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Twice blessed

Twice Blessed sounds a cry of hope, the prospect of integrating homosexuality and Jewishness into one intact identity

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian, Gay and Jewish. Edited by Christie Balka and Andy Rose. Beacon Press: Boston, 1989. 305 pages. \$24.95.

Twice Blessed, an anthology of essays, describes the half-full version of a glass gay men and lesbians could interpret in very different terms — twice shunned, twice urged to assimilate, twice rendered invisible.

In this book, the glass is not only half-full, but the level of sweet sustenance is rising. The 23 essays collected here come primarily from lesbians and gay men who have made peace with their dual identities, who strive toward a wholeness that blends their sexuality and their Jewishness.

Books

Although the voices differ, they sound a common call — for recognition of the parallels between being Jewish and being gay, for work to eradicate bigotry, for lives lived with integrity.

One contributor quotes from a letter she wrote to both her own and her partners' parents:

"As you all know, hiding is very unhealthy for the soul...We never stop 'coming out' as Jews every time we speak up and refuse to disappear. As Jews we all know how important it is to have a voice, and to be openly visible. And when you are gay in a heterosexual society, it's the same: you never stop 'coming out.'"

Other contributors, describing the painful and joyous steps they took to assert both their gay and Jewish identities, echo that conclusion. In some places, that echo becomes a redundant call; most of the contributors seem to be of the baby-boom generation and live in Los Angeles, San Francisco or the corridor between Boston and Washington, D.C.

The lack of distinct midwestern or southern voices is an important gap, because the experience of growing up Jewish and gay in Topeka surely differs from that in Brooklyn. It may be that residing in the more tolerant urban communities of American's two coasts makes it possible to live an openly gay and fully Jewish life; if that's so, the

editors should have discussed the issue in their introduction. Otherwise, the absence of geographic diversity simply makes the book seem narrow.

In other ways, though, *Twice Blessed* broadens the discussion of homosexuality and Jewish identity. Books such as *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* and *The Tribe of Dina* have powerfully documented the experience of Jewish lesbians, but this book presents gay male and lesbian perspectives side-by-side. That format reinforces the similarities between male and female contributors as Jews while highlighting the sexism that continues to make their experiences different.

The personal essays that comprise two of the book's sections — "Naming Ourselves" and "Honoring Our Relationships" — do include a range of voices. Adina Abramowitz talks of her education in a Washington, D.C. yeshiva, an Orthodox Hebrew day school. Alan D. Zamochnick, who has cerebral palsy and a severe hearing impairment, describes his struggles with depression and Valium addiction as well as his experience as a gay Jew. Felice Yeskel, who grew up in a working-class home, outlines her fight against stereotypes that paint all Jews as affluent.

One of the most moving pieces is an oral history of Gerry Faier, an 80-year-old lesbian who is active with Senior Action in a Gay Environment in New York.

Many of these essays are "coming out" stories and will strike familiar chords with gay and lesbian readers, no matter what their religious or ethnic background.

Others capture the changing edge of gay and lesbian experience, discussing choices about partnership, ongoing family relationships and parenting. Two men describe their commitment ceremony; a woman details the day-to-day frustrations of being a Jewish lesbian mother, making decisions about her sons' circumcision and searching for a Jewish preschool that believes "family" can be something other than a mother, father and children.

These personal accounts are one part of *Twice Blessed*. Other essays treat such subjects such as the Leviticus passage describing male homosexual acts as "an abomination," the dearth of gay role models in Jewish history and new liturgy that includes the perspectives of gay and lesbian Jews.

These essays, both informative and searching, help connect the book with threads of politics and theory, making it larger than

the individual stories.

An essay by Rebecca T. Alpert, a Reconstructionist rabbi, examines three ways of approaching the Leviticus text — interpretation based on the varying meanings of the words, criticism that questions Biblical norms in today's context and emotional response.

"...We get angry — at the power these words have had over our lives, at the pain we have experienced in no small part because of these words," she writes. "Then, if we can, we grow beyond the rage. We begin to see these words as tools with which to educate people about the deep-rooted history of lesbian and gay oppression."

Another essay suggests re-reading Jewish historical sources, including the Bible, with eyes open for a gay and lesbian subtext. And one of the most provocative pieces, "Toward a New Theology of Sexuality," criticizes Jewish teaching for defining sexuality in a narrow and misogynist way, as a force requiring the submission of women.

The author of this piece, Judith Plaskow, suggest that sexuality is part of a broader human dynamic that includes our connections to people and the world, our craving to live passionately and fully. Sexuality defined in this manner becomes a potent political force, she writes: "There is no question that the empowerment that comes from owning the erotic in our lives can disturb community and undermine familiar structures."

Overall, *Twice Blessed* sounds a cry of hope, the prospect of integrating homosexuality and Jewishness into one intact identity. The contributors were selected, for the most part, because their lives bear testament to that wholeness.

A few essays demonstrate that the struggle continues, bitterly, for some. Eric Rofes describes the anti-Semitism that goes unchallenged in his west-coast gay community, where he is criticized as a "typical pushy New York Jew" and thoughtlessly named to manage finances for an event because "Jews know how to handle these things."

A piece by a closeted lesbian rabbi who uses the pseudonym, "La Escondida," the hidden one, demonstrates the homophobia that lingers in her community and within her own psyche.

"I often fear that I will not be given a chance...to simply work with Jews if I come out. I fear that I will become marginal, ostracized from the general community of Jews and confined to working only with lesbian and gay Jews," she writes.

Despite the experience of many contributors, who not only survive but thrive as "twice blessed," both Jewish and gay, this piece in particular points to the need for more education, struggle and change. Perhaps this anthology, when read by Jews and non-Jews, lesbians, gay men and heterosexuals, will help pave that slow path. ▼



Judy Carnahan



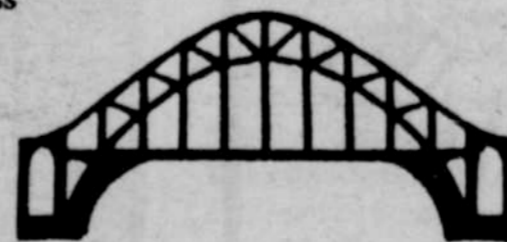
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