

Introduction

April 3, 2023 | 12 Nissan 5783

כְּנִגְד אַרְבָּעָה בְּנִיִּים דִּבְרָה תּוֹרָה: אֶחָד חָכָם, וְאֶחָד רָשָׁע, וְאֶחָד תָּם, וְאֶחָד שְׂאִינֹ יוֹדֵעַ לְשֹׂאוֹל.
Concerning four children, the Torah speaks: The Wise one, the Wicked one, the Simple one, and the One who does not know how to ask.

There are many interpretations for this section of the Haggadah, but what stands out to me this year is the defining label that characterizes each child. If they are defined as “wicked” or “wise,” there is little room for multiple identities. The wise one is burdened by expectations of greatness. The wicked one can never be seen through a positive light.

In fact, a close reading of the question each child asks as recorded in the Torah reveals that the children are asking a variation on the same question. Perhaps then, there is really only one child with multi-faceted identities, revealing aspects of being wise, wicked, simple, and even unable to ask at different times. As Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (19th Century, Lithuania and Germany) explains: “Each of us contains all aspects of all four children.” We do a disservice to our children when they are identified through a singular lens, when we cannot recognize their diversity of character. People become stuck when the fullness of their human potential cannot be recognized.

It is through this lens, where we all hold multiple identities, that Maharat proudly presents *Gay Women (Nashim Mesolelot): A Teshuva*, written by Maharat Rosh HaYeshiva, Rabbi Jeffrey Fox. The journey began years ago with a question that was posed: “Can a woman hold multiple identities? Can she be accepted into a traditional *halakhic* system that is core to her identity and proudly identify as gay? Can she be seen as a fully integrated member of the community?”

As a rabbinical school that values our *mesorah* and *halakha*, Rabbi Fox leads us through a deep exploration of Rabbinic and modern sources, compiling, interpreting, and framing the conversation of how our rabbinic sources understood gay women (נשים) in our Tradition. The exploration began in 2019 with a convening in partnership with the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, gathering together Maharat alumnae, academic scholars, rabbis, and

women who were passionate about moving the needle on gay women's place in the Orthodox community. Rabbi Fox taught the texts, presented ideas, listened to feedback, honed his language, and over the next four years, wrote this response. The *teshuva* is meant to open a communal conversation, and it was important to us that we engage with and hear from respondents. We are grateful to Rabbi Zev Farber, Rabbi David Fried, Rachael Fried, Rabbi Yisoscher Katz, Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, and Rabbi Aviva Richman who have already participated in this conversation. In the coming months, we hope more will join.

Special thanks to Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler who shepherded us through the concluding stages of the volume with her brilliant editing and gathered the respondents. To Dr. Gillian Steinberg, who is a master of language. To Sari Steinberg for being an early reader. To the Maharat Board who has supported this project over these many years. To the students, alumnae, faculty, and supporters of Maharat who have been readers and real interlocutors.

And to Rabbi Fox, who wrote this *teshuva* because he could not operate in a world that ignores a large swath of our community; who intuitively understands that people seek to live an integrated life. Finally, to the women who inspired this project. Thank you for your guidance, patience, and leadership in bringing this article to fruition.

At the seder this year, may all questions, each child, and all people be welcomed around the communal table.

כָּל דְּכָפִין יִיטִי וְיִיכַל כָּל דְּצָרִיךְ יִיטִי וְיִפְסֹחַ

All who are hungry, let them come and eat. All who are in need, let them come celebrate Passover with us.

Chag Kasher v'Sameach,

Rabba Sara Hurwitz
President and Co-founder