

No Longer Strangers?

by Reuben Zellman, 2008

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Good morning.

I want to thank Pastor Ellard and Reverend Anderson, and all of you for so warmly welcoming us to your community this morning, and for inviting me to share some words with you.

When I learned that this month's transgender sermon series was entitled "No Longer Strangers", I reflected that this was a remarkable coincidence. This week across the Jewish world we read the section of the Torah known as Mishpatim, from the book of Exodus. One of the best-known commandments in this section has to do with the stranger. This week the Torah tells us not once but twice: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt." (23:9). This is not the only place in Torah where we find this. In the five books of Moses we are instructed thirty-six times about this person called the stranger. God requires that we treat strangers well – we must be hospitable to newcomers and foreigners, and treat them with full justice and dignity.

And I asked myself: what might God's words about the stranger have to teach us about transgender people in our faith communities today?

Almost exactly five years ago, I became the first openly transgender person to be admitted to rabbinical school, to study in seminary towards ordination as a rabbi. A few months later I was asked to deliver the drash, the sermon, at a Sabbath service at a predominantly gay and lesbian synagogue in another city. After the service, a man came up to me. Very kindly and politely, he welcomed me to their synagogue and then said: "Reuben, your sermon was very interesting. I appreciate your coming, and I learned a lot about the transgender community. But we're a gay and lesbian synagogue. Why are you here?"

Since that time I have thought a lot about this man in relation to the commandments about how to treat the stranger. It seems to me that, at least at face value, this man did it by the book. He was welcoming and polite and genuinely glad that I had come. He was hospitable and certainly did not oppress me in any way.

But he could not understand why, as a transgender person, my story was relevant to him as a gay man. He felt that the transgender community was an entirely separate entity from his

gay and lesbian community; and he did not understand why I had been asked to come and speak with them. For him, I might as well have represented the competitive crossword puzzle community. It simply did not occur to him that the transgender community might have experiences that he himself shared, or that might be important to his own life story. And therefore he said to me: That was very interesting; but why are you here?

This would not be the last time I was asked this question. I think that this man's response is a very common one. We who are fighting for real transgender inclusion in faith communities face this question all the time in one form or another. Transgender people today are still treated most of the time and in most communities as if we are strangers on this planet. When we transition or come out, we are often made into unwelcome strangers. When we simply live our lives as our true selves, we are often met with cruelty and abuse. I probably need not remind anyone here how dark it can be for trans people today. Rampant discrimination has led to high unemployment and poverty; lack of access to health care and education and other resources; deplorable levels of violence; rejection by friends and family. It is not surprising that many trans people have encountered deep despair. And it is no exaggeration to say that whether a transgender person finds a welcoming, loving faith home can be a matter of life or death.

Thankfully, some synagogues and churches have decided that it's high time to be those welcoming sanctuaries for our community. And so faith communities like yours and like mine have been in processes of soul-searching and wrestling and changing, to figure out how to become more trans-friendly. Communities like these are saving lives every day. I pray that more and more will follow, and choose to open their doors wider and affirm that people of all genders are made equally in the image of God. It is urgent that we all heed that commandment to welcome those of us who have been called strangers.

But Jewish theology demands even more from us than this. Thirty-six times the Torah teaches us to treat the stranger with justice; even to love strangers as ourselves. But that is not enough. There is a very important distinction between the act of not oppressing someone and the act of truly including them. Torah teaches us that there is something deeply and uniquely important about those who are deemed strangers. The great contemporary Jewish thinker Elie Wiesel beautifully explains the stranger in Jewish understanding:

“Man, by definition, is born a stranger; coming from “nowhere” he is thrust into an alien world – one which existed before him and did not need him to survive. Yet a stranger goes through life meeting other strangers... and, estranged from both this world and himself, his very existence lies in doubt...on the sociological level...the stranger is someone who suggests the unknown...the stranger represents what you are not...the stranger is the

other...For the Jew, however, the stranger suggests a world to be lived in, to be enhanced, or saved. One awaits the stranger; one welcomes him...in our tradition, the stranger may well be someone very important: a prophet in disguise...or even the Messiah. Thus, with every stranger we hope to receive a fragment of his secret...to live without strangers would result in an impoverished existence...to live only amongst ourselves, never facing an outsider to question our certainties, to look beyond the boundaries, to look through him towards God..."

In other words, opening the door to the stranger is not enough. We must welcome them to impact us, to better us, to change us. When it comes to welcoming transgender people into our faith communities, we must say more than: come share this place with me. We must say: come share yourself with me. We must not only make more room at the table; we have to change what's on the menu. Truly welcoming trans people into our houses of worship means we must all be prepared to think differently, to do differently, to believe differently. We must be ready to be changed, institutionally and personally, by the particular knowledge and gifts that transgender people bring.

And this is not easy. Because one of the gifts the trans community brings is a shattering of the most basic myths that all of us are taught from birth – myths about who human beings are and what we can be. For so long our society has been built upon this myth: that there are two and only two ways of being human, male and female; that these identities are determined by our bodies at birth, and cannot be changed. But we trans people know that this is not true. We know that there are more than two ways of being created in God's image. We know that these false boundaries and boxes can be and must be moved, or redrawn, or broken down. There is a profound cultural revolution happening today. Trans people are coming out to tell our stories, and these stories often uproot long-held assumptions. Not only is it possible to change genders, it is possible to be bi-gendered, or multi-gendered, or to identify with no gender at all. The world that God has laid before us is much greater, more nuanced, and more wonderful than anything we can categorize or define.

