BODIES IN MOTION: 
PRELIMINARY NOTES ON QUEER THEORY 
AND RABBINIC LITERATURE

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“That which is bent cannot be made straight; that 
which is wanting cannot be numbered.” (Qoh 1:15)

“Consider the work of God; for who can make 
straight what God has made bent?” (Qoh 7:13)

In the beginning of the book of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth laments, “That 
which is bent cannot be made straight” (1:15). Qoheleth presumably 
makes such a statement from a place of utter despair. While he rages 
against the world—the way things are and will always be—my aim 
is to recontextualize his pronouncement within the field of queer 
theory, which works to recreate the world and dares to imagine the 
unpredictable ways the world might be. I seek to accomplish this task 
by bringing this ancient utterance into dialogue with contemporary 
articulations of gender and the body and by applying Qoheleth’s 
words and queer theory to rabbinic constructions of gender and rep-
resentations of the body.¹ I thus translate this verse as follows, “That 
which is queer cannot be fixed.” An admittedly liberal translation, 
it nevertheless playfully negotiates the language of the verse.

The Hebrew root a.v.h., translated above as “queer,” means “to 
be bent,” “to be crooked” or “to pervert/subvert.”² With a similar 
ing, Eve Sedgwick links the word “queer” etymologically to the

¹ Because there are no rabbinic compilations specifically about gender and/or 
the body, this essay, by necessity, draws from various rabbinic documents of differing 
chronological and geographical settings. My goal is not to present a comprehensive 
analysis of gender or the body in rabbinic literature, but to look for some of the 
places that queer theory and the study of rabbinic material might meet, as well as 
to point out where they diverge. My chronological parameters are texts redacted 
between the third and seventh centuries c.e. All translations of ancient texts in this 
essay are my own.

² Marcus Jastrow, A Dictionary of the Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, 
Latin *torquere*, meaning “to twist.” She goes on to point out that “Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*.” Extending this idea of queer as a continuing mo(ve)ment, I have rendered the latter part of the verse (*lo yukhal litkon*) as “cannot be fixed,” in order to indicate that the “queer” cannot be fixed or made static. Writing about the Hebrew root *t.k.n.*, Gilbert Rosenthal points out that in rabbinic literature “the verb assumes many meanings and, in fact, becomes one of the most flexible verbs in the language.” Such linguistic fluidity is at least matched, if not surpassed, by the shifting deployments of the term “queer.” David Halperin explains that queer “describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance,” while for Judith Butler queer “will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively.”

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4 Sedgwick continues with the following comment: “The word ‘queer’ itself means *across*—it comes from the Indo-European root-*twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *thwart*” (*Tendencies*, xii).


7 Annemarie Jagose writes, “As queer is unaligned with any specific identity category, it has the potential to be annexed profitably to any number of discussions” (*Queer Theory: An Introduction* [New York: New York University Press, 1996], 2).
