

Torah In Transition

by Professor Joy Ladin

For over two thousand years, Jews have been reading the same book. The moment we reach the end, we start over at the beginning. Though the Torah's words don't change, we do, returning to the same passages older, braver, needier, stronger, wiser, more terrified or more centered than we were before. The very familiarity of the text reflects how we and our sense of life have changed.

But for many gay, lesbian, bi and trans Jews, the Torah is a bitter mirror that reflects nothing but our otherness. For example, responding to news that I would return to teach at Yeshiva University following my transition from living as a man to living as a woman, one of my colleagues, Rabbi Moshe Tendler, told the *New York Post* that "There is no niche where [a transsexual] can hide out as a female without being in massive violation of Torah law, Torah ethics and Torah morality." According to Tendler, the only reflection of my life the Torah offers is a condemnation of everything I am or hope to be.

Fortunately, Rabbi Tendler's views don't seem to be shared by my students. Their response has been thoughtful, respectful, compassionate and often far-sighted. The same Torah that, for Tendler, mirrors his transphobia and intolerance, inspires my students to try to understand an aspect of being human that most of them had heard of before.

Most of my students have been studying the Torah since they were very young, and several have asked me how my transition from living to a man to living as a woman has affected the way I read Torah.

It's a good question. Transition has affected every aspect of my life. But until my students asked, I'd never thought about it how it had affected my relation to Torah. In some respects, not much has changed. I started reading the Torah daily as a young bearded man; as a depillated middle-aged woman-in-progress, I still read Torah every day, following the cycle of weekly portions. As always, I find the text oblique, strange, alternately terrifying, exalting and boring. I remain most interested in the narratives of family dysfunction and least interested in the technicalities of sacrifice.

I started reading the Torah as a child. What drew me most was the character of God. God and I, it seemed to me, had a lot in common. (Of course, I also felt I had a lot in common with Star Trek's Mr. Spock and – in my wildest wish-fulfillment dreams – Barbara Eden in “I Dream of Jeannie.”) God and I were both aliens who found it hard to relate to human beings – so hard that we were constantly oscillating between clumsy attempts to connect and bitterness at our failures to understand or be understood. We were both unique, both invisible, both craving a kind of recognition we never seemed to get. Neither of us had many friends to play with.

Though it was comforting it was to remake God in my own image, Bronze Age Judaism was a dangerous neighborhood for a child. The sex didn't bother me, and I liked the violence, but the statement that “A woman must not put on man's apparel, nor shall a man wear women's clothing; for whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord your God” (Deut. 22:5) troubled me for years. Much as I wanted to, I couldn't ignore it. For one thing, it was the only time the Torah acknowledged my existence. I didn't have much opportunity for cross-dressing, but on the rare occasions when I was alone in the house, I would go into the attic and try on my younger sister's outgrown clothes. It wasn't exactly an act of self-affirmation – to wear clothes that could never fit while praying to be transformed into something I could never be was as depressing as it was painful – but I knew that wearing girl's clothing was something I had to do. And once I came upon that sentence in Deuteronomy, I knew God hated me for it.

I didn't really blame God. I too longed for the simplicity and stability that the *yin-yang* of the gender binary seemed to promise. If everyone was simply male or simply female, life would make much more sense. I would stop longing for the impossible and punishing my body for what it couldn't be. The human-Divine relationship, so tortured in the Torah, would be easy. As long as men and women stayed on their own sides of their closets, God would not abhor us.

But I wasn't simply male or female, and so, as that verse in Deuteronomy made clear, neither the world nor my relationship with God would ever be as clear as I longed for them to be. Despite the law, I knew I was going to keep wearing female clothes, so I did what any felon, caught red-handed, would do: I looked for a loophole. Perhaps the law didn't apply to children. But since codes of masculinity and femininity were as strictly enforced in my family and school as in Moses' wilderness, I knew children weren't exempt from the policing of gender. God's abhorrence wasn't a factor in our almost entirely secular lives, but abhorrence of gender transgression was all around me, in the people I loved, in the air I breathed – in myself. I didn't *want* to be a boy wearing girl's clothing; I wanted to be a girl.

