audience for a play or a film. Aesthetic experience crystallizes and awareness of forming part of a broader community."[4]

As I write this thesis, we find ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic, with theaters shuttered all over the world. The experience of "forming a collective audience" for a

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[2] Rita Felski, "Recognition," in *The Uses of Literature* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 23.
[3] Ibid 33.
[4] Ibid.

play is, painfully, not currently an option. As such, the process of consuming art of any medium is, by and large, a solitary enterprise. The plays which comprise the focus of my study can certainly be read, but they were intended to be experienced alongside one's fellow theatergoer. The reemergence of public gathering following our extended lockdown period will finally bring back the ability to experience self-recognition through art in a public forum, facilitating not only a personal self-discovery, but also a sense of communion with others who also see themselves reflected on stage.

After all, the lens through which I aim to explore this intersectional gay/Jewish identity is rooted in perhaps one of the most primal of human experiences, the act of story-telling. Openly lesbian Rabbi Lisa Edwards writes that "we are Jews after all, and so we know what to do when people do not see us, or do not understand what they see -- we tell them (and ourselves) stories about us, so they (and we) will come to know who we are. We tell stories, and in doing so, are reminded of what the Torah taught us way back -- that the stories themselves are transformative; they change lives."[5] Over the course of myriad generations, humankind has relied on personal stories as a tool to understand that which exists outside our frame of individual reference. After all, the story is the secret weapon that puts a face to an idea, that allows our brains to shift understanding from the realm of the theoretical to the realm of lived experience. Throughout the history of technological development, from the printing press to radio, from television to the internet, our ability to share stories on a large scale has grown exponentially, yielding exposure of a variety of identities and life experiences across the global landscape. Yet, for the purpose of exploring these particular identity intersections, that is the unique composition of a Queer, Jewish

[5] Rabbi Lisa A. Edwards, foreword to *Mentsh: On Being Jewish and Queer*, edited by Angela Brown (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 2004), xiv.

identity, there is hardly a question regarding the most suitable medium in which to establish our investigation.

Professor David Román of the University of Southern California highlights the unparalleled role of live performance in facilitating cultural conversation. He writes, "performance's liveness and impermanence allow for a process of exchange -- between artists and audiences, between the past and the present -- where new societal formations emerge."[6] Whereas a variety of media have the capability to foster this sense of cultural awakening and yield deeper understanding, the ephemerality of live performance provides an incomparable opportunity for an audience to engage with a subject amid the electric energy that materializes when breathing the same air as the actors, entering into a conversation intended exclusively for the people in the room, only to fade into darkness upon the final fall of the curtain.

I must add that my own personal background lies firmly in the realm of theater, having earned my undergraduate degree in musical theater and working as a professional actor for fourteen years. From a personal vantage point, theater is the medium which I credit most for fostering my own personal growth and transformation. As a young, awkward child, unaware of my burgeoning gay identity but well aware of my already present feelings of otherness, theater provided me a platform to freely explore my full self through the study of the other: physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Working as an actor required me to bring deep awareness to my own body alongside my thoughts and emotions, a challenge for any young person but doubly demanding for one in the process of understanding one's sexual

[6] David Román, *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1-2, quoted in Jonathan C. Friedman, *Rainbow Jews* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 6.

orientation. As I learned how to study a play, I found myself enthralled by the richness of the material brought to us by great dramatists spanning the generations. In fact, the experience of mining a text to develop a deep, intimate, personal understanding of a character is ultimately what fueled my passion for studying Jewish sacred texts, to experience our texts not as ancient relics but as living entities in conversation with the world around us.

Yet, there is another undeniable argument to be made in favor of theater as the medium through which to explore the intersection of Queer and Jewish identity. After all, in the American context, no storytelling medium has been so closely associated with both identity groups than Broadway theater. Professor Jonathan C. Friedman notes that "Jews have been drawn to cultural pursuits to a disproportionate degree in the modern world for a variety of complicated reasons, but in the United States, theater and film were forums to which Jews had unprecedented access, in part because Gentiles found them, particularly cinema, to be somewhat scandalous. Stage and screen served a dual purpose for Jews, at once facilitating their assimilation into American society and constructing a sense of nostalgia for the Jewish communities which they had left behind."[7] In fact, according to the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, "it is safe to say that from the 1920s on Jews formed a disproportionately high percentage of New York's theatergoers[8] [...]. One rough estimate placed Jews at 70% of the city's concert and theater audience during the 1950s"[9]

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[7] Jonathan Friedman, *Rainbow Jews* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 31.

[8] While this statistic particularly relates to the post-WWII theatergoers, the connection between Jews and theater in America dates back to the late 19th century. it must not be ignored that Yiddish theater was a thriving enterprise in New York City from the 1880s to the 1920s with twenty Yiddish playhouses at one point lining Second Avenue on the Lower East Side. (Friedman, *Rainbow Jews*, 32.)

[9] *Encyclopedia* Judaica (Farmington Hill, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007). Volume 15, 219, quoted in Stuart J. Hecht, *Transposing Broadway: Jews, Assimilation, and the American Musical* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1.

The gay connection to theater is similarly undeniable. While it is true that attitudes and depictions of homosexuality on stage have evolved significantly over time, the relationship between the gay community and Broadway has remained steadfast. Perhaps the connection relates to the understanding that the theater and the stage have always been associated with the underbelly of society. Perhaps the element of performance and the act of assuming other identities have simply resonated with those who seek a reprieve from the injustices and traumas of everyday reality as an outcast. Perhaps the theater's reputation as a safe haven became itself a self-fulfilling prophecy, attracting an increasing percentage of gay individuals eager to join this already thriving community of acceptance and support.

In fact, to comprehend theater's place set directly at the nexus of Jewish and gay identity, one need only peruse the list of prominent theater-makers of the 20th century: iconic choreographers such as Michael Bennett and Jerome Robbins[10]; world-renowned composers and lyricists such as Leonard Bernstein, Lorenz Hart, Stephen Sondheim, John Kander and Fred Ebb, and Jerry Herman; prominent playwrights such as Arthur Laurents and Tony Kushner. The contributions of gay Jews to the American theater remain unparalleled and outstanding, providing the perfect platform to explore the junction of these two identities.

So, if one were to seek to understand and deconstruct the unique identities of gay Jews through the lens of the American theater, which era might provide the most fruitful focus? Theater historian John Bush Jones elaborates on the preponderance of Jewish-themed theater, which skyrocketed in the early 1960s. To understand this phenomenon, Jones points to a variety of factors including an intentional appeal to a disproportionately Jewish audience

[10] For just one example, the classic 1957 musical *West Side Story* was written by Arthur Laurents, with a score by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, and directed and choreographed by Jerome Robbins. This comprises an entirely gay, Jewish creative team.

base in the face of declining ticket sales alongside a more widespread and growing tolerance of Jewish Americans.[11] Yet the Jewish theater of this period, while prolific, is noticeably lacking in gay content. After all, while theater certainly presented fertile creative territory for gay Jews throughout the entirety of the 20th century, homosexuality's taboo status rendered it nearly impossible to explore the intersection of these identities in substantial ways prior to the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

Notwithstanding some notable exceptions,[12] gay content lingered in the shadows[13] of the American theater until playwright Mart Crowley presented his cornerstone of pre-Stonewall gay theater, *The Boys in the Band*, off-Broadway in 1968. The play, while revolutionary in its focused portrayal of the lives of eight gay male characters, was nonetheless met with deep critique by those who objected to the notion that the play "allows it heterosexual audiences a liberal compound of pity, tolerance, and superiority."[14] While Crowley's play was inarguably groundbreaking, it only skimmed the surface of what gay theater would eventually become.

In many ways, the periodization of gay theater mirrors that of gay history. Undoubtedly, modern gay culture in America has been defined by two seismic shifts: the

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[11] John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2003), 206-8.

[12] Rose Franken's play *Outrageous Fortune* shockingly featured two gay male characters, one of whom was Jewish, and ran on Broadway for 77 performances in 1943-1944. (Friedman, *Rainbow Jews*, 38.)

[13] Theater historian, John Clum frequently refers to Richard Rodgers' original lyricist, Lorenz Hart, a closeted (and tormented) gay Jew whose lyrics have been widely read as coded gay content. For example, Hart's lyrics for "He Was Too Good to Me" included the lyrics, "I was a queen to him / Who's goin' to make me gay now." Clum writes, "Later, Hart wrote a new lyric for the Rodgers melody that did away with the queen/gay lines but created, not a torch song, but a song of praise for the appearance of a gorgeous young man: 'He looks so good to me / my arms are aching for him.' Were the queen/gay lines cut because they were too obviously gay in 1930? Was the lyric that replaced it never sung on stage because it, too, was too transgressive, singing of the beauty of a man, not a woman?" (John Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001, 66.)

[14] John Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 206.

Stonewall Riots and its subsequent Gay Liberation Movement, and the AIDS crisis. Whereas *The Boys in the Band* represented the paragon of pre-Stonewall gay American theater, the intermediary years between Stonewall and the emergence of AIDS yielded productions exploring previously uncharted territory including the persecution of gay men in the Holocaust (Martin Sherman's *Bent*, 1979) and a Jewish husband's coming to terms with his own homosexuality (William Finn's *In Trousers,* 1979). That said, in terms of depth and richness of storytelling, the theater that emerged in the first decade of the AIDS crisis is unparalleled in its substantive depiction of Queer Jewish identity.

Over the course of this thesis, I will explore, among other central themes, the emergence of AIDS as a vehicle for understanding fundamental aspects of gay identity, foundational to the construction of the image of the gay Jew of late 20th century America. In many ways, the majority of plays I have selected use the emergence of HIV/AIDS both to explore the role of trauma in the gay psyche but also to draw a parallel between the experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and victimization of gay and Jewish communities. While this narrowing on a specific period of creative expansion in the American theater helps elucidate the unique relationship between gay and Jewish identity, I also recognize that this limited focus yields a more constricted understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation than perhaps we are accustomed to (or than we might desire) in contemporary times.

Within the American theater emerging during the first decade of the AIDS crisis, the material that developed at the crossroads of Jewish and gay identity was overwhelmingly written by cisgender gay men, concerning subjects who were predominantly cisgender gay men. Additionally, the playwrights overwhelmingly identify as relatively secular Jews,

reflected in their by and large secular Jewish characters, primarily based in the New York City region of the United States. Ultimately, this produces an admittedly narrow focus that is hardly representative of all Jewish and/or Queer individuals. Today, it is abundantly clear that both gender identity and sexual orientation exist on a spectrum rather than a binary model. But the gay, Jewish playwrights of the 1980s operated within their own cultural context and their work is representative of their now-outdated mindset.

At the time of these plays' initial productions, the identifying label "queer" still very much existed as an epithet, rather than its contemporary usage as an umbrella term to express a variety of non-traditional gender and sexuality identities. As a result of my focus on this historical period, I recognize that the experiences of female-identified or non-binary individuals are unfortunately not as present as they could be. I also recognize that the Jewish identity of relatively secular, assimilated Jews of Ashkenazi descent in New York City is also hardly representative of broader Jewish identity and certainly does not represent the experience of LGBTQ Jews of more diverse backgrounds and family histories. That said, as a cisgender gay man of Ashkenazi descent, living in New York City and operating within the context of Reform Judaism, I am personally drawn to this material for its power to elevate and illuminate disparate aspects of my own identity and help elucidate the ways in which they work together to shape my own experience walking through this world.

In navigating the landscape of gay, Jewish theater emerging in the 1980s, I have selected four plays upon which to focus my research. The first, *Torch Song Trilogy*, by Harvey Fierstein, is actually comprised of three one-act plays originally produced off-Broadway between 1978-1979, noticeably prior to the emergence of HIV. However, Fierstein's masterpiece achieved notoriety only later, upon its Broadway transfer, where it

ran for an astounding 1,230 performances between 1982-1985, before yielding a successful film adaptation in 1988. Despite being written in the late 1970s, the piece represents a cornerstone of gay theater in the 1980s, focusing not on the AIDS epidemic but rather on the life of Arnold, a Jewish drag queen, and his relationships with his family, both chosen and biological.

The second play upon which I have focused my research is the musical *Falsettos*, by William Finn and James Lapine. Similar to *Torch Song Trilogy*, *Falsettos* is comprised of two one-act musicals, *March of the Falsettos*, which appeared off-Broadway in 1981, and *Falsettoland*, which appeared off-Broadway in 1990 but whose action takes place in 1981. The two pieces were fused into a two-act musical, *Falsettos*, presented on Broadway from 1992-1993. Originally conceived as a trilogy,[15] *Falsettos* provides a unique perspective inherent to its spanning such a turbulent period of time, benefitting from material written both prior to and years after the emergence of the virus. Centering around a Jewish father's navigating his sexuality amid planning his son's Bar Mitzvah, the play deconstructs the notion of the Jewish man, weaving themes of cultural and sexual identities into a powerful portrait of a postmodern American Jewish family life.

