

Becoming a Good Boy: A Transmasculine Meditation On Gendered Ritual Objects and The Challenges of Transfeminism

by Max K. Strassfeld, published in *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, Noach Dzmura, ed., North Atlantic Books, July, 2010.

I was pawing through a bin at my local Judaica shop, trying to find a *kippah* (a man’s head-covering; in Yiddish, *yarmulke*) to match my partner’s new striped shirt. My dedication to the task was derailed by a *kippah* that read ‘*yeled tov*’ which in Hebrew means, “good boy”. I was immediately drawn to it: I often joked that we trans folk need to wear buttons to advertise our preferred pronouns (because “he” is not automatically applied to my body that looks substantively ‘female’). In my *yeled tov kippah* I’d found the Jewish equivalent of a political billboard -- *Pirsum HaNes* in Hebrew-- which comes from the commandment to “advertise the miracle” (of the oil lasting 8 days) at Chanukah.. This *kippah* would ‘advertise the miracle’ of my identity: a Jewishly-involved genderqueer, who is ‘read’ (incorrectly identified) as ‘female’ most of the time. So I bought the *yeled tov kippah*, even though I noticed at the time that the bin did not have one that read “*yaldah tovah* (good girl). I stood in front of the bin wondering if the girl version would have rainbow crayons too, as I admired the boy version’s gender neutral (and gay-friendly) imagery. I envisioned what a “*yaldah tovah*” might look like instead, and a plethora of reinterpretations of masculine ritual wear sprang to mind, images that typify only one ultra-feminine role for Jewish women: I saw something lacy and frilly in pink or lavender. Or a non-feminist parody of Jewish femininity—a *kippah* decorated with a pile of rubies perhaps, or an apron and some frying *latkes*. In the end, if women as consumers of ritual objects are acknowledged at all, then they are still forced to choose between pink *kippot* and blue *kippot*. I remember idly wondering which *kippot* my butch sisters would choose.

This small moment at a Judaica store hi-lights the dilemma of trans-masculine feminists. What is the cost of my transmasculine visibility? My *yeled tov kippah* feels fraught: I want to believe that I am successfully (gender)queering the *kippah* by subversively co-opting a marker of traditional Jewish masculinity to instead mark trans-masculinity. But I am concerned that my attempt at *pirsum ha nes* fails to mark the miracle of my genderqueerness. Perhaps instead it simply re-inscribes a Jewish hierarchy of masculine over feminine, similar, in the end, to the feminist woman’s dilemma of the pink or blue *kippah*. Perhaps all I do, in choosing ‘masculine’ ritual objects to trumpet a transmasculine identity, is to reinforce the limited (binary) options, aligning myself with blue.

Purchasing my *kippah* would have felt less loaded with symbolism if I had worn a *kippah* regularly when I (tentatively) identified as a woman. I wear it now because I relate to the object differently now. Like all good rituals and ritual objects, this *kippah* has meaning for me; it calls to me as a way to declare my genderqueerness. In effect, *yeled tov* is the reason that I fulfill this particular *mitzvah* (commandment).

Certainly, I am not the first writer to meld (or create conflict between) trans and feminist frameworks. Other, more sophisticated theorists have attempted to negotiate these ideological tensions. Some of the conflict seems to be rooted in the question of privilege. The argument that most readily comes to mind about transfolk and privilege is Janice Raymond's famous diatribe about Male-to-Female (MtF) women, "The Transsexual Empire," in which she claims that: "Transsexually-constructed lesbian-feminists show yet another face of patriarchy."¹ Raymond's positing of a male privilege retained by transwomen, and even (or particularly) those who are claiming a lesbian feminist politics is easy to critique, nevertheless, she succinctly articulates a challenge within feminist thinking. How do feminists formulate masculine privilege (or for that matter, how do we articulate the target of sexist oppression) in the face of shifting sex and gender identities?

This question of masculine privilege is often employed to split the trans and feminist communities, as in the example of the exclusionary "only womyn born womyn on the land" policy of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. In this annual gathering of music-loving women on private land, the utopian notion of taking a break from patriarchy collides with the problem of what physical bodies constitute that patriarchy and detract from a "safe space for womyn." Transpeople have been protesting their exclusion (and educating attendees) at Camp Trans across from the annual feminist gathering since 1992.²

The dynamic of pitting transpeople against the ideals of feminism can often be more subtle than Michigan, however. I have heard Feminist Studies scholars impugn MTF colleagues for their male privilege while insisting that I (a female bodied masculine transgender person) am the 'good feminist genderqueer.' Creating 'good' and 'bad' transfolk, based on how neatly our self-definitions align with the current feminist formulations of sex and gender is one of the ways in which feminism picks up on an already existing tension within the community, and widens the gap between feminists and transfolk. Certainly, there are plenty of sexist transfolk—I have been witness to some very unfortunate drag performances, one of which employed, for example, violence against women (the NON-consensual kind) for a laugh, imitating the sexism of the song they performed, completely without irony. But the 'good guys' 'bad guys' tactic is a dynamic that exceeds the problem of sexism in the trans community, which, after all, is a

1 Raymond, Janice. P. 132 *Trans Studies Reader*

2 See <http://eminism.org/michigan/faq-protest.html> for a nice historical summary of the tension

community that reflects the prejudices and limitations of larger society.

