

Religion and Experience:

The Social Identities of a Gay New York Jew on the Iberian Peninsula

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While sex has often been compared to “a religious experience,” I almost never ask a “trick” his religious background. So how do I know that we’re referring to the same numinous moment? If we can believe in different notions of divinity, can one just assume that our conceptions of orgasm converge? (It’s difficult enough, in the act of sex itself, to manage the physical trick of concurrent orgasms, let alone worrying about a simultaneous spiritual convergence!)

For the past three years, I’ve been living in Madrid, Spain, and I still don’t ask the men I meet for sex about their religious background. But I don’t really need to; there is such a pervasive normative Catholicism here that to do so would belie the obvious.

My being Jewish is also patently obvious—at least the moment we get undressed and it’s observed that I’m circumcised. Unlike in the United States, where circumcision is a matter of course for reasons of hygiene regardless of religion, in Spain it’s a practice that only occurs in extreme medical cases—if the foreskin is so long, for instance, that it doesn’t fully pull off the glans when the penis is erect. Most Spaniards, therefore, assume a religious importance to circumcision, perhaps unable to imagine such a painful procedure being self-imposed by a people without the ineluctable justification of a divine mandate. (Thus far, no one has ever asked simply if I’m American.)

More often than not, we don’t interrupt the foreplay for theological discussion, but sometimes after sex we’ll start chatting before heading for a shower and the question will arise. And I will try to explain my history as a Diaspora Jew to men who grew up in



a country where being Jewish was only officially pardoned by the King less than a decade ago, half a millennium after the Inquisition and the Expulsion.

The question I am most frequently asked is if I am an observant Jew. This question makes me defensive every time, for various reasons. First of all is the implied taint of belief, which in the scientifically-ruled world of Western culture is seriously looked down upon.

For my generation of twenty somethings, religion is for the most part looked on for its secular implications of family gatherings and an excuse for time-off from studies or work. We're by and large skeptical when it comes to the idea of miracles or anything which violate the laws of physics as we currently understand them; Science Fiction and the paranormal may be popular on television or in the movies, but in real life we take little on faith and instead demand measurable proof before being convinced of something being more than just fancy special effects. And if science should manage to recreate what we had been told were acts of god, well, that just goes to prove that there is a perfectly rational and plausible explanation for these miracles that has nothing to do with faith or belief. Like we had known all along.

While I am considered a homosexual based on the acts that I perform with other men, and if I were to change my sexual behavior to perform such acts with women instead my identity as perceived by others would also change, no distinction is made between my inescapable cultural identity as a Jew, in that I was born to Jewish parents, and a performative identity as a Jew, which is to say, the acts of prayer and ritual that correspond with Jewish belief. To be Jewish in Spain is automatically equated with being Orthodox and frum, and it is a long convoluted discussion to begin splitting hairs about everything possibly Jewish from Abraham to (post-)Zionism. Additionally, the question of whether I am an observant Jew unnerves me each time because I am not. Ironically, my own non-belief makes me feel inadequate, as if I am, in a way, failing my religion. I am serving as a representative example of Judaism, like an emissary sent into hostile territory—not to proselytize, necessarily, but with a social obligation, perhaps, to be on my best behavior.

It is similar to how I often feel as a gay man when faced with heterosexual ignorance and prejudices. Can I summon the patience to explain why their preconceived notions about me are wrong? In these situations I feel a sort of guilt on behalf of all of homosexuality in its many diverse and deviant behaviors—whether or not I practice them myself—and feel responsible to portray us all in a good light.

Which is, of course, ridiculous, but that's the gut feeling I have. I may joke that this guilt is a preconditioned response from being Jewish as well as gay, but the truth is



that it stems from a sense of blameless innocence in the face of the double whammy of cultural anti-semitism and homophobia. I have this naive belief that simply by my existence as a gay Jew I cannot provoke such hatred, even when I'm faced with it. I also have the hopefully less-naive belief that by my good example I can change people's minds and misconceptions about my people(s). Ironically, as a gay man I don't think of myself as either assimilationist or apologist. I actively try to promote an acceptance of the myriad differences, whatever they may be, both within homosocial circles and to the pervasively heterosexual culture at large. I often try to include cultural space in my queer anthologies and books for radical acts and thinking.

But I have realized, living in Spain, that as a Jew I am more of a coward, and don't like to find myself alone and out on a limb. And not

simply because unrest in the middle east has heightened awareness in general of aggression and violence toward Jews. I think my unease stems mostly from not having a Jewish community here. With regards to homosexual concerns, I know there are many other men and women fighting for the same things I am, all over the world and in all languages, even when I seem to be a lone voice shouting out into the darkness. I am one voice shouting into a darkness that many other voices are shouting into. There are certainly lots of homosexuals here in Spain, to that I can attest. Whereas, in all my travels across this country during the past two years, I'd be hard pressed to come up with a minyan of Spanish Jews, irrespective of their gender. Which makes me very aware of being alone, of being without the safety blanket of having a community at one's back—even if I never participated very actively in its rituals and beliefs. Only once it was gone did I realize what a comfort its subliminal presence was.

