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Religion and Homosexuality as National Themes in Angels in America

Tony Kushner's two-part play, *Angels in America*, claims to be "a gay fantasia on national themes" (Kushner). The intertwining stories center around the emergence of the AIDS virus in the late 1980's, and manages to give faces and lives to some of the countless people who were victims of what is considered by many to be a plague. But while the AIDS virus is at the center of attention in *Angels*, Kushner also highlights the theme of religion in America in increasingly subversive ways. Through multi-faceted characters, and their complicated relationships, Kushner tells the story of Judaism and Mormonism individually as national themes in a way that impacts just as forcefully as the more centered gay narrative. Finally, he crosses paths, and the three themes - Mormonism, Judaism, and homosexuality - begin to tell the same narrative of painful otherness, journey, and redemption in the modern American landscape.

Angels has three leading characters that identify as Mormon. Joe is a Mormon man suppressing his sexuality, while his wife Harper deals with the trauma of anxiety and addiction. Finally, Joe's mother Hannah picks up her life in Salt Lake City, Utah, and moves to New York City to take care of her son. But, strangely enough, the story of Mormonism as an American theme begins with Prior, the non-religious protagonist suffering from AIDS. Prior outwardly has nothing to do with Mormonism, and only seems to know enough about the faith to know that Mormons are stigmatized in mainstream American culture, gawking at his lover Joe and sputtering that he "can't be a

Mormon. You're a lawyer! A serious lawyer" (Perestroika 67). It's through two important qualities that Prior connects to Mormonism, the first being his self-identification as a "WASP" (Millenium 20), and the second being his position as a prophet.

Prior's journey to becoming an unlikely messenger for God mirrors with remarkable similarity that of Joseph Smith Jr., the prophet who received the message from God in the early 1800's that prompted the start of Mormonism. Joseph Smith Jr. was the descendant of British immigrants to the New World and was what we today would give the WASP title: White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Like Joseph Smith, Prior is a product of Yankee New England (Hutchinson-Jones 7). Both men are subject to the idea that the white community seems to lack a sense of culture, but the text rejects this idea. Instead, Kushner makes Prior a sort of blank slate, able to absorb the teachings from all of the religious people in his life, and from the Angel. With no basis for religious knowledge, Prior is able to roll with the punches when he takes on the role of prophet. If Prior's story is also Smith's, Angels can work as an inclusion of Mormonism as an integral part of American culture.

Perhaps a little more obvious is the Angel herself. Those with a fair knowledge of Mormonism can easily recognize that, despite the tidbits of Jewish Old Testament in her actions and speech, the Angel that visits Prior is modeled after the Angel Moroni. The trajectory is almost identical. "Like the Angel Moroni, [this angel] comes to Prior at night in his bed, announces a great work he is to carry out, and tells him of the book to which she will lead him" (Hutchinson-Jones 12). Like the story of Mormonism, this book is buried underground, one under a nearby hill and the other "under the tiles under <https://assignbuster.com/we-will-be-citizens-religion-and-homosexuality-as-national-themes-in-angels-in-america/>

the sink” (Perestroika 44). Prior also gets ahold of a pair of glasses with rocks for lenses, another nod to Mormonism, as Joseph Smith tended to go treasure hunting using the same “ peep stones”, rocks with holes in the middle. It’s Prior’s witty remarks, and Kushner’s dark humor, but the history owes a debt to Mormonism, and it is through imagery from the Mormon holy book that this American story unwinds.

Additionally, the angel’s presence and power, and also that of God, are intrinsically linked with sexuality in a way that ties together Mormonism and the homosexual identity in even more complicated ways. This stems from the way Mormons see their relationship to God. Mormons believe in a state of being called ‘ godhood’, which explains that God was once a man, and through living a physical life, was later exalted to a deity-like state. It also indicates that, with the right choices, the Mormon people will eventually embody god-like forms as well. God is the same type of being as man, only older and more powerful. Thus, in a Mormon cosmos, spiritual beings would continue to possess and exert sexuality, like the angels Prior knows “ copulate ceaselessly” (Perestroika 49). Thus, starkly unlike the views of Judaism or Christianity, “ it has always been a fundamental tenant of Mormonism that the sexual power is divine, eternal and exalting” (Austin 32). The views of Mormonism on corporeality and the lifestyle of the celestial beings in Angels line up. This important parallel, the existence of guiltless, shameless, heaven-sanctioned non-procreative sex, puts Mormonism and the homosexual community eye-to-eye. And, like the early Greco-Roman understanding of homosocial and homoerotic bonds as being those that go on to create empires, nations and laws rather than offspring, Mormonism

also embraces non-procreative sex as a part of the journey into something bigger than time and physical bodies. Together, these two otherwise unrelated topics conjoin under the umbrella of the American narrative.