With *The Normal Heart*, activist Larry Kramer created a barely fictionalized version of his own life in New York City fighting a sense of complacency and apathy around the AIDS crisis from 1981-1984. Premiering in 1985, *The Normal Heart* follows Ned Weeks (strongly based on Kramer himself), a Jewish man keenly aware of the outcomes of

[15] The story of *Falsettos*' protagonist, Marvin, began in William Finn's 1979 musical *In Trousers*. In continuing the story from *In Trousers*, *March of the Falsettos* is actually technically a sequel, with *Falsettoland* serving as the culminating third chapter. That said, *In Trousers* does not heavily explore any substantive Jewish content. That, in conjunction with not being included in the Broadway production *Falsettos,* has led me to shift my focus away from this first chapter of the trilogy and focus on the far more Jewishly rich *March of the Falsettos* and *Falsettoland*, or as the two pieces are known as a unit, *Falsettos*.

complacency and apathy in situations when the undesirables of a society are dying preventable deaths. Kramer's play reads as more of a political scream than a typical drama and Kramer's scathing indictment of everyone from the political establishment to his own community opens a portal for understanding the ways in which trauma and victimization shaped a generation of gay Jews.

Lastly, it would be impossible to study the intersection of Jewish identity and Queer identity through the lens of late 20th century American theater without a deep dive into Tony Kushner's epic masterpiece, *Angels in America*. Though Part One, "Millennium Approaches," was first performed in 1990 and Part Two: "Perestroika" was first performed in 1991, the two productions both appeared on Broadway for the first time in 1993. The action of the play, however, takes place primarily in the Fall/Winter of 1985-1986, with a brief epilogue set in 1990. One might argue that it picks up where *The Normal Heart* ends, painting a comprehensive portrait of New York City, and in many ways of America as a whole, during this tumultuous and frightening period of history.

While *Angels in America* has monumental stature in the canon of late 20th century American theater, its specific significance to the study of both gay identity and Jewish identity cannot be underestimated. Professor Jonathan C. Friedman identifies the saga as "perhaps the richest expression of the merger of gay and Jewish discourses in contemporary American literary culture."[16] In fact, Professor Alisa Solomon argues that Kushner's subtitle: "A Gay Fantasia" could "just as well have [been] subtitled [...] 'a Jewish Fantasia.'[17] *Angels in America* features multiple Jewish characters including two gay Jewish men: Louis Ironson,

[16] Friedman, *Rainbow Jews*, 111.
[17] Alisa Solomon, "Wrestling with Angels: A Jewish Fantasia." in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America,* ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997), 118.

who abandons his lover dying from AIDS, and the notorious bigoted (and closeted) lawyer and conservative icon Roy Cohn. Weaving their stories together with biblical allusions, historical reference points, philosophical diatribes, and theological curiosities, Kushner's saga may not have emerged until the early 1990s but it remains the most fertile literary ground for analyzing and comprehending the building blocks of gay, Jewish identity in the 1980s.

As another contemporary gay Jewish playwright, Lisa Kron, writes in her lyrics to the 2013 musical, *Fun Home*, "I want to know what's true, dig deep into who and what and why and when, until now gives way to then."[18] After all, this search for and commitment to truth is a crucial element to Kushner's understanding of "Jewish speech." In this thesis, I aim to uncover truths about gay identity and Jewish identity by exploring the art that blurs their boundaries. As Professors Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini note in their introduction to *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, the idea of Jewish and/or Queer "identity" is a relatively new concept. They note that "the nineteenth century [...] witnessed not just the emergence of the modern Jew but the emergence also of the modern homosexual, [leading scholars to explore] the complex of social arrangements and processes through which modern Jewish and homosexual identities emerged as traces of each other." In other words, "there may just be something queer about the Jew … and something, well, racy about the homosexual."[19] By intertwining these two identities, the playwrights in question provide an invaluable study in the ways we are shaped, identified, and bound together not only by a

[18] Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron. "It All Comes Back (Opening), *Fun Home*. PS Classics, 2015.
[19] Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini, ed., *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (New York: Columbia University, 2003), 3, 1.

sense of otherness, but by expectations of masculinity and a shared history of trauma and victimization.

Lastly, it is worth explicitly stating that this research explores an exclusively and uniquely American moment. Jewish identity, Queer identity, attitudes around the AIDS crisis, and even the role of theater vary significantly across geographic boundaries and I have chosen to center this study in the cultural context which I know best, that of the United States. In the opening scene of *Angels in America,* Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz tells a group of mourners "You do not live in America. No such place exists," calling this nation "the melting pot where nothing melted."[20] As such, the story of marginalized groups within the United States might be read as standing for the general story of that time period. After all, these gay, Jewish stories are, at their root, fundamentally stories of modern American families, American political failures, and American crises.

For the purposes of this study, I have narrowed my focus onto two distinct themes which repeat prominently throughout the corpus of gay, Jewish theater. In my first chapter, I delve into the concept of masculinity, specifically the charges of effeminacy and emasculation that have consistently plagued gay men and Jewish men alike. By navigating both internal and external expressions of disappointment, I seek to understand the ways that compounded gender expectations have shaped the experiences of gay, Jewish men, with a special focus on the generation depicted in the four plays in question. In my second chapter, I turn to the shared history of trauma and victimization by exploring the unique intersections of homophobia and antisemitism. By studying the plays and their playwrights through the lens

[20] Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 16.

of our Jewish prophetic tradition, I aim to shed light on the power of legacy and chosen family to provide safety and comfort in the face of widespread indifference and indignity.

Though these four plays focus on the emergence of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, their relevance today is undeniable. Notably, three of the four plays have successful film or television adaptations and all four plays have had Broadway revivals within the last decade. The works speak for themselves in terms of the meaning they can provide contemporary audiences. In emphasizing the power of self-recognition, Felski turns to Ibsen's classic *Hedda Gabler*, a play which many people, particularly women, have used to understand themselves in relation to the world around them. Felski writes, "In saying 'Hedda is all of us,' a woman comes to name herself differently, to look at herself in a changed light, to draw on a new vocabulary of self-description."[21] The same could be said of a gay Jew, whether in the 1980s or today, encountering the protagonists of these four works (Marvin, Ned, Arnold, and Louis) and saying to himself, "He is all of us." Through the lens of these four plays, may we better understand not only the identities that color the ways we see the world as LGBT Jews, but also better understand the world around us that continues to shape those identities.

[21] Felski, *The Uses of Literature,* 35.

Chapter One: Masculinity

In a 1993 interview, composer/lyricist William Finn explained the thought process behind the title of his groundbreaking musical, *Falsettos*. Finn explains that, "falsetto is a voice normally outside the normal range … I felt these were people whose situation was outside the normal range of most people's situation, and so I thought that falsettos kind of, in a vocal way, explained that."[22] While it is true that the characters of *Falsettos* find themselves in a situation that could be deemed atypical in most understated terms, there is an additional element to his categorical use of the term "falsettos." The falsetto vocal register is not simply "outside the normal range" but rather very clearly and inextricably linked to masculinity and gender. When a male voice enters the "falsetto" range, it is entering the realm typically reserved for women and children, abandoning its post as a masculine identifier, and either regressing or transforming, depending on one's perspective. This distinction is crucial to understanding the elements of gay and Jewish identity in Finn's work and the work of his contemporaries. The charge implied in the use of the falsettos designation is not simply an inability to play by the rules or to exist within a "normal" range, but rather a very specific form of transgressive behavior rooted in a perceived failure to perform masculinity according to the terms set by external forces of power.

Of course, the boundaries of what constitutes an appropriate performance of masculinity depend significantly on the general cultural context of any given period. The fruitfulness of studying these four plays specifically is rooted in the excitement and terror of the time period in which they are written and set. Following the sexual revolution of the

[22] Alex Bádue, "Performing Gender, Sexuality, and Jewishness in the Songs of William Finn's Musical Falsettoland (1990)," *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1981-),* vol 38, no. 2 (2019): 161.

1960s, in which public attitudes shifted regarding not only homosexuality but also traditional gender role expectations, gay Americans began to reshape the narrative of their sexual activity from a source of shame to a source of liberation. Following the Stonewall Uprising of 1969, urban centers like San Francisco and New York, as depicted in the 2005 documentary film, *Gay Sex in the 70s*, experienced a 12-year period (June 1969-June 1981) in which gay men found opportunities for sex to be abundant, easily accessible and, at least within the bubble of these communities, finally released from the shadows.

Of course, this illusion of sexual nirvana came to a crashing halt with the discovery of the mysterious and sexually-transmitted illness killing gay men en masse. These seismic shifts, from the pre-Stonewall closet to the post-Stonewall/pre-AIDS bathhouse to the post-AIDS funeral, reflect a rollercoaster of exploration, liberation, and degradation for gay men. This rollercoaster is mirrored in the four plays in question, all of which navigate this dance of progress and regression regarding expectations for gender and sexual behavior.

While the fluctuation of societal acceptance of gender and sexuality variation occurred on a grand scale, the four plays in question provide a uniquely Jewish lens through which one can explore these themes. After all, Jewish men of all sexual orientations have their own history of what constitutes gender transgression. Yet, while Jewish masculinity (or rather accusations of male femininity) has long been a source of critique and discrimination against Jews, the explicit study of the subject is crucial to dismantling the assumption of masculinity as a standard, assumed baseline. As Professor Rhiannon Graybill notes,

> Masculinity has more recently become a topic of great interest in biblical studies. The study of masculinity is often discussed as complementary to, but not necessarily coterminous with, feminist critique. From my perspective, however, the issue of

> masculinity is a deeply feminist one. So long as 'gender' remains a stand-in for 'women' or even 'female representation and experience,' men and masculinity are allowed to pass unproblematized and unconsidered. Men remain ungendered, and the 'neutral,' unmarked subject remains implicitly masculine. There is nothing neutral, however, about allowing the masculine to pass as an unsexed neutral subject."[23]

Graybill's focus on breaking the assumption of masculinity as neutral is especially important given the extensive history of labeling Jewish men as excessively effeminate, compared to their virile, red-blooded gentile compatriots.

In their introduction to *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, Boyarin, Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini point to the "non-normative sexual and gender categories" of Jews as an abiding phenomenon. They point to "attributions of 'softness' to Jewish men predating the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."[24] Boyarin looks even further back, noting "traces of a 'soft' Jewish masculinity in the Talmud and the succeeding culture of rabbinic Judaism. Boyarin proceeds to make a claim for the effeminization of Jewish masculinity as a sort of oppositional (and incipiently postcolonial) discourse."[25] Rather than misinterpreting this effeminization as a "rebuff of patriarchy," Boyarin clarifies that "this valorization of male effeminacy could go hand in hand with the devaluation of women."[26] Regardless of its intentions, this image of the effeminate Jewish male, highlighted upon the emergence of race theory, was weaponized by those who sought to devalue the Jew in relation to his Aryan counterpart. In the 19th century, "long-standing stereotypes of Jewish gender difference were

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[23] Rhiannon Graybill, *Are We Not Men? Unstable Masculinity in the Hebrew Prophets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 12.
[24] Boyarin, Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini, *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question,* 1.
[25] Ibid 2.
[26] Ibid.

thus translated into signs of racial difference, operating as a kind of visible proof text. So, for example, the alleged failure of the male Jew to embody 'proper' masculinity became the indelible evidence of the racial difference of all Jews."[27]

While this categorization of Jewish men as characteristically and relatively effeminate has had a significant impact on external perceptions of Jewish men in the modern world, it is hardly a modern innovation. One need only look to the people of Israel's namesake to begin exploring the ways in which a mild-mannered softness has been the historical calling card of the Jewish male. The book of Genesis describes the birth of Isaac and Rebecca's twin boys, Esau and Jacob:

וַיֵּצֵא הָרִאשׁוֹן אַדְמוֹנִי כֻּלּוֹ כְּאַדֶּרֶת שֵׂעָר וַיִּקְרְאוּ שְׁמוֹ עֵשָׂו׃

And out came the first one, red, like a hairy cloak all over; so they called him by the name Esau.

וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יָצָא אָחִיו וְיָדוֹ אֹחֶזֶת בַּעְקֵב עֵשָׂו וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב וְיִצְחָק בֶּן־שִׁשִּׁים שָׁנָה בְּלֶדֶת אֹתָם׃

And afterward, his brother came out, holding on to the heel of Esau; so they called him by the name Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.

וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יֹדֵעַ צַיִד אִישׁ שָׂדֶה וְיַעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהָלִים׃

When the boys grew up, Esau became a man who knew all about hunting, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild[28] man who stayed indoors (in tents.)