The dynamic of the ‘good feminist trannies’ versus ‘bad feminist trannies’ might also form some of the tension between MTF and FTM communities. Which portion of the community constitutes the good guys depends on people’s perceptions: MTFs are good when they join the oppressed group and relinquish ties to male privilege, and bad when they are seen to intrude into women’s spaces. FTMs, on the other hand, are perceived as being more naturally feminist because many of us come out of feminist dyke communities. Alternatively, we are viewed as the ‘bad guys’ since we betrayed the sisterhood and joined the patriarchy. Each of these seems to me a “lose lose” proposition. I am thinking of Gayle Rubin’s brilliant response to lesbian feminist rejections of FTMs in her article “Of Catamites and Kings”, where she argues that we should “strive to maintain a community that understands diversity as a gift, sees anomalies as precious...”³. She is making the case for revising our notion of identity, even though it continues to be a useful category for political organizing, to include the notion of the anomalous, the diverse, the subjects that test the boundaries of a category.

Rubin’s argument is a lovely attempt to weld the communities back together, but it does not directly answer the question of privilege. Embedded in the notion of FTM ‘betrayal’ is the question of whether FTMs have male privilege post-transition, a question that is hotly debated both within the trans community and without. Certainly, for those of us who don’t pass, it is hard to conceive of how we are granted substantive male privilege, although I think it is always worthwhile to consider such questions. But, as I’ve tried to demonstrate with my examination of Jewish traditionally male ritual wear, even for us genderqueers, the problem of male privilege is imbricated in how we reach for visibility, or carve a space for ourselves in the world.

Trans folk, in turn, have created a concept parallel to the feminist construction of male privilege: cisgender privilege, which can interchangeably refer to the privilege awarded to the gender normative, or specifically to those who have never experienced the pain of being ‘unintelligibly’ gendered.⁴ In a sense, the feminist concept of male privilege uneasily balances beside the trans concept of cisgender privilege, and activist discourse has walked a tightrope trying to envision how to discuss privilege while marrying these concepts that appear to be in conflict.

After I made the decision to purchase the *kippah*, I began to think about what would need to change in order for me to feel unambiguously good about being a ‘good boy.’ From the

3 P. 479 *Trans Studies Reader*.

4 In using the notion of “intelligibility” I am following Judith Butler’s controversial lead in her essay anthologized in the *Trans Studies Reader* entitled “Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality.” Cisgender is an adjective that refers to a type of gender identity formed by a match between an individual’s biological sex and the behavior or social role considered appropriate for one’s sex. In contrast, Transgender refers to a mismatch between biological sex and social role.

perspective of parity, the existence of a *yaldah tovah kippah*, with the same silly rainbow crayons, would certainly have made me feel a little better. But somehow the phrase ‘good girl’ feels more loaded and less playful to me than ‘good boy,’ which probably has everything to do with personal baggage from my feminine childhood.

“Good girl” rings, in my ears, as approbation for fulfilling stereotypical femininity. When I was a girl I hated the phrase good girl, not simply because it would deny to me some of my complicated reality, but also because I associated good girl with the girls in my class who were able to wear a denim skirt and look normal, who seemed to effortlessly adhere to gender norms like chatting and trading stickers with the other girls, who played the right games and talked the right talk. Curses were one of my earliest pleasures in language, the epitome of un-good-girl behavior. I associated good girl with a particular set of characteristics: cis-genderedness, whiteness, non-Jewishness, assimilated-ness, and classness ... that neither me nor my mother imitated well.

But perhaps that no longer needs to be true today, when I can re-think the construction of good-girlness. I can think of Joan Nestle and all the feminist queers who have worked to reclaim both the feminine and the femme from where it was shuttered away by angry feminists. Maybe then *yaldah tovah* would not feel like a curse flung at our young girls (and boys-who-would-be-girls). Maybe then a *yaldah tovah kippah* could be as good a thing as a *yeled tov kippah*. Maybe then I would not have to apologize for my appropriation of masculine Jewish symbols. Maybe it would help to equalize my privilege: the privilege inherent in my ability to buy a *kippah* that “reflects” me.

