

Reading Between the Angels:

How Torah Speaks to Transgender Jews

For most of my life, I've been following the weekly cycle of Torah readings that annually carry Jews through the five books of Moses, from Genesis to Deuteronomy. Every week, in every portion, something speaks to me as a transgender Jew. This may seem odd, not to say psychotic, since the Torah only once addresses transgender issues – and that's to assure us that God abhors cross-dressing, which is why many trans Jews feel cut off from Judaism's sacred texts and traditions.

Trans people often feel marginal in the GLBT world, but when it comes to religious alienation, we have lots of company. Even when conservative religious leaders aren't going viral with [Youtube rants](#) urging parents to break gender-variant children's “limp wrists”), many LGBT folk feel excluded from religious discourse and shunned by religious communities.

Lately, Orthodox Jewish opposition to President Obama's support for same-sex marriage has reinforced the idea that Jewish tradition has no place for LGBT Jews. For example, [the National Council of Young Israel announced that](#):

As members of a community that abides by the precepts of the Torah, we are firm believers that marriage is a sacred bond between a man and a woman, [and] we simply cannot accept a newfound social position that alters the value, definition, and sanctity of marriage as set forth in the Torah, which has guided us for thousands of years.

But the Torah doesn't portray “marriage [as] a sacred bond between a man and a woman.” To take one famous example, the Biblical patriarch Israel (aka Jacob), from whom the National Council of Young Israel and the state of Israel take their names, had two wives – sisters – and two concubines, and children with all four of them.

It's not surprising that the Bronze Age norms portrayed in the Torah differ from those of even the most pious of twenty-first century Orthodox Jews. But it is surprising that Orthodox Jews who

devote their lives to studying Torah ignore what the Torah actually says about sexual and gender norms, and, in regard to LGBT people, deny the ongoing work of interpretation they otherwise accept as necessary in order to “abide[] by [the Torah's] precepts” in 21st century lives.

However, if we listen closely – very closely, because Orthodox Jews who express these views risk being ostracized from their close-knit communities – we can hear the voices, many voices, of Orthodox Jews who reject the idea that the Torah would be used to hurt rather than to heal, to push LGBT Jews away rather than gathering us in.

Even before the latest same-sex marriage debate, I knew there were courageous LGBT allies in the Orthodox Jewish world. I teach at Yeshiva University, an Orthodox Jewish school that gave me tenure as a man, and, after transition, promoted me to full professor. My students are young Orthodox Jewish women. They wear long skirts and shape-concealing long-sleeved blouses; many will feel like failures if they aren't engaged by graduation. These pious, often politically conservative young women accept me as a teacher, and often as mentor and confidant.

I believe that my students' acceptance grows out of their study of the very Torah that so many of Orthodox leaders cite to justify rejection of LGBT Jews. Traditional Jewish Torah study is based on the premise that the truth embodied by the Torah is beyond human comprehension, and that only by comparing our different, blurry, individual interpretations can we approach Divine truth. In fact, one tradition teaches that you can't effectively study Torah alone, because then you would have no one to disagree with. Because Jews have looked to the Torah to guide our lives for almost three millenia, even the most literal-minded Orthodox Jews know that the Torah can't simply be read – it must be studied, interpreted, argued over, in order to yield living, livable truth. No one, no matter how learned, gets to determine the absolute meaning of the text, because any such meaning would be as limited and fallible, as bound by cultural assumptions and historical accidents, as the human being who asserted it. My students' acceptance of me, someone whose life, choices, values and version of Judaism is radically different from their own, reflects a deeply traditional vision of the Torah as a Tree of Life whose

transcendent branches spread above and embrace all human experience – including the experience of Jews like me, who don't fit Orthodox Jewish gender conventions.

Because my family wasn't religious, I didn't grow up with institutionalized voices insisting that the Torah has no room for people like me. In fact, when I started reading the Torah on my own – I was 9 or 10 – I saw God AS someone like me, someone struggling to join a human community despite lacking a body that human beings could see, love, understand. The Torah portrays the Israelites as unable to perceive, conceive or even believe in the presence of God even after decades of visible daily miracles, like manna.