[27] Ibid.

[28] This word is translated by JPS as "mild" but can also mean innocent, perfect, complete, or wholesome.

וַיֶּאֱהַ֥ב יִצְחָ֖ק אֶת־עֵשָׂ֑ו כִּי־צַ֥יִד בְּפִ֖יו וְרִבְקָ֕ה אֹהֶ֖בֶת אֶת־יַעֲקֹֽב׃

Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for game[29]; but Rebecca loved Jacob.[30]

Without knowing how this text would unfold, it would be reasonable to assume that the text's perspective, at this point, favors Esau. Even as a baby, Esau seems to be depicted as a "man's man." He's a wild man who knows his way around the natural world, a hunter with the body hair to prove his testosterone levels. Jacob, on the other hand, is a sensitive boy, the type sometimes affectionately deemed an "indoor child," more connected to his mother than his father. Yet it is Jacob, the one who prefers to cook rather than hunt, who is transformed into Israel, becoming the progenitor of the Jewish people. Notably, when Jacob himself is blessed with twelve sons and a daughter, his favorite son is not the most athletic or the most overtly masculine, but rather Joseph who is described in rabbinic midrash as behaving "like a [young] boy, penciling his eyes, curling his hair, and lifting his heel."[31] The famed "coat of many colors" that Jacob gave to his beloved son is described in Hebrew as a כְּתֹ֥נֶת פַּסִּ֖ים, a phrase only seen once more in the Hebrew Bible, referring to the dresses typically worn by princesses.[32] One might extrapolate that Jacob found in his son, Joseph, a kindred spirit.

Yet, at least internally, these "feminizing" behaviors do not strip a Jewish man of his masculinity. As Rabbi Steven Greenberg explains, "Leviticus 20:13 censures both parties of a male sexual encounter because the willingness to be turned into a woman, to be mounted

[29] Literally, "because he had game in his mouth."
[30] Genesis 25:25-28.
[31] Genesis Rabbah 84:7.
[32] II Samuel 13:18.

by another man, is parallel to self-castration. To be like Jacob -- to dwell in tents; to be pale, soft-skinned, and hairless; to study Torah and spurn physical aggression like Rabbi Yohanan -- are not inconsistent with manhood in Judea. To be physically receptive to another man is surely a way to lose oneself as a man."[33] This can be particularly challenging for gay Jews, who find themselves spurned by the broader gentile community for their inability to perform masculinity within acceptable societal boundaries, yet also often spurned from within the Jewish community for violating the ultimate demarcation of acceptable male behavior.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the biblical character whose story weaves throughout the entirety of Kushner's *Angels in America* is Jacob himself. The first character that Kushner associates with Jacob is Joe Pitt (notably, another Joseph), a closeted and married Mormon Republican. In his politics, his demeanor, and likely his physicality,[34] Joe is ostensibly the external antithesis of the leftist queer Jew. However, Joe first references Jacob after his wife confronts him regarding his sexuality. Joe speaks of seeing himself not only in Jacob's story of wrestling with the angel, but in his physical manifestation presented in Joe's illustrated book of bible stories:

> *Joe: I had a book of Bible stories when I was a kid. There was a picture I'd look at twenty times every day: Jacob wrestles with the angel. I don't really remember the story, or why the wrestling -- just the picture. Jacob is young and very strong. The angel is … a beautiful man, with golden hair and wings, of course. I still dream about it. Many nights. I'm….It's me. In that struggle. Fierce, and unfair. The angel is not*

[33] Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (Madison, WI, University of Wisconsin, 2004), 202.

[34] Of course, this will vary from production to production. But, for example, in the HBO Miniseries, Joe is played by Patrick Wilson, an actor with strikingly Aryan features frequently associated with Mormons.

human, and it holds nothing back, so how could any human win, what kind of a fight is that? It's not just. Losing means your soul thrown down in the dust, your heart torn out from God's. But you can't not lose.[35]

In this monologue, Joe reflects a challenge inherent to his gay identity. He sees himself in Jacob's youth and strength, clearly desiring the physical intimacy of the encounter with the masculine angel. But, aside from the sensual excitement, there is an underlying recognition that Jacob's situation is an uphill battle, that the decks are stacked against him. As Professor Yair Lipshitz of Tel Aviv University notes, "for Joe, Jacob's struggle with the angel represents the unfair battle that closeted gays must wage against their sexual orientation. The difficult, unfair, inhuman struggle that is imposed on Jacob -- which 'you can't not lose' and after which 'your soul [is] thrown down in the dust, your heart torn out from God's' -- is Joe's struggle with his homosexuality."[36] Lipshitz characterizes the significance of this story as beyond simply an exploration of male intimacy, noting the episode's "ability to present the homosexual story as that of struggle."[37]

This sense of struggle exemplified by Jacob's story is pervasive throughout the gay narratives of *Angels in America* but also central to the way Kushner understands Jewish identity. In an optional scene written for the final act of *Perestroika*, the second half of *Angels in America*, the Rabbi whose eulogy opened the play is in heaven playing cards with Sarah Ironson, the deceased woman being eulogized. While playing, the two meet Prior Walter, a gay man with AIDS recently designated as a prophet, and the ex-boyfriend of

[35] Kushner, *Angels in America,* 55-56.
[36] Yair Lipshitz, "The Jacob Cycle in *Angels in America*: Re-Performing Scripture Queerly," Prooftexts, vol. 32, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 206.
[37] Ibid 209.

Sarah's grandson, Louis. As Prior descends back from heaven to earth, Sarah calls out to him in Yiddish:

> *Sarah Ironson: Hey! Zogt Loubeleh az di Bobbe zogt:*
>
> *Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz: She says tell this Louis Grandma says:*
>
> *Sarah Ironson: Er iz timid geven a bissele farblonjet, shoin vi a boytshikl. Ober siz nisht keyn antshuldigunk.*
>
> *Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz: From when he was a boy he was always mixed up. But it's no excuse.*
>
> *Sarah Ironson:* He should have visited! *But I forgive. Tell him: az er darf ringen mit zin Libm Nomen, Yah?!*
>
> *Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz: You should struggle with the Almighty.*
>
> *Sarah Ironson: Azoi toot a Yid.*
>
> *Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz: It's the Jewish way.*[38]

Struggle may be the Jewish way but Prior is most certainly not a Jew, as the audience is frequently reminded by repeated references to the legacy of men named Prior Walter, dating back to the Bayeux Tapestry. However, his name evokes a sense of lineage that calls to mind the Jewish precursor to Christianity itself. When one character explains early in the play, "Weird name. Prior Walter. Like, 'The Walter before this one,'"[39] one feels Kushner calling attention to the prior Hebraic underlying of Christianity, especially within the context of a play which focuses its religious attention on Judaism and Mormonism, a tradition with an enduring emphasis on building a Zion in America, a New Jerusalem in the New World.[40]

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[38] Kushner, *Angels in America,* 269.
[39] Ibid 57.
[40] "Zion/New Jerusalem," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed December 7, 2020, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/zion-new-jerusalem?lang=eng

Professor Alisa Solmon further argues the Jewish significance of Prior Walter. She explains that "in *Angels* Kushner audaciously declares a new apocalyptic period, when the gay man with AIDS will become the essential myth of the whole Western world.[41] Kushner assigns Prior this metaphorical role, and he does so by making him, in iconic terms, Jewish."[42] According to Solomon's reading, Kushner's choice to connect Prior to Sarah Ironson intentionally marks him as a symbol of the Jew, despite his gentile heritage. Solomon notes Prior's connection to Louis's grandmother, stemming from his very first appearance in the play at her funeral. Additionally, while Joe indeed explores his sexuality through the story of Jacob's wrestling with the angel, it is Prior who actually wrestles with an Angel onstage in Kushner's play, demanding a blessing of more life, leaving him with an unmistakable mark in the form of a limp.

Solomon points to the political context of the 1980s to examine why Prior adopting the symbolic mantle of Israel is particularly powerful and illuminating:

> *Having recalled and critically examined three Jewish American cultural and political traditions in Roy, Louis, and dead Ethel[43], Kushner suggests that American Jews, having achieved a level of comfort and even clout in the United States, have abandoned their commitment to erotic and political liberation. If the millennium is approaching, the religious tradition of Judaism is being supplanted by the worldwide reign of Christianity; perestroika[44], meanwhile, presages the worldwide reign of free-*

[41] Here, Solomon complicates Leslie Fiedler's 1949 assertion that "in this apocalyptic period of atomization and uprooting, of a catholic terror and a universal alienation, the image of the Jew tends to become the image of everyone; and we are perhaps approaching the day when the Jew will come to seem the central symbol, the essential myth of the whole Western world." (Solomon, *Wrestling with Angels,* 130.)

[42] Ibid 131.

[43] These are the three ostensibly Jewish characters in the play, as named in the introduction: attorney Roy Cohn, Louis Ironson (Sarah's grandson), and Ethel Rosenberg, whose famed execution was enabled by Cohn.

[44] The political reformation movement within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the 1980s

> *market capitalism, supplanting a secular vision of redemption (however failed) associated with leftist Jews. Now, Kushner ventures, it is queers, conflated with Jews in the cultural unconscious, who bear the responsibility*.[45]

In this worldview, Prior's role as prophet is steeped in a form of queer Jewish identity which must carry a torch of responsibility previously abandoned by the broad American left. The struggle, Prior seems to say, is now in the hands of his queer compatriots, presented through an explicitly Jewish prophetic lens. Sarah Ironson's struggle at the turn of the century is now Prior's struggle at the turn of the millennium, as he inhabits the essence of Israel, wrestling with God and prevailing.

Whereas Prior's embodiment of Jacob/Israel yields a conflation of Jewish/queer identity regarding responsibility toward societal and communal liberation, plays such as *Falsettos* and *Torch Song Trilogy* approach the nexus of these identities with a focus on the familial nature of Jewish identity and the threat that queerness poses to the status quo. Both plays center on relatively secular American Jews, for whom homosexuality is not necessarily a religious threat, but rather a disruption to the fabric of the family structure that provides the foundation of their lives. Off-Broadway's *March of the Falsettos*, later becoming the first act of Broadway's *Falsettos*, opens with the unforgettable first musical number, "Four Jews in a Room Bitching."[46] While the script asserts that the opening lines are sung by "four men," one of those "men" is Jason, Marvin's prepubescent son whose coming-of-age provides the background for this play's exploration of masculinity within a queer Jewish context. Trina, Marvin's ex-wife and Jason's mother, appears later in the song, not immediately counted in

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[45] Solomon, *Wrestling with Angels,* 131.

[46] This song title was actually, at one point, Finn's working title for the musical itself. (Bádue, *Performing Gender, Sexuality, and Jewishness in the Songs of William Finn's Musical Falsettoland*, 162.)

this foursome of male Jews who provide the song's namesake. At the end, she asserts herself and her role:

Four Men:

Four Jews in a room bitching.

Marvin:

In a room bitching

Four Men:

Bitch -- bitch --

Bitch bitch bitch bitch

Now and then.

Can't lose.

Loose screws.

Four --

One, two, three, four --

Trina:

Five!

Four men:

Five Jews.

With this opening number, William Finn prepares his audience for a musical about Jewish men "whose salvation [does not] come from Torah or synagogue but rather from the psychiatrist's couch"[47] The song sets a major theme in place for the audience, that the

[47] Friedman, *Rainbow Jews*, 72

pathologization of the Jewish man cannot be divorced from that of the gay man. Finn himself explains that "part of what makes this song work as a comic opening number is that it misleads the audience to think this is a musical about Jews, but as the other songs come along and the plot develops, the story is about Marvin's sexuality and his family."[48] The play, of course, is undeniably also a musical about Jews, through which Finn offers a Jewish story that is inseparable from a story about sexual disruption.

With this first song, Finn teaches the audience "what you're going to see is not going to be like any other Jewish musical you've ever seen. This is going to be about angst and identity and community … told in a way that embraces modern Jewish diction."[49] This thematic intertwining is expressed with great clarity in Director James Lapine's staging for the 2016 Broadway revival, opening with a large box sitting in the center of the stage. As the actors begin to deconstruct the box into smaller blocks, which become the set pieces used throughout the rest of the production, the audience experiences a visual, representative "unpacking" of Jewish and gay identity.

Arguably, *Falsettos,* at its core, is a musical representation of the queer/Jewish yearning for stability and normalcy, represented in this social context by "A Tight-Knit Family," the title of the musical's second song. As "Four Jews in a Room Bitching" comes to a close, Marvin is described as being "somewhere else" and "rumpled," as he sings directly to the audience:

Marvin:

Well, the situation's this --

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[48] Bádue, *Performing Gender, Sexuality, and Jewishness in the Songs of William Finn's Musical Falsettoland,* 162.