But in a world of parity where the *kippah* ceases to be the purview of masculinity, as my inner angry feminist wants, will it still call to me personally as a ritual object? In other words, once *yaldah tovah* has been reclaimed, does my *yeled tov* become less compelling? My attraction stems both from its function as an announcement of my preferred pronouns, but also from the fact that it remains rooted as a traditional symbol of Jewish masculinity. Subverting the original meaning of the symbol is part of the attraction I find in appropriation. Once anyone can wear a *kippah*, and it ceases to have any association with Jewish masculinity *per se*, the gesture of revolt is lost. Its attraction, for me, as well as its problematic nature, lies precisely in its problematic troubling of traditional masculinity.

What does it mean for transmen to be men? This is a frequent topic of conversation amidst my friends who have transitioned. Part of the ‘second adolescence’ that occurs as a result of changing gender roles during transition is the process of relearning social norms and expectations, in order to (only) break them on purpose. From men who used to identify as butch women, for

example, I have heard the frequent lament, that flirtatious behavior is perceived as sex-positive and sexy when it comes from butch dykes, but the same behavior can be viewed as sexist and obnoxious from the same people who are now perceived as straight men.

Even without passing, I experience a similar dilemma in interacting with the cisgender world: the same action before someone knows me as trans is read as feminist, while after I disclose my trans identity is read as masculine. For example, when I insist to my co-workers that I can help move the heavy table, it is perceived as feminist before they understand me as a genderqueer; after I come out to them it is seen as an expression of masculinity. As a result, so often those that are attempting to be respectful about my gender identity choose to acknowledge it in sexist ways. Sometimes, this is in order to cover a moment of awkwardness, when they've unthinkingly labeled me as female and want to affirm my masculinity by calling attention to my 'traditionally masculine' traits. That I am physically strong (particularly for a *nebbishy* Talmud *bocher*) is not something I associate with my masculinity. I am faced with the unappetizing choice of allowing well-meaning cisgender people to affirm my identity through sexist remarks, or correcting their fumbling attempts to make me feel more at home.

Recently I saw a very fine play by an emerging playwright Ricardo Bracho, entitled *The Sweetest Hangover*. Among many interesting moments in this strong play is a scene between two black women—one who recently came out as MTF and decided to transition, who is told by her friend that she will have to give up her male privilege now. In this scene the transwoman agrees with her. It took me a long time to realize what did not ring true about that scene—until I realized that throughout the entire play we never see the transwoman trying to pass as male. She is costumed in female clothes throughout-- in order to feel the loss of male privilege as an audience, we would have to see her exert it. The scene clarified for me the issue of privilege and MTFs: despite Janice Raymond, when the world perceives a 'man in a dress', they are not lining up to afford that person masculine privileges.

This is reminiscent of an argument frequently used to discriminate against bisexuals. Since a bisexual has the opportunity to pass as straight, they are granted straight privilege that lesbians and gay men who can't pass as straight don't have. The argument is flawed by an equally limited understanding of the cruel choices offered to those individuals: attempt to pass, monitoring yourself at every moment for the slip that will betray you, or live as you see fit and accept the (sometimes brutal) consequences of not 'fitting in' entirely with either straight or queer communities.

As a trans person who walks in masculine ways through the gender segregated world of Palo Alto, I have lately been feeling the weight of my responsibility to consider these issues. Judaism is a fiercely gendered legal system, and working through what a modern genderqueer and trans-friendly Judaism looks like in ritual, spiritual, and legal ways is a process that has only recently

begun. As transmen, even as we fight against the allegation of residual male privilege leveled at transwomen, it is time for us, among ourselves and our allies, to think about (and exert in new and perhaps more sensitive ways) any gender privileges we may have acquired during the process of transition.

Julia Serrano makes this point cogently in her book *Whipping Girl*, which, for all its faults, asks an important question: why are transwomen the public face of transsexuality despite the fact that MTF and FTM people are now transitioning in roughly equal rates? Her answer is that this world has a fascination with ‘men’ who no longer wish to ‘be men’...but a ‘woman’ who wants to be a man? By the skewed logic of the cisgender world we inhabit, moving from female to male makes some amount of sense, since transgender masculinity ostensibly buys male privilege, and who in their right mind would want to choose an unprivileged position? If we accept Serrano’s argument, then we masculine-spectrum transpersons do carry a certain amount of gender privilege, even if it is only the meager amount that we hold over our trans sisters. It is time to give serious consideration to how we, as genderqueers, recognize and employ that privilege in the fight for Jewish gender justice.