

Torah in Transition

Joy Ladin

Delivered Nov 21, 2008 at Congregation *Beth Simchat Torah*, New York

For over two thousand years, Jews have been reading the same book. The moment we reach the end, we start over at the beginning. But unlike, say, compulsive handwashers, who have to do the exact same thing the same way every time, each time we read the Torah, we are supposed to find new insights, new challenges, new questions, new wisdom. 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. As we live with the Torah year after year, the very familiarity of the text, the changelessness that seems to preclude renewal, discovery, surprise, offers us new and sometimes startling insights by reflecting back to us how we and our sense of life have changed.

But for many gay, lesbian, bi and trans Jews, the Torah, like a bitter mirror, seems to reflect nothing but our otherness, our marginality, our relegation to the shadow realms of silence and sin. For example, responding to news that I would return to teach at Yeshiva University, the premier Modern Orthodox institution of higher learning, 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, has inspired my students to try to understand and accept an aspect of being human that most of them had never encountered, or even heard of, before.

Most of my students, reading, thinking and arguing about Torah since they were very young, and several have made it clear that they are less interested in the ways that hormones have affected my body than in 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. Some, like my marriage and family life, have fallen apart; some, like my relationship to my mother, have blossomed. Old desires have fallen away, and new desires have emerged. The newness of living as a woman has made it feel like I'm walking in a new world, in which every moment brings discovery.

But until my students asked, I'd thought much more about how transition has changed my wardrobe choices than how it has changed the way I read Torah. In some respects, the way I read Torah hasn't changed. I started reading the Torah daily as a young bearded man; as a depillated middle-aged woman-in-progress, I continue to 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 feel as moved as ever by the loneliness of Moses, an introspective mystic trapped in the body of a national leader, and the same uncomfortable sense of recognition when I read

about the morality-dissolving cleverness of Jacob, the self-destructive stubbornness of Pharaoh, Esau's grief at his loss of his father's blessing, the readiness of our mothers and fathers to follow inexplicable promptings into the unknown.

I started reading the Torah as a child. My family wasn't religious, but for some reason, I liked going to services, and I had to read something (I was always reading something, from comic books to ketchup bottles) during the long mumbling stretches of the old men's prayers. The Torah – specifically, the old apologetic Hertz commentary – was the most compelling read there was. As a kid fighting my way through the jungle of sibling rivalry, I loved Genesis' baring of winner-take-all family dynamics. But what drew me most to the Torah was the character of God. God and I, it seemed to me, had a lot in common. (In the interests of full disclosure, I have to admit that 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 rage 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.

But no matter how 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) shook me up for years. Though I felt free to ignore parts of the Torah that I found problematic – I didn't, for example, think that parents should be

able to publicly execute rebellious children – I couldn't ignore this sentence. 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. I was a child, not a man; 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. My sister's wardrobe and mine had nothing in common; even on a dark night, in fog, my mother would never be mistaken for my father. 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.

Perhaps that was how I could convince God not to abhor me. I wasn't a man or a woman, a male or a female; 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. After all, that's what I did, when I saw myself not through the lens of my longings but in terms of my behavior. Obviously, I shouldn't wear girl's clothing; it was wrong, it was stupid, and no matter how much I wanted it to, it would never transform me into a girl. It would only make me abhorrent.

And yet there I was, again and again, cross-dressing. I couldn't stop. That, perhaps, 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. I knew that sometimes – often – I wanted to do things that were just plain wrong. I could stop myself from punching my

sister but I couldn't – wasn't willing to – stop cross-dressing. Maybe I wasn't a basically good child doing an abhorrent thing; maybe I myself was abhorrent.

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, or is aborted before it can begin. We have plenty of flesh-and-blood relationships that demand that we deny or despise what we are. We don't need a book so ancient that it's hand-lettered on sheepskin to amplify the voices that tell us we should hate ourselves for wanting to be who we are.

But I didn't break up with the Torah. Something made me keep reading. At the risk of sounding pompous or stupid, I'd call it longing for truth. As a transgirl whose life depended on hiding who she was, truth, for me, could never be a simple matter of fitting all the pieces together into a seamless whole. In fact, my need to hide who I was meant that I was constantly lying. I told myself that I had no choice, but I hated the fitting-in, getting-along, doing-and-saying-what-you-should kind of thing that passed for truth in my life. What I wanted, what I yearned for, was truth that was sufficiently difficult, contradictory, painful, and mysterious enough to feel like truth to me.