When we try to limit God's creative power into two little boxes, all human beings are harmed and limited. Anyone of any identity today – trans, gay, queer or straight – who does not conform to society's gender expectations is vulnerable to abuse. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and straight people are also hurt by our society's narrowness, and prevented from becoming and expressing their full and authentic selves. Butch lesbians who aren't hired, effeminate straight men who can't find housing, boys whose dolls are taken away, girls kept off the sports team – we are ALL suffering from a system that does not reflect the true diversity of human beings. Everyone has a stake in this fight for freedom of gender expression. It is each of our sacred responsibility to let our own Divine image shine, to reveal the unique soul that the Creator

has placed within us – whether that soul is gender-conforming or not.

To truly welcome and affirm transgender people in our faith communities is to acknowledge that all of our liberation is bound up together. We trans people ask our world to question its certainties, to look beyond its boundaries, and to look through us to see God and God's work in a different way. To really welcome transgender people is to finally really welcome every person, and the full spectrum of their own gender experiences. This, I believe, is what it means to welcome the stranger – to have our communities transformed by their liberating presence. When the presence of the stranger creates more room for everyone to be their true selves, then we have offered true inclusion.

People are often surprised to learn that in Jewish tradition, transgender and gender-variant people have really never been strangers. It is widely believed that Jewish law and traditions prohibit living a transgender life. I am often asked to explain how it is possible to be an out trans person and a religious Jew at the same time.

But if we examine traditional Jewish thinking and writings, we discover that Judaism has known and included people of many sexes and genders for at least two thousand years. In fact, on matters of gender variation, Jewish legal and social thought from antiquity is far more nuanced and humane than many of our beliefs and practices today, in twenty-first century United States.

For example, the Babylonian Talmud, circa 600 C.E., describes several gender or sexual categories, not just two. There are women who have something other than the usual feminine traits; men having other than the usual masculine traits; people without identifiable sex or gender; and people with traits of multiple sexes or genders. By the third century, the Mishna teaches that it is not permitted to cause any harm to a gender-variant person; and that anyone who kills a gender-variant person is subject to the usual punishment. When a person is born who has traits of multiple sexes, their mother is to act as if she had borne both a son and a daughter, and is to present to God a doubled offering for her child. The Talmud addresses questions about intersex and transgender people in every aspect of society: marriage, property, dress and conduct, inheritance, conversion, sex, religious duties. The scholars try to figure out how many categories of people there really are and the proper legal treatment of each one. Two thousand years ago, our Jewish forbearers were asking questions that we are just beginning to ask today.

By contrast, for the greatest part, we today in the 21st century West have chosen to leave trans and intersex people out of society altogether. Our Jewish scholars of the past appear to have never considered that an option. In our tradition it is understood, first of all, that intersex and transgender people do exist. It is specified clearly that their lives are of equal value to

any others. And it is assumed that social institutions must figure out how to fit such people in. Whenever I teach people and we study these texts, I remind them that our ancient rabbis' solutions are of course highly imperfect. But how I wish we today were closer to where they were almost 2,000 years ago. They were not advocating for gender liberation as I might wish that they had. But I do believe that in many ways, Jewish traditions of the past are way ahead of where Jewish communities are now, or where our country is now in general. Jewish tradition assumes an essential humanity in every person, and that supercedes everything else. We are all made by God and in God's image – no matter what our body; no matter what our gender.

That question that the man asked me five years ago is the one question that Jewish tradition never asks of transgender people: Why are you here? Our scholars take it for granted that we are here; and we will continue to be here, in all communities, in all parts of the globe. I believe that the holy task of faith communities now is to rediscover and reassert these liberating truths that each of our traditions already know. And then we must add to that our developing wisdom. Across lines of gender and culture, race and religion, all of our communities must be allies in radical, inclusive welcome.

My favorite teaching is from Rabbi Yosi. In 200 C.E., he wrote: the gender-variant person cannot be categorized as a single gender; they are *briah bifney atzmah*, creations unto themselves. I would add that we all are. Every person is an absolutely unique being, with our own genders and loves and knowledge and insight to be shared. In this sense we are all strangers, because none of us can really be boxed in, and no person is exactly like the next; none of us can ever fully know what it is like to be anyone else. At the same time, none of us are strangers, because we are all in this most profound uniqueness together, with our many genders and stories. And we welcome each other and celebrate each other, and look through each other towards the wonderous God who has done this, the God who surpasses all boundaries, the Holy One who welcomes all.

Let not the stranger say,
Who has attached themselves to the Almighty,
“Adonai will keep me apart from God’s people”;
And let not the eunuch say,
“I am a withered tree.”
For thus said Adonai:
“As for the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
Who have chosen what I desire
And hold fast to My covenant—
I will give them, in My House
And within my walls,

TRANS TORAH

A monument and a name
Better than sons or daughters
I will give them an everlasting name
Which shall not perish.
As for the strangers
Who attach themselves to the Eternal One,
To minister to God,
And to love the name of Adonai,
To be God's servants—
All who keep the sabbath and do not profane it,
And who hold fast to My covenant—
I will bring them to My sacred mount
And let them rejoice in My house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
Shall be welcome on My altar;
For My House shall be called
A house of prayer for all peoples.”