Maybe that was how I could convince God not to abhor me. I wasn't a man or a woman; I was a transsexual. Either I had no gender to transgress, because my female self and male body canceled each other out, or the law was inoperative because I had no way not to transgress it. Whether I wore male clothing or female clothing, I was always in some way cross-dressed.

That sounded right to me, but what were the chances that a God revolted by cross-dressing would bother to go through the tedious exercise of sorting out my gender? God would abhor first and ask questions later. And yet there I was, still cross-dressing. I couldn't stop. Maybe that was the out I was looking for. Starving Jews are allowed to eat non-kosher food. I was starving to be a girl, and the non-kosher food of female clothing was the only way I knew to feed my malnourished self. Perhaps the law really meant, "God will abhor you for cross-dressing, unless you are dying to do it." God had made me a boy who was dying to be a girl. How could God abhor me for being what I was made to be?

Unfortunately, neither God nor I were comfortable with the claim that my desire to be female transcended the laws of the Torah. What was at stake here was not behavior but essence. I was a transsexual, someone created to put on the clothes of the opposite gender. The law in Deuteronomy wasn't cutting me off from God; it was showing me that God and I had something in common. We could abhor me together.

For some trans Jews, this is where a relationship with Torah ends. But I didn't break up with the Torah. Something made me keep reading. In the gnarled, often terrible text, Torah, I heard what sounded like truth. I'm not talking about the plain sense of the text. The Torah didn't convince me that creation had taken six days, but I heard truth in the enigmatic multiplicity of the text, its refusal to reduce life, humanity, actions or events to simple statements. For example, when Moses, in the course of his long conversation with the Burning Bush, asks the name of the God who is ordering him stop tending sheep and start defying a Pharaoh, he receives not a name but an existential fortune cookie:

Moses said to God, 'Behold, when I come to the Children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your forefathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His Name?' – what shall I say to them? God answered Moses: '*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*.' (Exodus 3: 13-14)

I was delighted by the commentaries that pointed out that these three words – crucial words, designed to establish the identity of a heretofore unknown God – can be understood in two distinctly different ways. *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* could mean "I am that I am," a tautological statement that identifies God as pure, unchanging Being, an essence that underlies and belies what humans know as reality. Whatever you think you know about the world or life, this name says, the truth is always that "I am," a posture that, like Zen meditation, demands that we see through the flux of existence to the essence beneath. You may be oppressed, you may be crushed by circumstances, you may feel trapped in a life in which there seems to be no

possibility of God or redemption, but if you open your eyes, mind, heart, you will see that God is right there, in the very circumstances that seem to make the idea of God absurd.

This stoic, mystical doctrine seemed like a good calling card to offer people who'd been enslaved for the past four hundred years. However, the commentaries pointed out that *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* also means "I will be what I will be." Instead of essence, this reading defines God as a pure becoming, a fountain of potential constantly bursting through the crust of existence and realizing itself in the world. This is a God of action, a restless verb that refuses to stand still or be fixed, a hummingbird-like blur of transformative energy that has always moved on before we can quite bring it into focus, an arrow whose trajectory opens new horizons. The God this name defines isn't found through meditation or stoic shrugging-off of reality, but by the opposite: by recognizing and participating in the revolutionary God-energy bubbling through the tumult of life and history. For slaves trapped in oppression that had lasted sixteen generations, in a country so besotted with stability that its very art barely changed from one century to the next, such a God would constitute a veritable earthquake of hope.

Logically, of course, only one of these contradictory definitions can be the "real" name of God. But that's exactly what made the Torah feel so true to me – its indifference to the either/or imperatives of the logic of the world. Either/or logic made someone like me impossible. A girl with the body of boy – how was that possible, when girlhood was defined by the sex of the body? A boy who felt like a girl – how could that be, when, as a boy, I couldn't know what being a girl felt like? The logic of my world defined me either as someone who didn't exist – but then why was I in so much pain? – or who only existed as what I knew I wasn't.