In the gnarled, often terrible text of the 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, or that I shouldn't mix my fabrics. 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've 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'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, 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 very 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.

*

Though I had an intense relationship with Torah before my transition, transition has definitely changed the way I read Torah. Over the past two years, I have returned to familiar passages with new eyes, desperate for insight into the issues of gender and identity that have become so urgent for me. Academics might say that I've been "transgendering" the Torah. I would say that I'm simply doing what the Torah asks of all of us: reading it with my whole being, looking to it to illuminate the parts of myself and my life that are most in need of illumination. As a trans-Jew, I not only have a right but an obligation to read Torah as a transsexual; and when I exercise that right and fulfill that obligation, the Torah turns toward me faces I have never seen before.

It's common knowledge that Genesis portrays the gender binary as an absolute aspect of humanity: "So God created humanity in God's own image... Male and female created God them." (Gen. 1:27) According to this verse, before identity or history or desire or love, before there was a single individual human being, there were two God-created genders. 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 from the perspective of those whose gender doesn't fit neatly into "male" or "female," this verse is the cornerstone of several millennia of theological and social disaster, for it elevates the gender binary to the same ontological level as light, time and other building blocks of Creation. According to this verse, transsexuals, intersex and other gender-complicated

folks are not part of the blueprint of existence. Not only don't we exist; we aren't even possible. As a religious trans-Jew, this verse poses problems beyond dogma or even social persecution. If God did not imagine me, how can I imagine myself?

Our sages softened the absolutism of this passage; four distinct genders are recognized in the Talmud, and Kabbalistic mystics read Genesis 1:27 as implying that the first human, Adam Kadmon, the primordial Adam, was created as a hermaphrodite, embodying, like God, both sides of the gender binary. But even these teachings don't make room for transsexuals and many other gender identities.

Fortunately, this verse is not Genesis' final statement about gender. 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).

In this version, humanity is not created categorically. God doesn't just say, “Let there be people.” God creates a single human being, an individual, by hand, gathering, shaping and animating the dust rather than making a magisterial pronouncement. Like someone acquiring their first pet, God then has to take care of this new creature, to think about and respond to his needs. God creates a place for Adam – the Garden of Eden – and gives him a purpose in the world, “to work [the Garden] and guard it” (2:15). Once Adam has place and purpose, he has agency, the ability to make decisions, and that brings up a new need: morality, a sense of should and shouldn't, to guide and shape that agency – in this case, God's ill-fated prohibition against eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Though God has now devoted more narrative time and effort to creating humanity than to creation of light, dark, Heaven, Earth, sky, stars and time combined, Adam is still wanting. “It is not good that the man be alone” (2:18), God reflects, a moment of Divine empathy that inspires the creation of “every beast of the field and every bird of the sky” (2:19) in the effort to find a creature that can keep Adam company. This is a trial-and-error process; God isn’t sure what sort of companion Adam needs – a dog? A cat? A condor? – so all the animals and birds are paraded before Adam to be named. Though Adam comes up with names for the animals, he doesn’t find what he’s looking for: “a helper corresponding to him” (2:20). So 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 the companion he couldn’t find among the animals: “This,” he says, “is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” (2:23).

But though Adam is overjoyed to find someone like him in the world, this someone isn’t exactly like him. Adam recognizes both Eve’s similarity and her difference by classifying her as “*isha*,” woman, the feminine form of the Hebrew word for “man.” In other words, the creation of Eve also marks the creation of gender, and the gender binary. When Adam was alone, he wasn’t defined by gender; he was defined by his humanity. After all, as he found when he named the animals, he was the only one of his kind. The moment he recognizes Eve’s likeness and unlikeness, the moment he names her “woman,” he names himself “man.”

Before the birth of gender, the universe was a lonely place for Adam, full of animals, full of God, but missing that crucial other whose “correspondence to him”

would enable him to feel at home in the world. With the complement of femaleness, the creation of man – and of humanity – is complete.

This story defines gender very differently than “Male and female created God them.” In Genesis’ first account of the creation of humanity, gender is a given of humanity. In the second, gender is created through an arduous, messy process. In the first version, gender is part of the Divine template for existence; in the second, it is a response to Adam’s loneliness, his need to feel at home in a world that isn’t human. In the first version, maleness and femaleness represent wholeness; in the second, gender emerges through a literal hole that physically embodies Adam’s sense of incompleteness.