[49] Finn, as cited in Ben Furnish, *Nostalgia in Jewish-American Theatre and Film, 1979-2004* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 153, quoted in Friedman, *Rainbow Jews,* 71.

It's not tough to comprehend:

I divorced my wife,

I left my child

And I ran off with a friend.

But I want a tight-knit family.

I want a group that harmonizes.

I want my wife and kid and friend

To pretend

Time will mend

Our pain.[50]

Later in the song, Marvin repeatedly sings, "I want it all," but how could this be possible? In order to externally "harmonize" his family and to internally "harmonize" his identities, this gay, Jewish, American, middle-class father must engage in acts of denial, essentially performing a family, "pretending" that the tensions can be solved with time. Marvin does not wish to trade his Jewish identity (again, not represented here by religious practice, but rather by family convention[51]) for a gay identity but rather to synthesize the two, to swap his wife for his male lover and proceed with business as usual.

Marvin sings, "*So the year is 'seventy-nine, And we don't go by the book. We all eat as one -- Wife, friend, and son. And I sing out as they cook."*[52] What does it mean in this

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[50] William Finn and James Lapine, *Falsettos: Three One-Act Musicals* (New York: Plume, 1993), 12.

[51] Finn and Lapine use Jewish symbolism to portray a sense of familial stability and bliss. In the song, "Making a Home," Mendel and Trina establish the home which she once shared with Marvin as unequivocally their own now, represented by Mendel entering the room carrying a lighted menorah as they sing, "welcome to our humble place." This is the role Jewish identity plays in their lives, sustaining them as a "tight-knit family" as they build a solid home. (Ibid 82.)

[52] Ibid 12-13.

context to not "go by the book?" Immediately following, "Four Jews in a Room Bitching," this could be a repudiation of religious Judaism, an admission that these modern Jews are not governed by Torah. It could also be a rejection of conventional family roles, although his lyrics prove that he has no intention of adopting a domestic role, regardless of the gender of his partner. To the contrary, it seems that Marvin wishes nothing more than to "go by the book," barring the ways in which he would experience not only discrimination for his sexuality, but any sort of repercussions for his actions.

In a conversation with her psychiatrist (and eventually, her new husband), Mendel, Trina sings about her relationship with Marvin:

I was supposed to make the dinner,

make it pretty on his plate.

Every wife should pull her weight.

Have it ready, make it tasty, and love him."[53]

Later, singing exactly the same melody, Marvin's new lover, Whizzer, addresses him with a similar charge:

Whizzer's supposed to make the dinner,

be a patsy, lose at chess.

Always bravely acquiesce.

Clip the coupons, make the dinner, and love him,"

to which Marvin responds,

Anyone understand?

All I want's a kiss.

[53] Ibid 47.

Anyone understand?"[54]

Marvin couches his desire for a perceived role of masculine dominance in something much more universal, a simple desire for love and affection. Yet the message of gender and sexuality expectation is not lost on Marvin and Trina's eleven-year-old son, Jason, who stands firmly on the brink of his impending manhood (explored in depth as he prepares for his Bar Mitzvah in Act II: "*Falsettoland*," set in 1981). Jason sings:

Jason:

My father's a homo.

My mother's not thrilled at all.

Father homo…

What about chromo-somes?

Do they carry?

Will they carry?

Who's the homo now?

My father said that one day I'll grow up to be president,

And that idea's not so wild.

I don't lead the life of a normal child…

'Cause I'm too smart for my own good,

And I'm too good for my sorry little life.

My mother's no wife

And my father's no man,

[54] Ibid 81.

No man at all."[55]

Jason's musical monologue offers an insight into Marvin's deepest fears, primarily the emasculation associated with his sexuality revelation and the shame it engenders in his son. Jason has been taught that he is exceptional, even exhibiting presidential potential. Yet that forecasting has been accompanied by explicit and implicit messaging regarding the risks of homosexuality to the family system: the abdication of masculinity and the dissolution of marital structure. It is noteworthy, however, that while expectations for Jason's potential lie in a profession heretofore held exclusively by men, his predicted distinction still relates to his exceptional intellect, not physical strength or machismo. In *Falsettoland* (both the musical and the world created by Finn and Lapine), athleticism is simply not a marker of Jewish masculinity. At Jason's baseball game, Marvin, Mendel, and Trina sit in the bleachers with their next-door neighbors, a lesbian couple, Cordelia and Dr. Charlotte, as they sing in unison:

We're watching Jason play baseball.

We're watching Jewish boys who cannot play baseball play baseball.

[...]

We're watching Jewish boys who almost read Latin

Up battin' and battin' bad.[56]

This moment of comic relief is based on the shared assumption from both the characters and the audience that Jewish boys are better suited for studying Latin than playing baseball. At one point in the song, the joke takes a darker turn as Mendel compliments Jason, "*Ach, I like*

[55] Ibid 39.
[56] Ibid 112-113.

how he swings the bat," to which his father, Marvin, responds, "*It's good how he swings the bat. But why does he have to throw like that?"* Once again, the son is reflective of the father and Jason's assumedly effeminate pitch is a point of shame for image-conscious Marvin.

Yet, *Falsettos*, at heart, is a play about maturing, tracing a trajectory from boyhood to manhood through a uniquely queer Jewish lens. The Bar Mitzvah ritual serves as the obvious tool to facilitate Jason's growth but Finn "has stated that not just Jason, but all male characters become a man by the end of *Falsettoland*. He sees it as 'everyone's bar mitzvah,' and this Jewish tradition as a 'metaphor that resonates.'"[57] What, then, is the process by which one grows from boy to man? At the end of *March of the Falsettos* (Act One of the Broadway musical), Jason expresses an interest in girls for the first time, prompting the first "man-to-man" interaction between him and his father, through the song, "Father to Son." Marvin sings:

Father to son,

I for one would take love slower.

I've made my choice.

But you can sing a different song.

Watch, as you sing,

How your voice gets much lower.

You'll be, kid, a man, kid --

If nothing goes wrong.

Sing for yourself

[57] Bádue, *Performing Gender, Sexuality, and Jewishness in the Songs of William Finn's Musical Falsettoland,* 174.

As you march along.[58]

Finn is delicate and intentional with his pairing of music and lyrics, ambiguously placing pauses so one could hear Marvin telling his son, "you'll be, kid, a mankid," an amalgamation of man and boy, perhaps representing how Marvin sees himself, occupying his own "in-between" space in Falsettoland. Beyond developing a deeper voice, Marvin provides scarce advice on what it means to become a man. In the second act, as Jason prepares for his Bar Mitzvah, the sexually maturing boy sings an ode to the girls he plans to invite to his celebration: "*Selecting girls for one's bar mitzvah - God, that's the miracle of Judaism."*[59]

At the end of the play, Jason has been vacillating regarding whether or not he wants to move forward with the plans for his Bar Mitzvah celebration, especially in the face of Whizzer's impending death from AIDS. Yet his reprise, "Another Miracle of Judaism," belies a maturity and personal growth that proves he is thinking about his Bar Mitzvah (and perhaps by proxy, manhood itself) in terms beyond sexual attraction. He sings directly to God in one of the most spiritually grounded moments of the play:

Hello, God.

I don't think we've ever really spoken.

If you'd kindly allow,

How about a miracle now?

I don't know if you exist.

I can't hear your fingers snappin'.

Are you just a big psychiatrist?

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[58] Finn and Lapine, *Falsettos*, 94.
[59] Ibid 112.

Or can you make things not happen?

Do this for me

And I'll get bar mitzvahed.

In exchange for:

Could you please make my friend stop dying?

I am not naive.

It won't be easy,

But if you could make my friend stop dying,

God,

That'd be the miracle of Judaism.

That'd be the miracle of Judaism.[60]

While Jason's theology is still developing, he is able to recognize that the ritual of becoming a man is not exclusively tied to heterosexual attraction. His manhood is not shaped by his lust for his female classmates but by his spiritual and literal ancestors, including both his biological and chosen family. This is demonstrated by his *aliyah* to the Torah at the impromptu Bar Mitzvah ceremony taking place at Whizzer's deathbed:

Son of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

Son of Marvin, son of Trina, son of Whizzer, son of Mendel

And godchild to the lesbians from next door.[61]

In this moment, Jason becomes a Jewish man, the product of a modern Jewish family, shaped by Jews of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. The hope for Jason's future is

[60] Ibid 162.
[61] Ibid 170.

palpable as the audience imagines how much more liberated he might be in both his Judaism and his gender identity than the generation that came before him.

Even the recognition of Whizzer as one of Jason's parents is an extraordinary departure from the traditional narrative of a "tight-knit" Jewish family. Whereas both gay identity and Jewish identity confer a sense of outsider status, one must draw a distinction between a familial, shared outsider status and a far lonelier, isolated outsider status. Typically, although of course not always, Jewishness is an identity shared with, at least, the members of one's own household. Gay identity, conversely, is often shared exclusively among chosen family, yielding a sense of solitude within one's family of origin. The plays in question explore not only the alienation of their gay characters but the disappointment they foment in their parents, whose image of their Jewish sons' future is shattered by their inability to perform their masculinity according to what they deem appropriate.

The image, or perhaps more accurately, the stereotype of the overbearing, guilt-offering mother is deeply ingrained in collective cultural consciousness surrounding both Jewish men and gay men. For an example of an utterly comedic take on the guilt-trip, one need only hear what Jason's parents sing to him when he announces his decision not to become Bar Mitzvah:

Marvin:

Go ahead and kill your mother.

Trina:

Not with guns, but kill your mother.

Marvin and Trina

Rather than humiliate her,

Killing your mother is the merciful thing to do.

As musicologist Alex Bádue notes, "this [song] marks a late-twentieth-century musical version of the tropes of filial disobedience and the sacrificing mother, both common in Jewish comedy going back to Yiddish theater.[62] Of course, in this particular example, Jason is still assumedly heterosexual. The relationships presented between the gay Jewish characters and their mothers in these plays provide an exacerbated experience of guilt and shame. As Jonathan Friedman explains, theater artists like Finn and Fierstein used the process of "filtering the theme of sexuality through a distinctly Jewish prism, [thereby] appropriat[ing] and then reinvent[ing] traditions from Jewish and non-Jewish theater and film such as the clash between traditional and modern ways, the inter-generational conflict over family and life-cycle events, and the timeless struggle between Jewish mother and son."[63]

This struggle remains alive and present throughout much of the gay Jewish theater that emerged during this period. One of the most notable depictions of the relationship between a Jewish mother and her gay son appears in Harvey Fierstein's landmark play, *Torch Song Trilogy.* The production, as presented on Broadway, actually consists of three one-act plays, the last of which focuses on a drag queen, Arnold, expecting a visit from his Jewish mother in the midst of attempting to adopt a gay foster child. Here, Friedman argues that "Jewishness informs the generational disconnect between Arnold, whose sensibilities are basically secular and cosmopolitan, and his mother, who, while not Orthodox, still ascribes immorality to gayness based on Jewish custom and tradition."[6465] While this is true

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[62] Bádue, *Performing Gender, Sexuality, and Jewishness in the Songs of William Finn's Musical Falsettoland,* 172.
[63] Friedman, *Rainbow Jews*, 80.
[64] Ibid 79.
[65] Friedman draws a denominational distinction, noting that despite Arnold's mother not identifying as Orthodox, her negative views regarding homosexuality are still informed by her Judaism. It is worth noting that,

to an extent, Arnold's relationship and family goals are actually quite traditional, impeded only by his inability to perform masculinity and heterosexuality, ostensibly the requirements for a "traditional" marriage during this time period. Arnold has no disdain for his parents' traditional partnership. To the contrary, positive memories of their marriage fuel his romantic ideals and his desire to replicate that relationship in his own life with a monogamous husband. But Arnold's homosexuality prevents both the world and his own mother from allowing this to happen:

> ***Ma:*** *I had no intention of having a homosexual for a son. So, look where intentions get you. Arnold, do what you want. You want to live like this?* Gay gezzinteh hait*. I don't care anymore. You're not going to make me sick like you did your father.*
>
> ***Arnold****: I made my father sick?*
>
> ***Ma:*** *No, he was thrilled to have a fairy for a son! You took a lifetime of dreams and threw them back in his face.*
>
> ***Arnold:*** *What lifetime of dreams? He knew I was gay for fourteen years.*
>
> ***Ma:*** *What? You think you walk into a room and say, "Hi, Dad, I'm queer," and that's that? You think that's what we brought you into the world for? Believe me, if I'd known I wouldn't have bothered. God should tear out my tongue, I should talk to my child this way. Arnold, you're my son, you're a good person, a sensitive person with a heart,* kennohorah*, like your father and I try to love you for that and forget this. But*

at the time Fierstein wrote this play, the Reform movement had adopted a policy supporting anti-discrimination efforts for homosexuals in employment and housing, but no movement within Judaism recognized same-sex marriage or allowed openly gay individuals to study toward the rabbinate. In fact, in 1981 the CCAR issued a responsa arguing that homosexuals should not be placed in leadership positions or serve as a role model for children in any institutions. So, the suggestion within Friedman's statement that negative views toward homosexuality are more obviously connected to Orthodox Judaism is anachronistic, erasing the deeply homophobic past statements of the "liberal" Jewish movements.

you won't let me. You've got to throw me on the ground and rub my face in it. You haven't spoken a sentence since I got here without the word "gay" in it.[66]

With her monologue peppered with Yiddish, Arnold's mother places the ultimate guilt on her son -- the notion that his homosexuality was the reason for his father's sickness. Throughout the play, Arnold is compared to his mother, with his foster son even calling him "Ma," the same pet name he uses with his own mother. Arnold's mother made a concerted effort to break a cycle of family discord, noting that "all my childhood I listened to fights. My father fought with my mother, my mother fought with my brother, my mother fought with me….When I married your father I told him, 'Jack, I'll talk but I won't fight.' And did you ever hear us fight? No. And now you know why."[67] Here, while not explicitly referencing Jacob, Fierstein returns to the trope of fight and struggle, albeit not with a man or an angel but with the members of one's own family. Here, Arnold's mother claims to be the one to break the cycle of strife within the family system. Yet, Arnold's desire to continue the positive trajectory of family harmony is made impossible by his family's inability to accept him for his authentic self, thus pushing him into an unwanted wrestling match between Arnold and his family of origin.