To me, God's rage at not being perceived and frustrated longing for love seemed to reflect my own feelings as a closeted transkid. So even though the Torah said that God abhorred me for cross-dressing, I clung to it, because the Torah was the only text, the only voice that spoke to my transgender fears and longings. To me, the Torah was not just a Tree of Life – it was the Tree of my Life, rooting my struggles in the three-thousand-year-old struggles of the Jewish people, leading me along its ramifying branches toward the God who, inexplicably, had created me.

Jewish tradition holds that every Jewish soul is represented by a letter in the Torah. So when I say the Torah speaks to me as a transgender Jew, I'm expressing a radically but profoundly traditional view – because tradition insists that I too am part of the Torah, that its stories are my stories, that its paths are mine. And why shouldn't they be? Being transgender is just a particular mode of being human, and despite all the space devoted to God, the Torah is essentially about being human.

For example, much of the weekly reading named Nasso (Numbers 4:21-7:89), focuses on two questions that every trans person – and every other person – has struggled with: who counts in society, and who is pushed outside it. Nasso begins with God ordering Moses to count and assign priests responsibility for setting up and taking down the Tent of Meeting, the portable shrine on which religious life centered while the Israelites wandered toward the Promised Land. Only males between the ages of 30 and 50 were counted. I can imagine how God-besotted Levites, too young or too old or

too wrongly gendered, felt, knowing their bodies were keeping them from serving God as they felt born to.

As Nasso makes clear, devotion, conviction, our inner sense of who we are, aren't enough to make us the people we were born to be. If they were, I would never have needed to transition. My sense of being female would have been enough. To become myself, I needed to be recognized, counted by, those around me – and to have work that enabled me to both support myself and give me a place in society. Trans Americans literally aren't counted – there is no census data on us, no clinical trials to statistically determine the benefits and risks of different hormonal protocols. No one knows how many of us kill ourselves, how many find jobs, how many live on the streets. Even those of us lucky enough to have jobs and places to live struggle to find places in our families, communities, professions; like the uncounted Levites, many of us feel left out of the gender-normative life that surrounds us.

But for me, feeling left out is infinitely better than the revulsion and expulsion I feared would result if I ever came out as trans. Nasso speaks to those experiences too:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Instruct the Israelites to remove from camp anyone with an eruption or a discharge... Remove male and female alike; put them outside the camp so they do not defile the camp of those in whose midst I dwell. The Israelites did so, putting them outside the camp (Num. 5:1-4).

For most Jews, the image of people going door-to-door searching for those whose bodies “defile” their society seems like an eerie premonition of the Holocaust; as a trans Jew, it is a lifelong nightmare I relive whenever I approach an airport security frisking or body-imaging machine. Though door-to-door searches aren't in fashion these days, many of trans people know what it's like to be “removed from the camp” – pushed out of family, work place, community because others feel defiled by the “eruption” of our gender identities.

For me, the removal process started at home. When I started living full-time as myself, my ex was adamant that my children would be psychologically and socially damaged if I saw them, dressed as

a woman. I moved three towns away, and for years changed back into male drab before I picked them up. At first I saw them five days a week. I had a lot of time on my hands, because I had also been “removed” from another “camp” – Yeshiva University, when I came out as trans after earning tenure as a man. The school put me on “involuntary research leave”; I could stay on the payroll as long as I didn't set foot on campus. When my father died a few months later, my mother, who didn't hesitate to say she accepted me when I came out to her, said she wasn't ready to have family and friends see me at my father's funeral. I stayed away, and mourned alone outside the camp.

The removal process God commands in this passage seems cruel – even traditional Jewish commentaries find it hard to rationalize – but in some ways it's kinder than the gender-based removals many of us have endured. God doesn't accuse the Israelites expelled from the camp of moral failing, sin or crime. The eruptions and discharges that “defile” them are natural consequences of being human. And horrific as it must have been, their removal from the camp was temporary. After priests certified that their defiling conditions had healed and performed appropriate rituals of cleansing, they were welcomed back. But too often, transgender people are treated as inherently uncleanably defiled; we are pushed outside our families, social circles and professions for years, decades – sometimes the rest of our lives. There are no rituals to help others accept us as “clean,” no authorities to certify that we can and should be welcomed back. Even the Israelites targeted for removal are recognized as human – they are referred to as “men and women.” But it can be hard to be recognized as human when you live outside the humanizing categories of “man” and “woman.” I've been referred to in print as an “it,” and been told that the best thing I can do for society is to hide myself away.