Whereas Mormonism is a religion that is wholly American from start to finish, Judaism fits in with the narrative of the American lifestyle a little less cleanly. Judaism pre-exists America by a millennium, and claims its original home as the Middle East. And of course, the United States, and even more so the theoretical idea of 'America' and all its connotations, are said to be the land of the free, which is to say secular. And yet, Kushner opens up his entire play with a very Jewish scene during the funeral of Louis's grandmother, Sarah Ironson. Jyl Lynn Felman, writer for Jewish magazine Tikkun, argues that this opening scene not only establishes Judaism as a critical American narrative in *Angels*, but also seeks to intertwine the struggles of American Judaism with homosexual community and the AIDS epidemic.

This very first, quintessentially Jewish moment starts with Rabbi Chemelwitz openly admitting he doesn't know Sarah Ironson personally, and reading from a sheet of family members, commenting on the non-Jewish names. But then he goes into a monologue explaining the journey and continual exodus of the Jewish people, and ends by saying the iconic line "in you that journey is" (Kushner 11), referring to the spiritual obligation to continue the Jewish identity in a form of Diaspora that can translate to the secular American life. It's this that prompts Louis to say he has lived near to his grandmother for years, but has never visited her. It's here, in Louis admitting he's abandoned his family out of fear of re-encountering conflicts he wants to put behind him, where worlds collide. "Louis's absence from his family must also be read in <https://assignbuster.com/we-will-be-citizens-religion-and-homosexuality-as-national-themes-in-angels-in-america/>

the context of the historical abandonment of an entire people and the shame that that abandonment produced" (2), Felman writes. " Louis has internalized the family shame and projects this shame onto his grandmother...This singular act of abandonment of an immigrant grandmother, by a self-loathing Jew, forms the controlling metaphor upon which Kushner seeks to negotiate the question of morality in human relations in the age of AIDS" (2). Readers know this moment in *Angels* is not long before Louis also abandons his partner out of fear of his disease, and Kushner is aware of the parallel of the two. Louis's sense of failure is twofold as the child of a complex America. As a non-practicing Jew living in a secular world, he is outside the constructs of traditional Judaism, just like he is outside the construct of heteronormativity as openly being homosexual. In both senses, Louis feels inadequate and unable to cope with the demands. He cannot carry the weight of his grandmother's rich but dying history, and he cannot carry the burden of the visceral physical reality of AIDS.

While this is doubly frightening for Louis, it also illuminates the larger similarities between Judaism and homosexuality, specifically the AIDS epidemic for the reader. Here Diaspora acts like the AIDS virus, creating a diluted community both desperate to retain their culture and hyper-aware of impending death. When the people who carry your culture and your community die off, and the next generation is not ready or willing to reclaim it out of fear, what happens to a community? Enter the play's fictionalized Ethel Rosenberg, the semi-tangible ghost of the woman put to death for espionage in 1953. She embodies the rejected Jewish elder, just as Sarah Ironson did, betrayed by everyone around her, including in this case Roy

Cohn, now also dying of AIDS. But unlike Sarah Ironson, Ethel is able to shift the balance of power. Through keeping Cohn alive long enough to see himself be disbarred, she gains retribution for the abandonment that the modern Jewish community feels (Felman 3) This alone would have made the arc of Roy Cohn and the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg solely about exacting vengeance for a history of Jewish abandonment in a modern world.

However, the arc is tied back in to the gay community through the single meeting of Ethel, the betrayed Jewish mother, and Louis, the abandoning Jewish son, during the moment of the Kaddish. In an intensely strange, and moving moment, Ethel Rosenberg stands and leads Louis through the Kaddish over Roy Cohn's dead body. For something so goofy - Louis has a Kleenex on his head for a yarmulke and Ethel leads him in finishing the prayer with "you sonofabitch" (Perestroika 126) - it is also a moment of forgiveness for everyone involved. Everyone in the hospital room at this moment has cultural baggage, and are both victims and perpetrators of the morality, or lack thereof, which permeates their culture. Roy Cohn, with his whirlwind of racism, homophobia and total abandonment of his Jewish heritage, has injured Ethel, Louis, and Belize alike, and their respective communities. But even he, in his final moments, is shown to be helpless, pitiful, and worth some semblance of sympathy. Here they are two halves of a whole, with Louis young and unable to find the correct way to absolve and be absolved of guilt and anger and Ethel, dead already for half a century, being the only one who has the vocabulary of forgiveness (Felman 3).