Feeling nervously alone, therefore, every time a Spaniard asks me whether or not I am an observant Jew, I find myself telling a small white lie to claim a community and bridge the not-consciously-belligerent gap that this question engenders between my perceived being and his Catholic upbringing. I say that we have a Sephardic branch in the family, and suddenly he feels he understands what a moment ago seemed so alien to him. His history now overlaps with mine. In fact, more often than not, he will say he has some converso blood as well and point out one of his gazillion surnames, and we will feel almost familiar in that Spanish way of embracing one wholeheartedly on recent acquaintance.

It is quite likely that I do have some Sephardic blood somewhere in my veins, for all the predominantly Ashkenazi surnames in the family. It would explain my generically Mediterranean look—physically I blend in perfectly in Madrid, My Spanish fluency is sufficient that, for bar-room and preliminary chat, many men don't even realize



I'm not a native speaker (if not exactly from Madrid). Which is why my being circumcised so often comes as a surprise.

We do have some Sephardic relatives, the Rose family, whose name was Rosales before emigrating to the States. The only problem is: no one is certain how we're related. We see each other at weddings, brises, bar mitzvahs, and occasional high holiday gatherings, and since we get along with them grandly no one bothers with the details of how we're kin. We think we're related by marriage, although since it was likely a Schimel woman who married a Rosales there wouldn't be any Sephardic blood passing through my heart—at least not from that source. But then again, we might simply have been from the same town and claimed kinship for the purpose of coming to the States. It's never really mattered much to us, and we're happy to call them part of our family.

And there's also some Bartels floating somewhere in the family tree, a Jewish Catalan surname. And probably some others, over the centuries, that we simply don't have records of any longer, or never did because they'd changed their names for safety's sake when they fled Spain or some other country.

So I don't feel all that guilty claiming some Sephardic blood, when it might very well be true, and especially when it goes so far to create a bond between us. (As it should here; after all, "Sephardic" in Hebrew simply means "Spanish.") The idea of having a Sephardic heritage makes me feel less like a stranger in a strange land, and more like my having moved here is a sort of homecoming. Perhaps that is what aliyah feels like for Jews who choose that option.

And while being Jewish is an unknown concept here, equated with religious practice, being Sephardic is quite understood and accepted and even to be praised, because the intervening years (not to mention the Expulsion) have separated the secular achievements of these Jews from the taint of their belief. Jewish cities and centers were often important places of learning and craftsmanship, at the forefront of Medieval Spanish culture.

For all my unease about being a religious stranger here, the ease with which we set aside our accidental natal religious identities in favor of other identities we share has made me reflect on how we define ourselves, both personally and to others. I guess in a heterosexual encounter, interfaith issues have more import because of the risk of children and how to raise them. But as gay adults we can agree to disagree about the nature (or even existence) of God and still get along—even when "tricks" become relationships. Now that gays are more frequently having children, this may become a thornier issue for some homosexual couples than previously. So much of our religious background is unconscious and accepted without being analyzed. I can and often do point out to these



men who ask if I am an observant Jew that they are Catholic. And they demur, saying they were born Catholic but that doesn't really mean anything. What they don't recognize is the pervasive Catholicism of Spanish culture, from things like saying "Jesus" after someone sneezes to celebrating the Saint Day's of one's own name.

For many of us living in the secular world, when it comes time to present ourselves to someone we've just met, our religious identities don't usually leap to mind because they are so subliminal. It's not that these identities aren't important to us, but that we don't perhaps consider or assume that someone we meet is different from us in this regards until proven otherwise.

By contrast, I actively choose to live my life as a gay-identified man, independent of the sexual acts I am (or am not) at the moment performing. As a result, I am very much aware of my "different" sexual identity as I move through the largely-heterosexual world and react to situations accordingly. My sexual identity is constantly under attack by the barrage of heterosexist media and messages in advertising, cinema, television, music, etc. and one of the ways I react is to more strongly affirm my minority identity.

In an ideal world without homophobia or anti-semitism, I like to think our urgent need for identities such as being gay or secularly Jewish would disappear as irrelevant. Whether we can ever arrive at that prejudice-free world, I am not sure, but it is certain that we who claim either of those identities could not do so without changing ourselves as well. Both as Jews and as homosexuals, we define ourselves in relation to others—Jews as the hosen People, queers as "not straight." In both cases, we exist, as we know ourselves now, only in the context of a subculture, and a dynamic of opposition to those who are not us. And those constant confrontations, be they overt or subtle, reinforce our identities.

And yet the primal physicality of sex can drive away social conventions and constrictions. Sex has the power to cut across all of our social identities and divisions; it can transcend language barriers, religious and cultural differences, class distinctions, etc. It reduces us to a state of universal sameness, of being human and desiring. However we might differently describe "a religious experience," sex—at its best—instills in us a belief in numinous moments.