The both/and logic of the Torah offered me a new way of thinking about myself. Like God, I was what I was, something that couldn't be named or explained and had to be taken on faith, an essence that rendered the details of my flesh irrelevant; and like God, I would be what I would be, something neither I nor anyone around me could imagine, something that would create the possibility of its own becoming. The Torah presented the existential paradoxes that kept me in a state of panic, teetering on the edge of suicide, as the very basis of identity, of truth.

Torah narrative can only present this multi-faceted, contradictory form of truth because it suppresses subjectivity. The emotion and sensuality that reflect individual commitments and perspectives are absent from the Torah's narrative voice. The Torah depicts a terrifying spectrum of human emotions, but the narrative itself remains cool, dispassionate, relating the murder of Abel and Jacob's love for Rachel with the same detachment, barely describing the land of Canaan that is at the heart of God's covenant and the focus of millennia of Jewish yearning.

The Torah's bloodless detachment in describing the most intimate and passionate events was part of what made it ring so true to me. I spent most of my pre-transition life in a state of dissociation, so cut off from feeling that I often wasn't sure I had feelings at all. Torah narrative requires detachment in order to present individual human lives, which normally dominate the narrative spotlight, as signs of a God and a destiny that transcend generations. I required detachment in order to maintain the sickening discipline necessary to pass as a male. My rigid suppression of emotion, which made other kids' euphorias and tantrums seem incomprehensible to me, made the Torah make perfect sense. In fact, the only time I was ever in the presence of a voice, a perspective, that shared the detachment that entombed me was when I read Torah. Though my detachment represented hysterical dissociation, when I read Torah, my dissociation seemed nobler, as though rather than making me less human than people who could really feel, my detachment made me closer to God.

Since I started transitioning, the connections between body and mind on which feeling depends have grown stronger by the day. At first, feeling was overwhelming. I seemed to be vibrating with grief and longing, anguish and excitement. I felt too much to read, too much to write, too much to do anything but feel. "How do people function with all these feelings?" I asked one of my friends. "Do people feel *all* the time? Do they feel so much about everything?" Feelings had always come to me singly, over great distances, arriving like dusty messengers exhausted by the effort of reaching the distant country in which I lived. Now there was no part of me that didn't feel.

I no longer experience feelings as natural catastrophes, but I still feel a bit like a character from a black-and-white film who has stumbled into Technicolor. The world is brighter and darker, more dangerous and more generous, humming with love and the ecstasies and anguishes it brings. As my life has changed, so has my relationship to the Torah. The emotional detachment that once made me feel at home now makes me uncomfortable, even angry. Where are all the emotions, perceptions, sensations that Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Sarah and Abraham must have experienced? Where is the richness that I have finally come to know as human life? I know, of course, that a story that spans hundreds of years cannot register the moment-by-moment feelings of its characters; and I know that our tradition fills in many of the blanks in Torah narrative in midrash, imaginative retellings that often focus on the feelings the Torah passes over in silence. But I knew all that before my transition. What my new craving for emotion has taught me is that the vitality of the Torah depends on the emotional urgency that we bring to it. If we didn't insist that the Torah speak to our deepest needs, confusions, anguishes, the Torah would wither into something like the Code of Hammurabi – a text written by and for those who died millennia before us, a piece of archaeology rather than what our tradition calls it: a tree of life whose roots nourish the endlessly ramifying limbs and leaves of our individual lives.

And so, now that I have come to a life that seems immeasurably distant from the Torah, I

keep returning to it, demanding that it speak to the questions of gender and identity that have become so urgent for me, such as the question of whether I'm, well, human.