Such attitudes have no basis in the Torah. Moses says that those who cross-dress are “abhorrent” to God – but he doesn't say that cross-dressers aren't human, or should be “removed from the camp.” And though the Talmud doesn't discuss transgender people, the brief discussion of intersex Jews makes it clear that they have a place in the Jewish community despite their gender-non-conforming bodies.

The mildness of the Torah's transphobia – and my own experience – gives me faith that trans Jews will ultimately find acceptance throughout the Jewish world. Though my true self has never stopped erupting, the Jewish communities from which I was removed have gradually made room for me. My mother has been slowly telling family and friends about my transition; lately she's been the major distributor of copies of my memoir, [*Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey Between Genders*](#). My children still aren't comfortable having me in their schools or social lives, but they barely noticed when I stopped presenting myself to them as a man, and they don't hesitate to go around with me, outing us all by calling me “Daddy”; my daughter embraced me on the bimah at her bat mitzvah. After only a year of “involuntary research leave,” Yeshiva University allowed me to return to campus – and four years later, my class enrollments are as high as they were when I taught as a man.

But though I'm back in these various Jewish camps, I still feel acutely conscious of being seen as different. Though being visibly different is often stigmatized in secular American society, it is central to Judaism: visible difference is the basis of both Jewish identity and *kedushah*, the “holiness” Jewish identity is supposed to represent. Many of the Torah's laws and the traditions that have grown out of them are designed to mark Jews as different from – and more devoted to God than – their non-Jewish neighbors. And as the part of Nasso devoted to the nazirite laws makes clear, even within the Jewish community, visible difference was associated with holiness:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying.... If anyone, man or woman, explicitly utters a nazirite's vow, to set themselves apart for the Lord, they shall abstain from wine and any other intoxicant.... [and] no razor shall touch their heads.... [Num. 6:1-5]

With their untrimmed hair and aversion to wine – a beverage central to social life in every Mediterranean culture – nazirites must have stuck out like sore thumbs in Israelite society. But for nazirites, being “set apart” by socially problematic difference didn't remove them from the camp – it gave a special place within it, because they were set apart for God.

Like me, many trans Jews feel “set apart” by our socially problematic differences – but unlike

the nazirites, we have no laws or traditions to give our differences meaning within Jewish communities. As a result, even the most LGBT-friendly Jewish communities often don't know what to make of us. Despite important transgender policy advances adopted by the Reform, Reconstructionist, and – slowly – Conservative movements, few transgender Jews see their Jewish communities as completely safe and welcoming. Some, like my very progressive synagogue, try to ignore our differences – but it's hard to ignore something as fundamental as our gender identity without subtly setting us outside the normal life of the community. My synagogue has no rituals for its few trans members; though references to God have been gender-neutralized, other ritual language is thick with gendered pronouns. Transgender Jews are included in its welcoming statement, but my rabbi was at first inclined to go along when my ex argued that my daughter should be called to the Torah by my old male Hebrew name at her bat mitzvah. As my rabbi learned during my two-hour response to my ex's demand, if a Jewish community really wants to welcome transgender Jews, it has to rethink innumerable policies and practices – a process that will take years of patient and compassionate dialogue in each community.

Until Jewish communities do that work, transgender identity will remain a nameless blank between the recognized poles of the gender binary. But according to the end of Nasso, it was in such a space that Moses heard the voice of God:

When Moses went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with God, he would hear the Voice addressing him from above the cover that was on top of the Ark of the Pact between the two [statues of] *keruvim* [fiery angels]; thus God spoke to him. (Num 7:89)

This passage describes the holiest of holy places in the Israelite camp, where the stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments rested in “the Ark of the Pact” beneath two beaten gold angels. But the Voice of God didn't come from the angels: it came from the space between them. If Moses wanted God to speak to him, he had to address the nameless space between human categories and images.

It's uncomfortable to live in the nameless space between binary gender's fiery angels. It can be just as uncomfortable for my fellow Jews to face that space, to acknowledge the perspective it

represents, to listen to the voice, my voice, neither male nor female, that issues from it. But when we meet each other there, God speaks with and through us.