Through watching his fall from fame, and then finally leading Louis through the Kaddish, Ethel can represent the Jewish community in forgiving Roy, and

the type of person Roy represents. Through demanding prayer, and insisting, “ a Queen can forgive her vanquished foe” (Perestroika 124), and by stealing the rest of his AZT, Belize and Louis can find this same catharsis and forgiveness on behalf of the gay community. So, as the first Kaddish, for Sarah Ironson, seeks to mourn the abandonment plaguing the two communities, the second Kaddish seeks to identify the only thing that can repair it: forgiveness.

Clearly Kushner was vigilant when writing *Angels in America* to link Mormonism to the gay community and Judaism to the gay community in specific, enriching ways that didn't take away the unique qualities of either religion. But the similarities in culture and history become most unmistakable when the text joins all three communities together as one, hurtling forward into an unknown American future. In the most crucial ways that Mormonism and Judaism connect to each other, they connect as well to the larger theme of gay community in *Angels*. This narrative begins with the identity of the Other. Otherness as an American theme connects all three solely on the similarity that they are not accepted by those around them, a feeling that produces so much isolation and suffering that it becomes an identity of its own. All three communities, Mormon, Jewish and gay, acquire their Otherness on a basic level from deviation from what is considered the “ normal” American person. White, Christian and heterosexual are the attributes applied to the ideal American. Prior has the White Christian part down, but misses the boat on heterosexual, while Joe is missing the Christian bit even if he can fake it until he makes it on the heterosexuality front, and Louis is not Christian or heterosexual, and as a Jewish man his whiteness is

disputable. Together, Mormons, Jewish people and homosexuals take on roles of Others that make them immediately targetable for discrimination, slander, judgment, and hatred.

The constant scapegoat, pariahs and untouchables, Others have to constantly grapple for a space and identity in a hostile environment. One startlingly specific way in which all three of these communities experience bias as Others is through a condemnation of sexuality. For the homosexual community, this is explicit and unveiled. In a country so immersed in both Christian values and compulsory heterosexuality, the presence of non-procreative sexual intimacy as the practice of a community practically ensures abuse against that community. As we've read in our curriculum this semester, and as we continue to see in our every day lives, this kind of abuse ranges from job discrimination, to rape, to denial of basic legal rights, like the right to marriage, to explosive verbal abuse, like Roy Cohn's series of expletives at Belize in Perestroika. Historically, murder as a hate crime was and is also a very real possibility for many gay communities. All based on sexuality considered to be "inverted" or "backwards" due to the presence of a "right" way, i. e. heterosexuality. It's this assumption, that homosexuality is the wrong or opposite way to be conducting intimacy, that helped produce the stereotype that the gay community was one of sexual predation and excess. So, when the AIDS epidemic arrived in the 80's, the exact time period in which *Angels in America* is set, the pre-existing stereotype was the perfect excuse for blame. The gay community immediately became the cause, face and reason for AIDS. The gay community was socially shunned and shamed, in addition to also being

ravaged simultaneously by a disease that killed one in three at the time. Cures and treatments lagged behind because government officials refused to recognize the existence of a disease that was killing so rapidly and in such great numbers. Because of a sexual preference that was contrary to the American assumption of goodness, the gay community was essentially left for dead. It's no surprise then, that Roy Cohn's definition of the homosexual is a man or community that lacks power.

The stories of the Jewish community and Mormon community have not always been so different, despite having been separate temporally. For Mormons, a similar stigma comes largely from polygamy. Though the doctrine of polygamy has been long banished from Mormon teachings, it remains the trait about Mormonism that sticks the best, and to many seems to imply the same sort of illicit penchant for excess, or the inclination to take advantage of others sexually. Propaganda in the early twentieth century portrayed Mormons as laviscious, and anti-Mormon publications "abound with images, both frightening and humorously demeaning, of wicked old Mormon polygamists with captive harems of innocent young women" (Hutchinson-Jones 9). Frequently facing expulsion from the lands where they tried to settle, this sort of sexual slander was one of the points of contention.