At the end of the play, Arnold is physically alone, but he sits surrounded by symbols of the family he has created for himself: the wallet belonging to his former (and perhaps future) lover Ed, a book belonging to his foster-son David, and a cookie tin belonging to his mother, still a fixture in his life despite the explosive tension of the previous scenes. This is Arnold's new Jewish American family as he crosses the threshold into the 1980s, straddling

[66] Harvey Fierstein, *Torch Song Trilogy* (New York: Ballantine, 2018), 159-160.
[67] Ibid 156-157.

his identities as a gay man, a drag queen, a Jewish "mother," a disappointing son, and a hopeless romantic, unaware of the collective trauma that will lie ahead for his gay community with the emergence of a mysterious virus that will necessitate the creation of chosen family more than ever.

The introduction of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus into gay communities of the early 1980s precipitated the newest and most deadly form of struggle, a wrestling match to win the blessing of simply staying alive. Through the study of the gay Jewish theater of this period, one comes to understand the fundamental enterprise of both Jewish life and gay life as being rooted in a sense of struggle, a wrestling match with an angelic being, a man, oneself, or some amalgamation of the three. In fall 1993, just as *Perestroika* opened on Broadway, Rabbi Steven Greenberg published an article in *Tikkun* magazine entitled, "Gayness and God." Rabbi Greenberg, still closeted at the time, used the pseudonym "Rabbi Yaakov Levado." This pen name, meaning "Jacob Alone," finds its origin in Genesis 32:25:

> וַיִּוָּתֵר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ וַיֵּאָבֵק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר׃
>
> *Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.*

In the article, Greenberg articulates the personal struggle with which he has been engaged over many years of attempting to reconcile his sexuality with his religion:

> *I have come to understand my gayness as akin to my Jewishness: It is integral to my sense of self. I did not choose it, but it is mine. To try to escape it would be self-defeating. There is nothing left to do but celebrate it.*[68]

The choice to celebrate is, certainly, easier said than done. The external forces of discrimination continue to breed internal forces of shame which are powerful and incessant.

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[68] Rabbi Steve Greenberg, "Gayness and God," accessed December 7, 2020, https://www.eshelonline.org/gayness-and-god/.

Yet Greenberg's insistence on living his life as his full, integrated self speaks volumes to the predicament in which gay Jews find themselves, whether in the plays in question or in real lived experience. To live one's life transgressing gender definitions and expectations is to live a life of struggle. In Greenberg's decision to celebrate his sense of self, he rejects the internal struggle to reconcile his gayness with his Jewishness. Yet, none of us lives in a vacuum. Unfortunately, an alleviation of one's internal identity struggle does not suspend the constant battle to be seen by the outside world as deserving of love, to be recognized as a full human being. That fight soldiers on, from generation to generation. As Sarah Ironson would say, "*Azoi toot a Yid*. It is the Jewish way."

Chapter Two: Trauma and Victimization

On October 15 1982, Lester Kinsolving became the first journalist to publicly inquire about the Reagan administration's response to the AIDS crisis. The following is a transcript of his exchange with Reagan's press secretary, Larry Speakes:

Lester Kinsolving: Does the president have any reaction to the announcement by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta that AIDS is now an epidemic in over 600 cases?

Larry Speakes: AIDS? I haven't got anything on it.

Lester Kinsolving: Over a third of them have died. It's known as "gay plague." [Press pool laughter.] No, it is. It's a pretty serious thing. One in every three people that get this have died. And I wonder if the president was aware of this.

Larry Speakes: I don't have it. [Press pool laughter.] Do you?

Lester Kinsolving: You don't have it? Well, I'm relieved to hear that, Larry! [Press pool laughter.]

Larry Speakes: Do you?

Lester Kinsolving: No, I don't.

Larry Speakes: You didn't answer my question. How do you know? [Press pool laughter.]

Lester Kinsolving: Does the president — in other words, the White House — look on this as a great joke?

Larry Speakes: No, I don't know anything about it, Lester.[69]

President Reagan would not speak the word "AIDS" in public until September 17, 1985. By the end of that year, 12,529 Americans had died from the plague.[70] This is the historical context in which activist and writer Larry Kramer opened his groundbreaking play, *The Normal Heart*, amid an epidemic that elicited laughter rather than tears from White House officials, amid a rot of indifference that spread from the top down. Tony Kushner describes this period as "a critical, terrible era when an emergent community, laboring to set itself free from centuries of persecution and oppression, was blindsided just at the moment of a political and cultural attainment of some of its most important goals by a biological horror miserably allied to the world's murderous indifference, its masked and its naked hatred."[71]

On the heels of their own sexual liberation movement, some voices began to emerge within the gay community, urging a focus on sexual protection and precaution. The loudest and brashest of these voices was Larry Kramer, a Jewish activist who deeply divided the gay community over his 1978 novel, *Faggots*, "in which he accused gay men of embracing promiscuity as their central liberating tenet."[72] Branded as either "a left-wing hysteric or deplored as a right-wing antisex scold,"[73] Kramer used his writing as a tool of social and political change, "stat[ing] repeatedly that formal aesthetic concerns are no great concern of

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[69] German Lopez, "The Reagan Administration's Unbelievable Response to the HIV/AIDS Epidemic," *Vox,* December 1, 2016*,* https://www.vox.com/2015/12/1/9828348/ronald-reagan-hiv-aids.
[70] "HIV/AIDS Timeline," New York City AIDS Memorial, accessed December 21, 2020, https://www.nycaidsmemorial.org/timeline#:~:text=The%20U.N.,have%20died%20of%20AIDS%20worldwide
[71] Kushner, Introduction to *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me,* vii.
[72] Friedman, *Rainbow Jews*, 93.
[73] Kushner, Introduction to *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me*, xxi.

his, that he chooses different media (novel, screenplay, essay, play) depending on which seems most useful at any given juncture to the accomplishment of an explicitly social goal."[74] To do this, he frequently develops protagonists who are thinly veiled representations of himself, guiding the reader or the audience through a barely fictionalized version of his own life.

In *The Normal Heart*, Ned Weeks is Kramer's alter ego, a gay Jewish writer whose most recent novel caused a schism in the gay community due to its clear condemnation of gay promiscuity as a method of liberation. As a gay man, Kramer (through Ned's voice) sees himself as part of a gay lineage, a chain of "culture that includes Proust, Henry James, Tchaikovsky, Cole Porter, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Alexander the Great, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci [and many more….]."[75] This heritage provides the foundation for Kramer's gay identity and consequently his worldview. His AIDS activism can be read as an attempt toward a form of queer cultural continuity, an effort toward ensuring that his cultural inheritance would not fade away alongside an entire generation of dying gay men. He expresses his vision in no uncertain terms through his character of Ned Weeks:

> *That's how I want to be defined: as one of the men who fought the war. Being defined by our cocks is literally killing us. Must we all be reduced to becoming our own murderers? Why couldn't you and I, Bruce Niles and Ned Weeks, have been leaders in creating a new definition of what it means to be gay?*[76]

Yet what might be said about Kramer's Jewish heritage as an influence on his activism? Surely, Kramer was also the recipient of a social and cultural inheritance by virtue of his

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[74] Kushner, Introduction to *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me*, xiii.
[75] Kramer, *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me*, 112.
[76] Ibid 113.

Jewish lineage as well. For Kramer, it is the lived experience of the Jewish people, particularly the collective memories of discrimination and trauma, that inspires both his own advocacy and that of his protagonist, Ned.

Upon being removed from his leadership position of the AIDS advocacy organization he founded, Ned's partner tells him that his "attempt to justify your bursts of outrageous temper as 'part of what it means to be Jewish' is past our comprehending."[77] Yet, for Kramer, this way of behaving seems to represent the nexus of his gay and Jewish identity. His gay identity is rooted in a pride for the cultural, artistic, and intellectual heritage of those who came before him, alongside a pride in living his truth freely and openly. His Jewish identity, rooted in his understanding of Jewish history, provides the motivation to fight on behalf of his queer community. He holds deeply to the Jewish value of *tokheḥah,* or righteous rebuke, exemplifying and continuing the prophetic tradition. Kushner draws the connection between Ned Weeks and the biblical tradition of social justice prophecy:

> *This is the voice of Torah, of talmud, of the scrupulous, tireless parsing of Moral Law. Certainly Ned Weeks calls to mind, as has been often remarked about his author, one of the prophets of the Holy Scriptures, and Amos, perhaps, torn equally between love and fury for his people, righteous indignation manifest as towering rage shot through with heartbreak, with unrequited but inextinguishable devotion.*[78]

After all, it is with a deep love for his people, in this case referring to the gay community, that Ned/Larry takes up the cause of prophetic rebuke. In the following passage, Amos explains his duty as a chosen prophet of God:

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[77] Ibid 112.

[78] Kushner, Introduction to *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me,* xi.

כִּי לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה דָּבָר כִּי אִם־גָּלָה סוֹדוֹ אֶל־עֲבָדָיו הַנְּבִיאִים׃

For the Master, the LORD, does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants, the prophets.

אַרְיֵה שָׁאָג מִי לֹא יִירָא אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה דִּבֶּר מִי לֹא יִנָּבֵא׃

A lion roars, Who does not fear? The Master, the LORD, speaks. Who cannot prophesy?[79]

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel explains,

> *Amos, a prophet to whom the call of God came as a surprise and stayed on as dismay, is startled. The voice of God is compared with the roar of a lion about to fall upon its prey; Israel, God's chosen people, is the prey. And no one hears, no one trembles. All save the prophet are deaf and complacent. Yet Amos' reaction is not fear but the inner compulsion to convey what the voice proclaims; not escape for shelter, but identification with the voice.*[80]

Herein lies the central tension of Kramer's activism, mirrored in the antipathetic reactions from those whom Amos rebuked. Kramer's condemnation was rooted in the same love for his people as Amos's, the same desire to see them thrive and live up to their potential. His harshness and acerbity were understood by his contemporaries as attacks on the gay community, as a reversal of the hard-fought progress of the 1970s. Yet, hard to swallow as it may be, this prophetic message is actually one of hope. Kushner describes Kramer's characters as among the "fog people" of dramatic literature, surrounded by a proverbial fog

[79] Amos 3:7-8, transl. Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 2: Prophets,* (New York: Norton, 2019), 1261.
[80] Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 41-42.

so dense that it can feel impossible to move forward. While this moniker may appear to imply harsh criticism, Kushner arguably uses the term as a form of compliment, an attestation to the characters' resilience in the face of tremendous adversity.

Through his reading of Kramer's message, one can begin to see the inspiration for Kushner's own prophetic message of progress, delivered through Prior Walter in *Angels in America.* Kushner distills Kramer's clarion call: "The great error has been to mistake the darkness for damnation, to surrender to immobility or worse, to try to retrace our steps backward to a safety that has ceased to exist or never existed. It is nearly impossible to move forward. And yet moving forward is precisely what the courageous among the fog people do."[81] Ned's friends and colleagues experience the fog of AIDS as an immobilizing force, experiencing a desire to "retrace [their] steps backward" to the glory days of the 1970s, to recapture the feelings of abandon and release that brought them out of their closets of shame and self-loathing.