Before transition, I never felt human. It wasn't only my distance from emotion. Human beings were male and female; I wasn't, so I wasn't fully human. The Torah seemed to agree. Genesis 1:27 portrays maleness and femaleness as essential to being human: "So God created humanity in God's own image... Male and female created God them." From a feminist perspective, this sentence is a rare Biblical highlight; "male" and "female" are equally identified with "God's own image," and for a few words, at least, God has no more interest in one than in the other. But for those whose gender doesn't fit neatly into "male" or "female," this verse is a theological disaster, for it elevates the gender binary to the same level of givenness as light, time and other building blocks of existence. According to this verse, transsexuals, intersex and other gender-complicated folks are not part of the blueprint of Creation. Not only don't we exist; we aren't even conceivable.

If God can't conceive of me as human, how can I conceive my own humanity?

Of course, no one, not even God, gets the last word in Judaism. The Talmudic sages doubled Genesis' gender binary, adding *tumtum* and *androgynos* to "male" and "female." Centuries later, Kabbalistic mystics read the phrase "male and female God created them" as implying that the first human, Adam Kadmon, was a hermaphrodite, embodying, like God, both sides of the gender binary. But I'm not a hermaphrodite; no matter how expansively I read the tradition, transsexuality seemed to fall outside the Jewish definition of humanity, to mark me as something that wasn't created in the image of God.

Even before I could feel very much, that felt awful.

But as I've grown toward becoming myself, the Torah, it seems, has grown toward me. When I returned to Genesis in the midst of transition, I realized that the second chapter presents a very different account of the birth of maleness and femaleness:

"A mist ascended from the earth and watered the whole surface of the soil. And the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living soul" (2:6-7).

Here, God doesn't create a "male and female" species; God creates a single human being. And while the abstract males and females of chapter 1 spring, like light or stars, fully formed into their places in existence, in chapter 2, forming and animating the man is just the beginning. God has to think about and respond to this new creature's needs, to give him a place (the Garden of Eden), a purpose – "to work [the Garden] and guard it" (2:15) – and a morality, a

sense of should and shouldn't (God's ill-fated prohibition against eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil).

At this point, God has devoted more narrative time to creating humanity than to the creation of light, dark, Heaven, Earth, sky, stars and time combined, but humanity is still not finished. "It is not good that the man be alone" (2:18), God reflects. The Torah's narrative voice may lack emotion, but God's doesn't. This moment of Divine empathy for human loneliness inspires the creation of "every beast of the field and every bird of the sky" (2:19), as God strives to create a being that can keep Adam company. God can't tell which creature might give Adam the companionship he needs, so all the animals and birds are paraded before Adam to be named. When Adam fails to find the companion he's looking for, God puts him to sleep, cuts a hole in his side, takes out a piece of him and shapes it into a woman. The moment Adam opens his eyes, he recognizes what he's been longing for: "This," he says, "is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" (2:23).

It's a complicated form of recognition. On the one hand, Adam sees Eve as being like him – "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh"; on the other hand, he sees her different, a fact he registers by naming her "*isha*," woman, the feminine form of the Hebrew word for "man." In other words, Adam recognizes that the creation of Eve was also the creation of gender. Before there was a woman, the universe was a lonely place for Adam, full of animals, full of God, but missing that crucial other whose combination of similarity to and difference from him would enable him to feel complete, at home in himself and the world. The moment Adam sees Eve as "a woman," he sees himself as "a man," and that feels good to him.

Oddly enough, I can now relate to Adam's experience. Like Adam, I grew up thinking that I was the only one of my kind, someone – something – whose genderlessness meant I was alone in the universe. And since the birth of my gender, and my inclusion, however tentative and problematic, on the female side of the gender binary, I have started to feel that there is in fact a place for me in the world. Becoming a woman has made me feel human.

I'm not trying to sing the praises of the gender binary, which is a source of so much pain to so many people, GLBTQ and straight alike. But after four decades in what for me was the existential wilderness outside gender, I now find that these archetypal stories of the birth of gender, stories that seemed to erase the very possibility of my existence, have begun to speak to me.