The Jewish story of oppression includes these sentiments as well. In arriving in America from oppression and genocide abroad, the Jewish community only faced more discrimination as an Other group in America. Between 1880 and 1920, anti-Semitism entered the American arena on a massive scale, and the Jewish pervert became a trope ubiquitous enough to cause Jewish people to be banned from resorts and hotels (Freedman 93). Ivy League schools began <https://assignbuster.com/we-will-be-citizens-religion-and-homosexuality-as-national-themes-in-angels-in-america/>

to put quotas on the number of Jewish students they would accept, and mainstream American anti-Semitism was directly responsible for the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, which prevented the movement of the Jewish community and other Eastern European populations (Freedman 93). Publications made it seem as if America's sexual purity had been violated for the first time by the immorality of the Jewish population, credited to "those certain hideous and abhorrent forms of vice, which have their origin in countries of the East, and which in recent years have sprung into existence in this country, have been taught to the abandoned creatures who practice them, and fostered, elaborated, and encouraged by the lecherous Jew!" (Selzer 49). They were also credited inaccurately with heading white prostitution in America, largely by selling their own daughters (Freedman 93). It appears that a common method of ostracizing a community that doesn't fit the guidelines of American traits is to accuse them of abnormal lust. Not surprising, since the prudish American culture counts sexuality as one of its biggest taboos.

As an offshoot, or perhaps because they are always ostracized as the Others, all three communities have in common travel as a deeply-held impulse as well. This harkens back again to the first Kaddish of Rabbi Chemelwitz, but also some of the musings of Harper and the Mormon Mother puppet.

Mormons, Jewish people, and the gay community have all felt the push, often driven by this aforementioned Otherness, to travel to a chosen location where things will be better. For the Jewish community, exiled for hundreds of years, a spreading and diluting occurred while they traveled the world looking for asylum. This process, according to scholar Ranen Omer-Sherman,

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“ is a conversional one that involves a movement of dis- and relocation” (91). What this means is that, as community breaks and re-forms and transforms with distance, Judaism evolves and mutates with the flexibility that only a people in exile could perform. Rabbi Chemelwitz implies this when he insists, “ you do not live in America. No such place exists. Your clay is the clay of some Litvak shtetl, your air the air of the steppes” (Millenium 10). Judaism branches out and evolves, while keeping within them the spirit of their culture. Similarly, the story of Mormonism is relational to travel, despite being a wholly American religion. Rejected from state after state, Mormons dreamed of Deseret, the name of the Mormon holy land, a revival of Zion in Utah before it was a United States territory (Hutchinson-Jones 11). A radical, home-grown religion that began from grassroots, Mormonism was forced to wander across the country to do something as simple as live they life they felt they were being called to lead, a sentiment that is also readily understandable in a Jewish or homosexual context. For the gay community, the desired location was not Zion or Utah, but the urban centers. Ultra-conservative locations in rural America produced a migration of gay individuals that mirrored that of Mormons and Jews to cities, where they desperately searched for sanctity. There was the hope of community, acceptance and understanding. In some cases this was found, but in all three the final destination was not the end of the trials, but rather only another set of difficulties in another location.

But, as Hutchinson-Jones points out, there is a crucial third commonality between the three communities, in the form of hope. “ Hope for the future, tinged with millennial expectation, is an important part of America’s national

identity" (10) she writes, referring to the infallible hope of all three. Angels is deeply invested in the new millennium, with fear, excitement, and especially for hope. Whether it is the second coming of the Lord, the resolution of the heated Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or just a more accepting world, all three communities are eager with hope for the coming years and the arrival of the second millennium. All three communities are fighting for respect, having "struggled with powers that seemed too great to overcome, and, through the strength of their convictions, received the divine intervention that they sought" (Austin 34). Perhaps this is why Prior, in the end of the play, is shown holding a cane and limping, the disability ostensibly the result of his AIDS. The strategic injury, one injured leg causing a limp, harkens back to both Mormon prophet Joseph Smith and the Jewish prophet Jacob, who both physically wrestled with angels in order to get what they wanted (Austin 34), and came away with both a permanent limp, and the blessing they had desired. Prior too demands his blessing, and, supporting himself with his cane, tells the audience "we will be citizens. The time has come" (Perestroika, 148). In these final moments, Prior speaks for the Mormon community, the Jewish community and the gay community in a final assertion of their brotherhood. Otherness is arbitrary. Acceptance is mandatory; community is life giving, even if the melting pot won't melt. Jewish, Mormon, or gay, the American story is all these things and more.

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