The visionaries who picked up the pieces of a shattered Judaism two thousand years ago, after the destruction of the second Temple and the crashing of biblical Judaism, were courageous, creative, out-of-the-box-thinking, fringy radicals. Queer, if you will. Not in the sense of sexuality or gender, perhaps, but in what being those very kinds of people usually makes you: courageous, creative, out-of-the-box-thinking, fringy, and radical. And deeply attuned to that still, small voice inside, and confident of the truth it is telling you even when the whole world is telling you something else. These guys called themselves Rabbis. Teachers. They were the architects of a Judaism that would have been virtually unrecognizable to those practicing the Judaism of the Temple era.

Their Judaism, like ours, was crashing. Theirs, in many ways, was no longer physically possible. Ours, in many ways, is no longer morally plausible. They had a new “take” on what it could mean to be a human being, and took a shot at playing it out. Their radically transformed Judaism survived and we are its descendents. In a way, it was easier for them than it is for us. The Judaism they knew was over. They had nothing to lose. No one could pretend that sitting in (the) Temple was “working for them” any more--there was
no more Temple. It’s harder for us. We’ve got a lot to lose. But much of what we are afraid to lose is illusion, the illusion that Judaism today is working for us all even when it’s not working for most of us. And it cannot work for most of us until it understands all of us.

Queer people (along with women, the deaf, the disabled, people of color, among many others) have important—essential—things to say about what life is really like that the Tradition needs to hear. And while the Rabbis may have de-legitimated the God-spoke-to-me kind of prophecy as a source of new Jewish law two millennia ago, they elevated our informed internal ethical impulse to the status of Torah itself, and called it svara.

Those queer Rabbis took their outsider-insights, their sensitivity to those marginalized and oppressed by the Torah itself, their courage to stand up for them and mess with the Tradition to incorporate them--and declared their informed internal ethical impulse an authentic source of God’s will. They deemed it a source of Jewish legal change as authoritative as a verse in the Torah itself--so much so, that a law that they created out of svara has the same status as one that appears verbatim in the Torah itself--d’oraita. And they went even further than that. They
declared that one’s *svara* could even trump a verse in the Torah when the two conflicted.

*Svara* is a term and a concept that has been kept virtually secret—certainly in its far-reaching implications—for over fifteen hundred years. It is not taught even to rabbis or rabbinical students today. In my six years of rabbinical school at the Conservative Movement's flagship, The Jewish Theological Seminary, the word was never uttered. Not once. We were never assigned a text that contained it—though hundreds do. Instead, we were taught, as if it were Jewish dogma, the lie that our leaders have succeeded in conveying to most Jews: that when it comes to certain verses in the Torah, “There’s nothing we can do,” “Our hands are tied,” “If we could change it, we would.” Understanding the talmudic concept of *svara* exposes these excuses as the untruths that they are.

That is why queer Jewish learning must begin with an understanding of the game-changing concept of *svara*. Yet it is understandable that *svara* would not be taught in seminaries. Seminaries (particularly movement-affiliated ones) are typically in business to perpetuate the status quo of an era long gone—not to teach mechanisms of potentially radical change. *Svara* allows *any* change—even to the point of
uprooting the entire Tradition itself--to create a system that better achieves that
Tradition’s ultimate goals. It is a mechanism of change that arguably should be
entrusted only to those who are committed stakeholders in the Jewish enterprise.
My reading of Talmud also tells me that the Rabbis who came up with this
potentially dangerous and potentially chaos-creating source of change required its
practitioners to be learned in the Tradition. This cannot be overstated. They did not
believe that svara was merely one’s uneducated “gut feeling,” but one’s moral
impulse that was deeply influenced by having been steeped in the intricacies of the
values, principles, and concerns of the entire Jewish Tradition as well as by a broad
exposure to the world and its people. Menachem Elon, the former Deputy Chief
Justice of the Israeli Supreme Court, defined svara as:

“Legal reasoning that penetrates into the essence of things and reflects a
profound understanding of human nature. [It] involves…an appreciation of
the characteristics of human beings in their social relationships, and a careful
study of the real world and its manifestations.”

In other words, you can’t be a Jewish ignoramous and claim that “what I think is
right” is svara. It isn’t. And neither can you have never met a queer person and
presume to legislate on matters of, well, just about anything in Jewish law. The
Rabbis of the Talmud were explicit, though, that exercising one’s *svara* to upgrade the Tradition--to play the game, as it were--did not require rabbinic ordination. It didn’t for them, nor should it for us. But it did require learning.

Like that small band of queer Tradition-changers and inventors two thousand years ago, most of the new Tradition-changers and inventors of this next era of Judaism may not be ordained. They will, though, like their predecessors, have to possess learning and *svara*. Queer Jews, in other words, are Judaism’s new Rabbis.

The fact that each queer person is still alive is a testament to a willingness to heed the truth of one’s inner voices when the world would have queer people silence them, and to do so at great personal cost. Queers have been willing to face inconvenient truths to live fuller, more human lives. The prophetic insight of queer Jews is ultimately less about sexuality and gender than it is about the imperative to live by one’s *svara*. And this, it turns out, is a very old Jewish idea.

My dream is that when every queer Jewish kid comes out, he or she or ze will know--having already learned the concept of *svara* in Hebrew school--that the
voice that they are choosing to listen to not only does not place them \textit{outside} of their Jewish tradition or in conflict with God’s will, but is the most authoritative manifestation of both. The authors contributing to this book are, likewise, speaking not from outside of the Tradition, but from the place most respected by it, from the place that, two thousand years ago, our founding Rabbis determined was actually the most authoritative source of God’s will--more authoritative than the Torah itself. Though most are probably unfamiliar with the term, the authors in this book are utilizing the Tradition’s mandate to each of us to become learned, and to allow our informed \textit{svara} to push the Tradition beyond its current boundaries to become a truer, more humane vision of what it means to be a human being.

I challenge those who read these essays--queer or not--to accept upon themselves the implicit charge of \textit{svara} that animates every chapter of this book: Go and learn, refine and develop your \textit{svara}, and use it to make Judaism, or your own traditions, places where we are all freer to live more \textit{fully human} lives.

\footnote{Menachem Elon, \textit{Jewish Law: Cases and Materials}, p. 97}