Painful as it was, I grew up in the world of "male and female God created them," a world in which gender was, and in many ways still is, essential to humanness. In this country, you can't get a birth certificate, social security number, driver's license, or passport without being allocated to the ranks of male or female – which means you can't get a job, insurance coverage,

the right to drive or rent a car or move across borders without taking your place, at least on paper, in the gender binary. In some public places, you can't pee without identifying yourself as male or female. Thanks to sonograms, many babies are gendered even before they are born, and those who aren't are labeled "male" or "female" the moment their pelvises see the light of day. In this sense, as Genesis 1:27 suggests, gender is absolute; we aren't treated as human until we take our places in the binary.

But as God and Adam discover in Genesis 2, gender is not only an image in which we are created; it is an image in which we create, and recreate, ourselves, through our relationships to one another. Even in the most rigidly gendered social arenas, gender is not absolute. The gender of an octogenarian has little in common with the gender of an adolescent. The gender of the young veiled bride is very different from the gender the same woman will express when she is a forty-something mother of three, and both are different from the gender she expresses when she is in hospital scrubs performing surgery. Gender is something we bring out of ourselves, shaping and reshaping it in response to changing needs for completeness, companionship and a place in the world.

Gender, then, is not a matter of bodies or even souls; as Adam recognizes when he first sees Eve, gender is a way of relating to others that enables us to feel like ourselves. To the extent that gender grows out of relationships, even within the categories of "male" and "female," our genders are fluid, shifting in nuance and emphasis as we move in and out of contact with people we know and need in different ways.

In other words, both accounts in Genesis are true; or rather, truth is what we get when we take both, contradictions and all, together. Gender is both a given of existence and a relationship-driven process, an absolute template and a fluid mode of self-expression. And as I've discovered, both conceptions of gender have advantages, even for a transsexual. For years, the binary template of gender enabled me to massage my male identity without publicly transitioning. I shaved my beard, grew out my hair, raised the pitch of my voice and changed my gestural language without a single personal or professional acquaintance, gay or straight, suspecting that I was trans. Those who noticed that I was changing assumed I had a terminal illness. It was easier to imagine that I was dying than to imagine that I wasn't really a man. Once I began to shift between presenting as a man and presenting as a woman – sometimes as often as five times a day – the gender binary was, well, a Godsend. No matter how odd I looked compared to most men or women, according to the binary, I had to be one or the other, and so everyone went along with my presentation of the moment. Switching from male to female was as simple as changing clothes.

But convenient as it has been, the "male and female God created them" model doesn't allow for the possibility of transition. I might be able to *look* male or female, but according to the binary template, I could only, absolutely, *be* one or the other. Some of us may be created according

to the male and female binary; I wasn't. Like Adam, I'm a homemade creature. God didn't create me in relation to a category; I had to be individually imagined, assembled, animated. Like Adam, I had to confront the loneliness of that individuality before I could find my place in the world, and like Adam, I have learned that what I needed to find that place was always within me. As one study of child development points out, all of us learn to act like the gender we "are" by learning to avoid behaviors that are associated with genders we "aren't." This means that masculinity contains – indeed, is defined by – the femininity boys and men are taught not to express; all males internalize a femininity that, like Adam's rib, can be brought out of our male identities and fashioned into new female selves. In this sense, I'm not approximating a femininity that isn't mine; like my breasts' ability to grow when exposed to estrogen, femininity has always been there, sleeping within me. Like Adam, I simply – simply! – had to cut myself open to give birth to the woman swaddled and smothered by my masculinity.

Our tradition teaches us that we grow through reading Torah. But the Torah itself grows by being read, remains alive, fresh, startling and new, by becoming part of the lives blossoming and dying around it. As our Sages tell us, the Torah is our life, and the length of our days. All our days: gay, straight, male, female, trans, the days we first open our eyes to the world and the days we gaze our last upon it. The Torah's roots stretch down to the depths of our being; its limbs stretch through us, toward the future. It is not only our right to read the Torah through our gay, lesbian, bi- and trans- lives; it is our obligation. The Torah's life depends on ours.