Amazingly – or perhaps not so amazingly – we continue to live in terms of these contradictory definitions of gender. On the one hand, we tend to treat gender as a given of existence. 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, social security or other benefits, 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 – before we have functional lungs or nervous systems, we can be boys and girls, and if not, we are labeled “male” or “female” the moment our pelvises see the light of day. The force of the gender binary – the Procrustean power of these abstract classifications to shape “living souls” – is tragically attested to by the number of newborns whose ambiguous or otherwise gender-fudging genitalia are surgically “corrected” by doctors without even informing the parents. In this sense, as Genesis 1:27 suggests, gender is

absolute; our admission to existence is contingent on assignment to a place in the system. Male and female, we create our children, and ourselves.

But as Genesis' second account of the creation of humanity suggests, gender is also a long, complicated process that only begins at birth, an ongoing, regionally, culturally, ethnically, familially, situationally specific, trial-and-error process of learning, practice, internalization and expression. The gender of an octogenarian has little do with the gender of an adolescent, no matter what the two have in common in terms of genitalia and chromosomes. The gender of the young veiled bride is very different from the gender the same woman will live when she is a forty-something mother of three, and both are different from the gender she lives when she is in hospital scrubs performing surgery. The twenty-something guy who looks for a different partner every night is living a different gender than he will be living when he becomes a priest, or a Little League coach.

In short, as God and Adam discover in Genesis 2, gender is constantly shaped and reshaped by our twin needs for companionship and a place in the world. Gender is not only a matter of bodies or even souls; it is a way of relating to one another that enables us to feel like ourselves. The fact that gender grows out of our negotiation of relationships means that 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 who see us, know us and need us in different ways. Without compromising anyone's sense of us as male or female, we constantly redefine maleness and femaleness to fit the needs of the moment.

In this sense, both accounts in Genesis are true; or rather, truth is what we get when we hold the contradictions together. Gender is both a set schema and a relationship-driven process, an absolute template and a fluid mode of self-expression.

Moreover, as I've discovered, both aspects of gender have advantages, even for a transsexual. For years, the absolute template version of gender enabled me to modify my male identity without publicly transitioning. I was able to shave off my beard, grow out my hair, begin to grow breasts, raise the pitch of my voice and change my gestural language without a single personal or professional acquaintance, gay or straight, suspecting that I was trans. Many people later told me that they noticed that I was changing, but assumed I had some terrible 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 living as a man and going out as a woman, that absolute system was, well, a Godsend. I may not have looked much like a normal man or woman, but since I had to be one or the other, everyone went along with my presentation of the moment. As in a Shakespearean comedy, I found that all I had to do was change my clothes and rearrange my hair to find myself on the opposite side of the binary.

Since I've begun to transition publicly, I've found myself leaning more on the definition of gender that has its roots in the story of the creation of Eve. Creating femaleness out of the substance of maleness is exactly what I've been trying to do these past few years. As one study of child development points out, the emergence of gender identity is a dual process: we learn to act like the gender we "are" partly 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 don't have to try to attain a femininity that is by definition, other than me, a costume I'm putting on or dance steps I'm learning. Like my breasts' anatomical potential to grow when exposed to estrogen, femininity is a potential within me. Like Adam, I simply – simply! – had to cut myself open to give birth to the femaleness swaddled and smothered by my masculinity.

I know that this reading of the Torah is personal and idiosyncratic. But just as we can grow through reading Torah, the Torah grows by being read through our very different lives. If it didn't, it would be like the Code of Hammurabi, or the Tale of Gilgamesh – 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 deep roots nourish the endlessly ramifying limbs and leaves of our individual lives. The Torah only remains alive, only remains fresh and startling and new, by becoming part of the lives blossoming and dying around it. Our lives: straight lives, gay lives, male lives, female lives, trans lives, children's lives, adult lives, the lives of those opening their arms to the world and the lives of those about to leave it. When we read the Torah with our whole selves, the Torah grows toward us, through us, toward us, toward the futures emerging through us. The Torah, our Sages tell us, is our life, and the length of our days. If that's true, no matter who or what we are, we can find our lives within it.