Kramer met this fear with a message of bravery, one that imagined the fortitude of the gay community to be stronger than anyone had previously considered. He saw a path forward through widespread education, organized power, and organized money, fueling a campaign of political pressure. Ultimately, despite the protestations of some within his target audience and the absolute indifference, disregard, and cold-heartedness of the Reagan administration, Kramer's prophetic message proved its power, by laying the foundational and institutional groundwork for the campaign that has resulted in AIDS no longer representing a death sentence.[82]

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[81] Kushner, Introduction to *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of* Me, xxiv.

[82] Notably, Kramer developed a deep and abiding friendship with Dr. Anthony Fauci, America's top infectious disease doctor who most recently returned to the public eye amid the Coronavirus pandemic. It was a relationship that began with Kramer "call[ing Fauci] a murderer and an incompetent idiot on the front page of

Kramer's Jewish identity can be understood beyond the context of prophetic work, most prominently in the parallel he drew between modern homophobic discrimination and historic antisemitic persecution. Notably, this parallel is not simply a matter of overlapping one community's experience of marginalization onto another's. As Professor Alisa Solomon notes, the two identities represent a shared threat to a reactionary, conservative worldview, "invoking the specter of a powerful cultural elite controlled by liberal Jews and homos. For [neo-conservative journalist Richard] Grenier and his cronies *Jewish* and *queer* are rhetorical synonyms for power and moral corruption, always worth keeping on hand in case there is a demagogic duty to do."[83]

Solomon points to the emergence of *Angels in America* "at a moment when the anti-gay movement was turning to the structure of anti-Semitism as a template for its organizing."[84] She demonstrates conservative organizing strategies targeting the gay community, including those that implied that gay groups are funded and supported by "powerful allies" in all areas of public life including government and media, playing on generations-old stereotypes of Jewish media control. The similarities continued into visual media, with a campaign supporting Oregon's Ballot Measure 9[85] copying a Nazi cartoon of a puppet-master, the Jewish figure replaced by an image of a gay man. And perhaps

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the San Francisco Examiner magazine," eventually developing into "an extraordinary 33-year relationship." (Donald G. McNeil Jr., "'We Loved Each Other': Fauci Recalls Larry Kramer, Friend and Nemesis," *New York* Times, published May 27, 2020, updated July 13, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/27/health/larry-kramer-anthony-fauci.html.)

[83] Solomon, *Wrestling with Angels,* 121.

[84] Ibid.

[85] This was a 1992 ballot initiative which would have required all government organizations in the state to actively promote an ideology that homosexuality is abnormal and perverse, in the same category as pedophilia. (Timothy Egan, "Oregon Measure Asks State to Repress Homosexuality," *New York Times*, August 16, 1992. https://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/16/us/oregon-measure-asks-state-to-repress-homosexuality.html.)

unsurprisingly, the founder of the white supremacist Aryan Nation famously taught that "homosexuality is funded by the Jews."[86]

Yet, even beyond the conspiracy theories of Jews and gay men joining forces to corrupt Christian children and take over the world, one need only look to the unique form of anti-gay discrimination that emerged in the early years of the AIDS crisis to see a re-emergence of a timeless, hateful trope: the blood libel. Solomon refers to Canadian historian Gavin Langmuir's study of antisemitism to draw this parallel:

> *Langmuir shows how Germany obsessed about Jewish blood in the nineteenth century. Extremists described a cult of ritual murder, while liberals used blood as a metaphor for capitalist exploitation -- a modern, secular crucifixion. Both came to regard Jews' own blood as impure and infectious. Some mixed this symbolic literalism with the image of the feminized Jew and alleged that Jewish men menstruated.*
>
> *Homophobia commits a similar symbolic literalism, especially because the characteristics classically attached to a demonized group -- uncontrollable sexuality, gender transgression, and impure blood -- seem so palpably present in gays. AIDS gives literalness, though hardly accuracy, to accusations that gays, like Jews of old, will infect society with their poisoned blood.*[87]

This symbolic literalism has a unique impact on gay Jews who bear the brunt of this hatred in compounded ways, especially those with AIDS who are confronted by a medical reality that their blood is actually toxic. In the era of AIDS, the gay Jew who carries the virus is cast as

[86] Solomon, *Wrestling with Angels,* 122.
[87] Ibid 122-123.

the ultimate threat to the fabric of American society, the despised element faced with a choice to either succumb to the darkness and fog, or to raise one's voice into a shout in the tradition of Larry Kramer, demanding dignity when the world afforded him none.

Kramer's personal experience growing up as a Jew was not particularly tainted by antisemitism, nor did he feel especially connected to a sense of Jewish community. He has spoken about his discomfort with the synagogue community of his childhood, a "rich, Jewish temple, where everybody was loaded and we weren't. [...Kramer articulates that] mostly, what Judaism was to me was all these rich people that made me feel poor."[88] Yet, what Kramer lacked in Jewish community he found in his connection to Jewish history, explaining, "because of my main identity as an outsider, I have a lot of interest in Jewish history and behavior in this context," noting that even the wealthy Jews who made him feel alienated shared an element of his outsider identity.[89] Professor Jonathan Friedman points to the "Jewish world" of Larry Kramer as being "that of the outsider who clings tenaciously to an inner moral conscience."[90] How, then, does Kramer's moral conscience manifest as the outgrowth of his Jewish identity? In the context of the AIDS crisis, Kramer turns to historical precedent to ensure that history will not repeat itself.

Kramer's interest in promoting history as a tool for preventing the repetition of atrocities is reflected in every detail of his work, including the visual elements. The original off-Broadway production of *The Normal Heart* featured a set with walls of whitewashed plywood, painted with regularly updated facts and figures related to the AIDS epidemic. One

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[88] Lawrence Mass, "Interview with a Writer," in Mass, ed., *We Must Love One Another or* Die, 363, 364, quoted in Friedman, *Rainbow Jews,* 96.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Friedman, *Rainbow Jews,* 99.

wall of the theater featured this text from *American Jewry During the Holocaust*, prepared for the American Jewish Commission on the Holocaust in 1984:

> *There were two alternative strategies a Jewish organization could adopt to get the American government to initiate action on behalf of the imperiled Jews of Europe. It could cooperate with the government officials, quietly trying to convince them that rescue of Jews should be one of the objectives of the war, or it could try to pressure the government into initiating rescue by using embarrassing public attention and rallying public opinion to that end.*
>
> *The American Jewish Committee chose the former strategy and clung to it tenaciously.*
>
> *From the very onset of Jewish crises, the Committee responded to each new Nazi outrage by practicing their traditional style of discreet "backstairs" diplomacy.*
>
> *With each worsening event, the Committee reacted by contacting yet another official or re-visiting the same ones to call their attention to the new situation.*
>
> *The Jewish delegates were usually politely informed that the matter was being given the "most earnest attention."*
>
> *They were still trying to persuade the same officials when the war ended.*[91][92]

The message is clear and needs no explicit connecting thread to the crisis of AIDS inaction (and nor did Kramer offer any). By promoting this text, Kramer seems to be holding a mirror

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[91] Report edited by Seymour Maxwell Finger, quoted in Kramer, *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me*, 17-18.

[92] Of course, this tension between activists and mainstream organizations has infiltrated a wide variety of Jewish social justice movements in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Notably, strong disagreements infiltrated the fight to save Soviet Jewry, as large Jewish establishment organizations sought a less controversial approach compared to the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry who advocated for a form of civil disobedience that would apply confrontational pressure to the government. (Crystal Nix, "200,000 at Rally for Soviet Jewry," *New York Times,* May 4, 1987, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/04/nyregion/200000-at-rally-for-soviet-jewry.html.)

to the audience, reminding them of the most egregious outcome to the strategy their society continues to employ, despite full knowledge of how it has caused damage in the past.

In his typical fashion, Kramer uses the dialogue of *The Normal Heart* to play out the real-life ideological debates that pervaded his own life in New York's gay community of the early 1980s. In an early scene of the play, Felix, a closeted reporter at the New York Times, finds himself in Ned's apartment, experiencing some amalgamation of a romantic date and a political, sociological argument. Here, Ned offers Felix his parallel comparison between the current inaction regarding the AIDS crisis and the apathetic indifference to the systematic slaughter of Jews in the Holocaust.

> *Ned: Do you know that when Hitler's Final Solution to eliminate the Polish Jews was first mentioned in the* Times *it was on page twenty-eight. And on page six of the* Washington Post*. And the* Times *and the* Post *were owned by Jews. What causes silence like that? Why didn't the American Jews help the German Jews get out? Their very own people![93]*

Through Felix, Kramer preempts the challenge to his argument, that the comparison between the two experiences is simply untenable:

> *Felix: ...And this is not World War II. The numbers are nowhere remotely comparable. And all analogies to the Holocaust are tired, overworked, boring, probably insulting, possibly true, and a major turn-off.[94]*

Later, when Felix is dying of AIDS, he cringes when Ned approaches him, crying out, "Don't touch me! I'm so ugly. I cannot stand it when you look at my body," before noting

[93] Kramer, *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me*, 44.
[94] Ibid 45.

that a mutual friend who recently died of AIDS "looked like someone out of Auschwitz."[95] Again, the parallel is clear, now embodied in physical form. Not only does the world look on with similar disinterest, but here the audience can understand a visual cue: AIDS physically attacks and reduces gay men in the same way that Nazis did the Jews.

This argument is pervasive if not controversial. Professor Solomon, in her study of *Angels in America*, argues that "Kushner is not so crass as to equate AIDS with the Holocaust,"[96] implying, perhaps, a distinction between him and Kramer. Yet, Kramer faces this challenge with aplomb. Even if one characterized his comparison as "crass," it would certainly not be the first time that charge has been leveled at Kramer. He is secure in his argument and the parallel is compelling. When Felix calls Ned "relentless" and "as cheery as Typhoid Mary," he replies by reminding Felix, "The American Jews knew exactly what was happening, but everything was downplayed and stifled. Can you imagine how effective it would have been if every Jew in America had marched on Washington?"[97] Kramer is not equating the two atrocities but he is using his lived experience as a gay Jew to embody the late twentieth century, post-Holocaust Jewish rallying cry of "Never Again."

Ned's friend and colleague, Bruce, who opposes Ned's techniques and actions throughout the play, experiences the circumstances of his lover Albert's death firsthand, causing his perspective to shift dramatically:

> *Bruce: ...The hospital doctors refused to examine him to put a cause of death on the death certificate, and without a death certificate the undertakers wouldn't take him away, and neither would the police. Finally, some orderly comes in and stuffs Albert*

[95] Ibid 114-115.
[96] Solomon, *Wrestling with Angels*, 131.
[97] Kramer, *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me*, 46.

in a heavy-duty Glad Bag and motions us with his finger to follow and he puts him out in the back alley with the garbage. He says, hey, man. See what a big favor I've done for you, I got him out, I want fifty bucks. I paid him and then his mother and I carried the bag to her car and we finally found an undertaker who cremated him for a thousand dollars, no questions asked.[98]

Ultimately, political disagreements aside, this is about an experience of indignity, a complete rejection of another person's humanity, seeing the AIDS patient as trash in human form, undeserving of a proper burial or even an acknowledgement. Additionally, the actions of the undertaker evoke the mass cremations of the Holocaust, an affront to traditional Jewish burial practices and an erasure of the deceased's humanity. The circumstances surrounding the Holocaust and the AIDS crisis are of course incomparable. But the effect on the communal conscience of the gay Jew of the 1980s cannot be denied.

One must question how the rallying cry of "Never Again" might land differently on gay Jewish ears compared to the wider heterosexual Jewish community. For late 20th century American Jews to summon the strength to confront the memory of Holocaust, to engage with its barbarity, they needed to achieve a level of societal acceptance and comfort within broader American society, an acceptance which the characters of these plays simply do not experience as gay men. After all, the challenge to bear witness and to take up the mantle of responsibility toward preventing future horrors is an altogether different experience when one is experiencing sustained and ongoing persecution themselves. For the gay Jews of the 1980s, the AIDS crisis and the memory of the Holocaust did not exist only as parallel experiences, but rather as overlapping reminders of the intersectional enmity that pervaded

[98] Ibid 104.

their daily lives. As Kramer's surrogate voice, Ned speaks for a generation exhausted by the struggle to simply survive amid a torrent of public indifference, combined with a refusal to recognize basic humanity.

The choice by gay Jewish playwrights to explore parallels between their contemporary experience and the monstrosities of World War II predates the AIDS crisis. In *Torch Song Trilogy*, Arnold's partner Alan is the victim of a fatal, violent hate crime. Prior to the attack, Arnold and Alan had planned to foster a child, with the ultimate goal of adoption. Following Alan's death, Arnold decides to continue with the foster-to-adopt process, eventually gaining custody of David, a gay teen with many years of experience in the foster system. Toward the end of the play, David explains how Arnold brought him to the site of Alan's murder on their very first day together:

> *David: The day I moved in. At first I figured he was tryin' to scare me outta goin' into the park at night. I mean, I didn't know him from shit and here he takes me out, first day, and shows me some dried-up blood on the sidewalk. I figured him for a nut-case. Like maybe he had a case against the world or somethin'. I mean, havin' a bunch of piss-offs take out your lover for kicks…. I could understand him bein' crazy. So, I felt sorry for him, but just passed it off. Then about a week later we were watchin' the news on TV and there was this protest march; a bunch of Jews marchin' against Nazis. They had these signs that said "Never Again" and "We Remember." And I looked over at Arnold and he was like cryin' real soft, and just like that I connected. I knew why he showed me this.*[99]

[99] Fierstein, *Torch Song Trilogy,* 164.

Fierstein, arguably a more subtle writer than Kramer, does not need to draw the connection further. Arnold is doing his due diligence as a gay father of a gay son. Using his particular worldview as a Jew, he passes an important warning onto the next generation: This hatred is alive and well, we've experienced it before, and you must be prepared to experience it in your own life.

After all, being the target of violent hatred is an undeniable through line in the history of the LGBT community and the Jewish people. Jewish tradition, of course, upholds the intergenerational transmission of culture and history in the highest esteem. Beyond the commandment to teach Torah diligently to one's children (Deuteronomy 6:7), even non-religious Jews historically view their childrens' continued involvement in Jewish tradition (or lack thereof) as an offshoot of their own parenting, as reflected in Arnold's relationship with his own mother:

> *Ma:* (Calling to Arnold) *Arnold? You have Matzo Meal?*
>
> *Arnold:* (Enters) *Yeah, I'll get it for you.*
>
> *Ma:* (Proud) *He has Matzo Meal. Did I bring him up right?*[100]

While this scene is certainly intended to provide a moment of satire and humor, founded on the undeniable role food plays in the relationship between a Jewish mother and her son, this brief snapshot into Arnold's mother's priorities provides deeper insight into her aspirations for her children. After all, her pride is rooted in the secure knowledge that she has successfully continued the legacy of the Jewish people. She knows that the traditions will not die with her earthly death, that her son has absorbed the lessons of what it means to be a Jew, or at least her version of those lessons. It is notable that the symbol of this cultural

[100] Ibid 146.

transmission is matzo meal, a pulverized version of the bread of affliction. Of all the symbols Fierstein could have chosen, the use of this particular food—a pulverized form thereof!—evokes memories of slavery and degradation, implying that Arnold's education is not purely in the name of continuing traditions, but also in the service of perpetuating the memory of those who were abused or killed simply because they were Jews. Arnold, who sits at the nexus of gay identity and Jewish identity, attempts to do the same for his son. When his mother overhears him teaching his son about the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde, she immediately steers the conversation in another direction, prompting Arnold to confront her on her behavior:

> *Arnold: I wish you wouldn't interfere like that; it's very embarrassing.*
>
> *Ma: Excuse me, but listening to that is very embarrassing.*
>
> *Arnold: I'm sorry you feel that way, but I have a responsibility to his education.*
>
> *Ma: I am sure that the people who put him here did not have that kind of education in mind.*
>
> *Arnold: The people who put him here had exactly that kind of education in mind. And I'll thank you not to interfere.*[101]

This encapsulates a ubiquitous familial message received by gay Jews, one that teaches that Jewish tradition and heritage represent a point of pride, necessitating intergenerational transmission, whereas gay tradition and heritage represent a point of shame, necessitating silence and censorship. Arnold, who takes on the nickname "Ma" for himself, mirrors the maternal role, including a responsibility toward cultural education. As a gay man raising a gay son, he breaks the traditional family paradigm in which Jewish tradition is the only

[101] Ibid 148.

shared experience, allowing his and his son's shared gay identity to be awarded the same reverence and honor.

In *The Normal Heart*, Kramer further delves into the importance of gay intergenerational education. After being continuously challenged on his behavior and tactics, Ned speaks bluntly with an eye toward history:

> *Bruce, did you know that an openly gay Englishman was as responsible as any man for winning the Second World War? His name was Alan Turing and he cracked the Germans' Enigma code so the Allies knew in advance what the Nazis were going to do — and when the war was over he committed suicide he was so hounded for being gay. Why don't they teach any of this in the schools? If they did, maybe he wouldn't have killed himself and maybe you wouldn't be so terrified of who you are.*[102]

Here, Kramer reminds the audience that this transmission of culture is not simply important for its own sake and for the sake of continuity, but rather because it saves lives. The Passover Haggadah teaches:

וְהִיא שֶׁעָמְדָה לַאֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְלָנוּ. שֶׁלֹּא אֶחָד בִּלְבָד עָמַד עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, אֶלָּא שֶׁבְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, וְהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מַצִּילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם.

> And it is this that has stood for our ancestors and for us; since it is not [only] one [person or nation] that has stood [against] us to destroy us, but rather in each generation, they stand [against] us to destroy us, but the Holy One, blessed be God, rescues us from their hand.[103]

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[102] Kramer, *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me*, 112-113.

[103] Pesach Haggadah, Maggid, First Fruits Declaration, Accessed December 21, 2020, https://www.sefaria.org/Pesach_Haggadah%2C_Magid%2C_First_Fruits_Declaration?lang=bi.

It is not only for the sake of glorifying God that this message persists, but also as a preparation for what one might expect as a Jew, based on our shared history. The temptation is to focus on the latter portion of the narrative, God's saving power. However, the story's other key message lies in the reminder that this generation's persecution is not the first and it might not be the last. People and nations attempting to destroy us is part of the very fabric of Jewish life. Without this knowledge, younger generations remain unprepared for the realities that lie ahead.

Gay Jews inherit dual narratives of persecution and resilience but only one of those narratives is perpetuated in a public, open format, supported by their biological families. Without a focused effort toward passing the gay historical narrative to the next generation, both gay people themselves, and the broader host culture remain uninformed and indifferent to any sense of significant gay heritage or lineage. In the earliest days of the AIDS epidemic, gay culture was not completely absent from the media, especially in societal epicenters like New York and San Francisco. Yet, even then, the focus remained on the most salacious and/or trendy elements, notably lacking any focus on the virus or the humanity it seemed to be slowly erasing. In *Falsettoland*, Marvin's next-door neighbor, a lesbian doctor named Dr. Charlotte, reads a medical journal as she shares her firsthand experience caring for men with the yet-to-be-named virus:

Bachelors arrive sick and frightened.

They leave weeks later, unenlightened.

We see a trend, but the trend has no name.

(She holds up the journal.)

Something bad is happening.

Something very bad is happening.

Something stinks,

Something immoral,

Something so bad that words have lost their meaning.[104]

Her lived experience leaves her speechless. Yet, her insider information as a medical professional is contrasted deeply with what she sees of gay men in popular culture, as she reads a copy of *Interview* magazine:

I scan the mag.

Very chic tabloid --

The men dressed in drag

Next to their moms.

Fashion and passion and filler

But not a word about the killer.

I like the ball gowns but Jesus Christ!

[104] Finn and Lapine, *Falsettos*, 141.

Something bad is happening.[105]

This disconnect highlights two important and equally destructive forms of erasure. Firstly, by refusing to publish vital medical information regarding the virus, the media facilitates a culture that contributes to a surplus of preventable deaths. Secondly, by continually ignoring and actively withholding content related to points of honor and pride within the gay community, homophobia is permitted to flourish as queer people maintain their societal role as both the butt of the joke and the target of oppression.

To publicize that "something bad is happening" to gay men, to share the visceral details of the disease would imply at least a semblance of empathy, an acceptance and acknowledgment of gay men's humanity. Surely, by the 1980s, gay individuals were no longer completely hidden from view in mass media. Yet their gay identity, and more importantly the very risks to their human survival posed by AIDS, remained uncharted territory. A similar missed cultural opportunity is explored toward the beginning of *The Normal Heart*. Here, Ned pleads to Felix that he might be able to use his power as a *New York Times* reporter to finally shed light on this important issue of human life and death:

Ned: It is a very peculiar feeling having to go out and seek support from the straight world for something gay.

Felix: I wouldn't know about that. I just write about gay designers and gay discos and gay chefs and gay rock stars and gay photographers and gay models and gay

[105] Ibid 143.

celebrities and gay everything. I just don't call them gay. Isn't that enough for doing my bit?

Ned: No—I don't think it's going to be.[106]

With few words, Ned makes his point unequivocally clear. The world of the gay 1970s has come to an end and the focus now must be on survival. It is simply not enough to profile gay celebrities without acknowledging their gay identity. It is simply not enough to feature a photography spread with drag queens standing next to their mothers. Kramer prophesies by looking backward, remembering what happens when innocent yet despised people are being killed as the general public turns a blind eye. He speaks with visionary language, predicting that Felix's approach simply will not suffice in the face of the challenges that will lie ahead.

Additionally, there are unseen consequences to perpetuating the status quo, even beyond the deaths of those who contract the indiscriminate virus. While public disapproval can breed indifference, inaction, and apathy in the face of gruesome and preventable deaths, it can also fuel the dangerous and incessant flames of self-hatred. As Tony Kushner explains about Kramer's work,

being the object of hatred for millennia will make any subject hate her- or himself. [Larry Kramer, through his writing] is demanding that, as we liberate ourselves, we also transform what we are liberating, that we rid ourselves of self-hatred and begin the riddance by naming it.[107]

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[106] Kramer, *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me,* 34.
[107] Kushner, Introduction to *The Normal Heart and the Destiny of Me*, xxiii.

Kushner emphasizes and creatively channels this point in his own play, *Angels in America,* through the voice of Louis who bemoans the notion that "what AIDS really shows us is the limits of tolerance, that it's not enough to be tolerated, because when the shit hits the fan you find out how much tolerance is worth. Nothing. And underneath all the tolerance is intense, passionate hatred."[108] Here, Louis speaks as a gay man but he may as well be speaking from his Jewish background as well. After all, superficial tolerance of Jews that blankets a deep-rooted hatred is similarly central to the Jewish American historical experience.

Later in the play, Louis's lover Joe expresses a sentiment of being "actually happy" in their relationship to which Louis replies, "You're not happy, no one is happy. What am I doing? With you? With *anyone*, I should be exterminated but with *you…"*[109] Louis's use of "extermination" language evokes Holocaust imagery, uncovering how deeply the external forces of hatred have permeated his self-perception. With this short statement, he clarifies that this particular relationship is untenable for a variety of reasons but, even beyond that fact, Louis at his core feels undeserving of love, even undeserving of existence.

What, then, might these four plays offer as a path forward, given the histories of trauma, marginalization, apathy, and victimization that pervade the multifaceted collective conscience of gay Jews in the 1980s? The answer seems to be rooted in a sense of communal self-reliance, an interdependence of individuals with one another, within a specific community group. Navigating the external forces of hatred, especially amid a terrifying plague, is simply too great a task for any one individual. Finn captures this deep need for collaboration among chosen family through the song, "Unlikely Lovers," the only song

[108] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 96.
[109] Ibid 203.

exclusively featuring the four gay characters. While allyship is crucial and has been absolutely critical in the fight against AIDS, the song is an ode to the internal strength of the LGBT community to hold onto each other when that community was all they had. Dr. Alex Bádue writes:

> *Finn's lyrics reveal the song as an anthem to find and maintain a gay identity during the AIDS crisis. They emphasize nature and the world around the characters as an escape from reality, but also reinforce their bond when they sing in harmony, "Let's be scared together. Let's pretend that nothing is awful." (236). [...] "Unlikely Lovers" functions as a microcosm of the LGBT community in that decade; it had to unite to support each member and survive.*[110]

This approach is hardly unique to the gay community and has certainly been employed throughout Jewish history as a method of survival. The optimism of "pretending that nothing is awful" may appear naive but, for the gay community of the 1980s seeing its numbers shrinking every day, it represented the only way forward.

In fact, all four plays in question end with their gay Jewish protagonists leaning into a sense of community through chosen family. In *The Normal Heart,* Ned sits by Felix's bed as he finally succumbs to the virus. Yet, Ned's final message is one of hope as he speaks to his lover who has just passed:

> *Felix, when they invited me to Gay Week at Yale, they had a dance… In my old college dining hall, just across the campus from that tiny freshman room where I*

[110] Bádue, *Performing Gender, Sexuality, and Jewishness in the Songs of William Finn's Musical Falsettoland,* 167.

> *tried to kill myself because I thought I was the only gay man in the world—they had a dance. Felix, there were six hundred young men and women there. Smart, exceptional young men and women.*[111]

Ned's generation may be lost to the plague but he finds hope in the next generation who rely on their sense of community to move out of the shadows, to break the cycle of societal hatred that breeds self-hatred and isolation. As was true of the generation of Jews that survived the Holocaust, Kramer's hope is rooted in the belief that the next generation will be able to live their truth proudly and publicly.

In his analysis of Larry Kramer's work, Kushner reflects on Kramer "telling us *we must save ourselves*."[112] Kushner is keenly attuned to this message, as he finishes *Angels in America* with a similar vision of emerging from darkness with the help of community and chosen family. Kushner, while deeply influenced by Kramer, nevertheless presents a very different mode of prophecy. Whereas Kramer's central prophet, Ned, offers a prophetic vision with public rebuke at its core, Kushner's central prophet, Prior, offers a prophecy rooted in a sense of spirituality which feels noticeably absent in Kramer's work. Prior's role is not to offer castigation as much as to present a vision, a fantastical conception of a future that tinges the end of the play with a feeling of near-utopian optimism.

To achieve this, *Angels in America* concludes with an epilogue set in February of 1990, intentionally just past the threshold of the new century, one step closer to the approaching millennium. Four years have passed since the final act of *Perestroika* and the

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[111] Kramer, *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me*, 121.
[112] Kushner, Introduction to *The Normal Heart and the Destiny of Me,* xxiii.

audience finds Prior and Louis together again, not as lovers, but as friends, alongside their longtime friend Belize and Joe's Mormon mother, Hannah. This highly unlikely foursome stands together, spanning religious traditions, gender identities, sexual orientations, HIV statuses, past relationships, and generations, as Prior offers his final prophetic message of the play:

> *This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. Bye now. You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you:* More Life*. The Great Work Begins.*[113]

Who exactly is Prior blessing here? Who are the "fabulous creatures" he seems to be addressing? This is the third direct-address monologue of the play, in which the theatergoers take on the role of the imagined speech's intended audience. *Millennium Approaches* opens with Rabbi Chemelwitz's eulogy for Louis's grandmother, Sarah Ironson, identifying the audience as the funeral attendees. *Perestroika* opens with a 1986 speech from Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, the "World's Oldest Living Bolshevik," transforming the theater into the "Hall of Deputies" at the Kremlin. So, to whom does Prior offer his parting blessing? Here, Alisa Solomon returns to Leslie Fiedler's notion of the Jew as the "central symbol, the essential myth of the whole Western world,"[114] adding a queer twist. She writes,

[113] Kushner, *Angels in America,* 280.
[114] Solomon, *Wrestling with Angels*, 130.

> *Through the wrestling Jacob became Israel, the one who will strive and struggle with God -- or, in Harold Bloom's evocative phrase, "God-clutcher." Similarly, Prior becomes the "central symbol" Fiedler describes, acquiring the authority to stand in the place of Rabbi Chemelwitz and the Oldest Living Bolshevik and offer the audience the possibility of a new vision.*
>
> *If the Rabbi and the Bolshevik constructed the audience as Jewish and communist, in* his *direct address Prior queers us. "You are fabulous creatures" is not a sop to a crowd that needs to be congratulated for sitting through a seven-hour epic drama. [...] Rather, Prior's closing lines, as reproving and hortatory as the Rabbi's and the Bolshevik's, include us in order to challenge us. Queers "will be citizens," he declares, without giving up their queerness, just as Jews in France demand citizenship without assimilation.*[115]

Kushner cultivates a sense of public empathy through his ability to cast his audience as queer, an important foil to the theme of inaction and apathy from the general public. The challenge which Prior puts forth to the audience of queer people taking their rightful place not only as full humans but as full, uncompromising citizens, is a reality that can only exist in the aftermath of a major cultural shift. By ending his play with a direct address to the viewer, Kushner reminds each night's audience that they are not exempt from the pursuit of this progress. Standing idly by the blood and mass suffering of their neighbors is simply not a sustainable strategy moving forward. In fact, it never was. The marginalized groups must

[115] Ibid 131-132.

continue their communal interdependence, but the general public, whether they are gay or Jewish themselves, also have a role to play as the new millennium approaches.

Conclusion

Earlier this year, author Alexander Chee published an essay in the New York Times comparing his experience living through the early AIDS crisis to our nation's current handling of the Coronavirus pandemic. Chee recalls conversations with other AIDS activists regarding this parallel:

> *This virus is not that virus, some of my fellow AIDS activist veterans wrote in those first weeks, trying to make room for each virus to have its own identity and history. Absolutely, I agreed, even though I kept feeling the undertow. This virus is not that virus. But this country is still that country.*[116]

Chee notes that while the circumstances surrounding the two viruses are different, the dark forces of our country that allowed AIDS to spread are the same dark forces alive and well today. He cites the experience of having "a president confronting an epidemic with ideology and not science; Anthony Fauci on my television screen [a figure who went from an antagonistic relationship with Larry Kramer, to a close collaboration and friendship]; conservatives scapegoating Asians the way they once did gay people…"[117] While I did not live through the earliest years of the AIDS crisis, I resonate with Chee's comparison, if only based on my experience of studying these plays during this current pandemic. During the earliest days of the Coronavirus, I found myself in the research phase of this thesis, poring over texts rooted in the darkness of the early 1980s. I was struck by the experience of filling

[116] Alexander Chee, "In This Pandemic, Personal Echoes of the AIDS Crisis," *New York Times*, Published June 18, 2020, Updated June 19, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/us/coronavirus-aids-epidemic-lessons.html.
[117] Ibid.

my days reading accounts of people dying slow, painful deaths due to an emerging virus in a context of misinformation and fear. It all felt eerily fitting to the contemporary circumstances unfolding before my eyes. I felt the anxiety of these fictional characters accompany me throughout my days, as I wondered whether it was safe to touch a door handle or to ride in an elevator.

The process of writing this thesis also overlapped with a nationwide awakening around racial justice on a scale not seen since the civil rights movements of the 1960s. The public discourse of summer 2020 focused heavily on white supremacy and white nationalism, bringing renewed attention within the Jewish community to the current manifestations of Nazism and to our responsibilities based on our history of oppression. Again, my research seemed intricately connected to the current day's news reports and the cries of protest filling the streets. I raise this not simply to highlight the relevance of my work but to emphasize the personal nature of this process. As a gay Jew composing this thesis in 2020-2021, I was unable to extract my personal self and experiences from the conversation. The identities in question are not theoretical in nature but part of my daily life. This reality combined with the trauma of the past year was emotionally and spiritually exhausting, but also provided a level of deep resonance as I found glimmers of myself in the words of Fierstein, Kramer, Kushner, and Finn.

Renowned theater director Anne Bogart wrote that "inside every good play lives a question. A great play asks big questions that endure through time. We enact plays in order to remember relevant questions; we remember these questions in our bodies and the perceptions

take place in real time and space."[118] By these criteria, the four works which comprised the focus of this thesis are certainly great plays. All four address so many of the "big questions" our communities are asking today, especially related to identity and intersectionality: How can I understand who I am in relation to the other? How do the different components of my identity feed each other and how do they conflict?

Within the queer subsection of the Jewish world, our questions cut even deeper: What is inherently "queer" about being Jewish in America? What about the Jewish historical experience particularly resonates with the queer experience? How can theater help us, as Shakespeare wrote, "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature"[119] and better understand previously unconsidered elements of queer, Jewish identity? While these four plays cannot speak to the multifaceted, variegated totality of gay, Jewish experience (nor do they purport to do so), the narrow focus on this specific, pressurized moment in history illuminates core truths of this unique identity. Through the fictional lives of their characters, these playwrights were able to shed light on the ways in which a failure to meet expectations of masculinity, or sometimes an insistence on performing masculinity outside the confines of those expectations, yields a unique form of alienation and discrimination for gay, Jewish men.

Using AIDS as a case study, these plays helped their audiences, and future readers, navigate the intersections of homophobia and antisemitism, revealing the connections between external discrimination and internal self-hatred, illuminating the necessity for

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[118] Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 21.

[119] William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark,* Act 3, Scene 2, MIT Shakespeare Database, http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/hamlet.3.2.html.

interdependence and chosen family as a survival mechanism. Through these plays, America was invited to explore the role of struggle in gay, Jewish lives, marking our intersectional community as the paradigmatic example of those who must wrestle to survive. For those of us who identify as LGBT Jews, these playwrights help integrate the two identities, by elevating the queer nature of the Jewish experience and rendering queer Americans as surrogate Jews. The result is theater that not only elucidates complex identity questions but also has the power to make us feel seen in a world that ostensibly wishes we would remain invisible.

Yet, while these texts remain undeniably in conversation with contemporary society, they are very much a product of their time, unable to speak directly to the radical reimagining of gender and sexuality that has emerged in the 21st century. Fluidity seems to be the central tenet of identity in a way that might have perplexed the cisgender gay male playwrights of the 1980s. Drag performance is no longer an underground subculture but a multi-million-dollar industry.[120] Heterosexual, cisgender men pose on the cover of Vogue magazine in dresses.[121] Within progressive Jewish spaces, LGBT inclusion is de rigueur, while even centrist and more traditional communities are beginning to address the elephant in the room, opening conversations that would have only occurred secretly during the time period of these plays. The paradox, however, lies in these two dueling truths: the progress of the past decades has been unprecedented and remarkable while at the same time, the reactionary forces of hatred and persecution continue to be empowered and legitimized by political

[120] In 2021, the wildly successful television show, RuPaul's Drag Race premiered its 13th season on network television for the first time. The show has also spawned multiple spin-off series, including international varieties.
[121] Hamish Bowles, "Playtime with Harry Styles," *Vogue,* November 13, 2020, https://www.vogue.com/article/harry-styles-cover-december-2020.

forces following the tradition of the nefarious Roy Cohn, lawyer first to Joseph McCarthy, and then to Donald J Trump.

Twenty years ago, in his introduction to a new edition of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart,* Tony Kushner reminded us that "the revolution isn't over and liberation has not yet arrived, but looking ahead to the next step after the triumph of our efforts cannot be considered premature. It is, rather, essential – for without a forward vision, how are we to progress?"[122] Kushner wrote this text before the repeal of the "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy in the United States military, before the Supreme Court made marriage equality the law of the land and before that body later determined that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited employment discrimination against LGBT people. Yet, he also wrote those words prior to an astronomic surge in antisemitic attacks in the United States, including the Tree of Life synagogue shooting, the worst attack on Jews in American history. The decades that have followed these plays has been an ebb and flow of social advancement and painful regression. Needless to say, what may lie yet ahead for LGBT Jews is only a matter of conjecture. Nevertheless, the relatability of these plays to contemporary queer, Jewish audiences means that the cultural and societal forces that weighed heavily on Ned, Louis, Marvin, and Arnold are alive and well today.

The generation that comprises the focus of these plays has dramatically dwindled. I often wonder what remarkable achievements in the arts, sciences, and social justice we could have experienced had we not been robbed of their presence. Even more so, I imagine how powerful it might be to have these elders in our lives, to impart their wisdom on those of us

[122] Kushner, Introduction to *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me,* xxii.

who have felt their absence most strikingly. I imagine what might have been if this generation had the opportunity to grow into old age, finally reaching an appropriate end, like our patriarch Jacob coming to rest after a lifetime of wrestling, finally blessing his descendants that they might carry his torch into the next generation. After all, when Jacob lay on his death bed and blessed his grandchildren, Ephraim and Manasseh, he included the following phrase: וְיִקָּרֵא בָהֶם שְׁמִי, or "let my name be called in them."[123] Only through his descendants could his name live eternally. As a 21st century gay Jew, I see myself as a descendent of the members of our lost generation, carrying their names within me as I walk down the path they forged toward an uncertain future.

We do not know what lies ahead. We do not know whether the coming years will follow the trend of increased visibility and acceptance or the trend of increased persecution and division. In this world of uncertainty, I am able to offer no solutions, only a directive from the prophet Prior Walter:

> *We can't just stop. We're not rocks – progress, migration, motion is…modernity. It's* animate*, it's what living things do. We desire. Even if all we desire is stillness, it's still desire* for. *Even if we go faster than we should. We can't* wait….[124]

We cannot wait to see what the coming centuries have in store. We who occupy the space at the nexus of queerness and Judaism have no choice but to move forward. We have been taught, "וּבָחַרְתָּ בַּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה אַתָּה וְזַרְעֶךָ – Choose life so that you and your descendants may

[123] Genesis 48:16.
[124] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 263-264.

live."[125] Not only for ourselves but for the generations of gay Jews who will follow. May we all be blessed with more life. The great work begins.

[125] Deuteronomy 30:19.

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Pesach Haggadah, Maggid