

Transgender Jews

When Rachel Pollack was four, she knew she was a girl. Like other girls her age, she liked wearing her sister's clothes and imagining herself as her father's "darling." Only . . . Rachel was a son to her loving, Orthodox parents and to the outside world. A regular boy. No one knew about her secret—core—identity as a girl, nor about the fantasies, the furtive opportunities for cross-dressing, and the powerful desire to be acknowledged as a female.

Through all the milestones of latency and adolescence, no one knew about the confusion roiling the cowboys-and-Indians-playing kid, the religious bar mitzvah boy who put on t'fillin to pray, and later, the non-dating high-schooler.

At 25, Rachel "came out" as a woman to her female partner, to her students at SUNY Plattsburgh, to her parents and their close community in Poughkeepsie, New York.

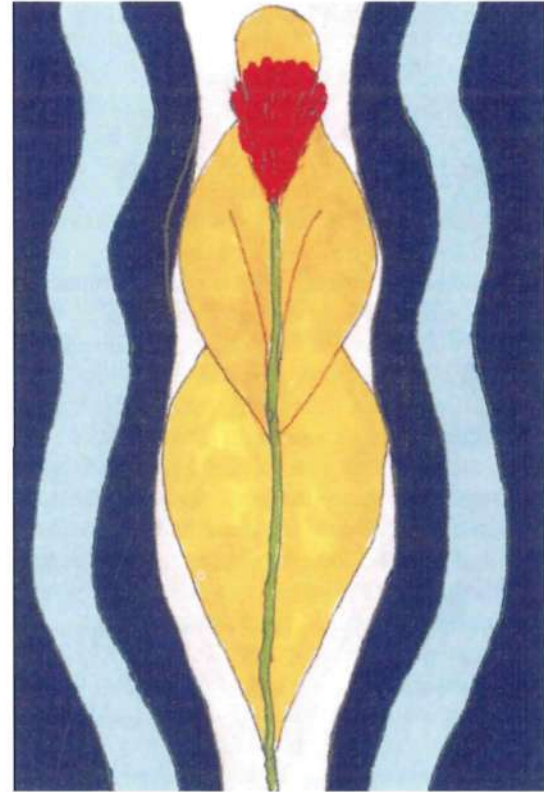
At 31, living in Amsterdam, she had the surgery that brought her body into consonance with her gender identity.

At 45, back in the U.S., an award-winning novelist and author of comic books and Tarot decks, she celebrated her bat mitzvah in Woodstock, New York. For her hand-painted bat mitzvah tallit, Pollack used the *ateret*, the collar-binding with the prayer embroidered on it, from the bar mitzvah tallit she'd worn decades earlier. (Amazingly, after she removed the *ateret* from her old tallit, she saw that it had another prayer-strip underneath it, almost as if there had been an extra lying in wait for her all those years: one complete tallit for being a male, one for being female.)

"A girl or a boy?" is the first question you ask when a baby is born. Most of us think of ourselves as ineluctably either male or female, and we usually expect the answer to remain the same throughout our lives.

But it's not so for everyone. For a variety of reasons, some people feel themselves—in the deepest core of their being—to be born into the wrong presenting body. They may have the physical markers labeled "female," for example, but feel themselves to be male. Or they may have been born with ambiguous genitals (intersex), a condition often altered by surgery early in life.

Trangendered people (the term includes those living as another gender from the one they were born into as well as transsexuals, those who have altered their gender physically in some way) are now a presence on the identity spectrum, and in Jewish life as well. "We used to refer just to gay and lesbian," says Mark Pelavin of Washington's Religious Action Center, which addresses a wide range of human



rights issues. "Now we add 'transgender' too." Kolot, The Center for Women's and Gender Studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia, includes transgender as a subject on this year's curriculum. Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, the training seminary for Reform rabbis, held a day-long session on transgender Jews for its New York students this winter. And the 92nd Street Y summer community service trip for Jewish high schoolers—Tiyul—has participants spend an evening in discussion with a transgendered person, so the teens can understand "that all people deserve love and caring and advocacy," says the director of the Y's teen programs, Sharon Goldman.

Alyson Meiselman, 51, a Maryland attorney, now specializes in gender law. Meiselman became a woman at 47. "As a kid, I always wanted to wake up one morning and be female," she says. "I had cross-dressed always—but that was symptomatic. A transsexual person doesn't cross-dress for sexual gratification. It's more like a sedative; it makes you feel calm." Meiselman, who grew up in a traditional Conservative family, remembers as a USYer helping dry out books after the Jewish Theological Seminary fire in 1967. She's still active in a Washington-area synagogue, and a former rabbi of hers appears in a television documentary about her transition "saying, basically, that the person is changing their body, not changing their mind."

Not everyone is so supportive. Amy Bloom, in her forthcoming book *Normal*, says, "A great many people, sick of news from the margins, worn out by the sand shifting beneath their assumptions, like

to imagine Nature as a sweet, simple voice. Bloom, whose 1994 New Yorker report on female-to-male transsexuals broke new ground, continues, “[O]ur mistake is thinking that the wide range of humanity represents aberration when in fact it represents just what it is: range. Nature is not two little notes on a child’s flute; Nature is more like Aretha Franklin: vast, magnificent, capricious—occasionally hilarious—and infinitely varied.”

Today there are examples aplenty of this gender variety, both in popular culture and in the law. The New York Times Magazine features a transsexual couple on its cover; Michigan State University debates creating a transgender bathroom, and all-women Smith College rules that no student can go on male hormones while enrolled. The Today Show reports a Kansas City court may decide that a widow cannot inherit her husband’s estate because she was born a man, and the Times covers the case of a transgendered man in court in Florida trying to gain custody over his children.

Though demographers don’t know the actual number of people who have transitioned from one gender to another, whether through surgery, hormones, or a choice to live as the “opposite” sex without physical alteration, clearly, this is a moment in the zeitgeist when “transgender” is on our radar screen. And Jewish transgendered people are beginning to go public with their experiences. Margaret Rothman, coordinator of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender services at San Francisco’s Jewish Family and Children Services, says “Half of my GLBT speakers bureau is transgender—they’re dying to talk.” Although they represent a tiny minority, Jews crossing gender boundaries are becoming increasingly vocal.

What do we possibly learn from them? Hebrew Union College rabbinical, cantorial and education students have begun to find out. A “Pluralism and Tolerance” program addressed “the challenging question of the religious, legal and policy issues arising over gender identity.” Joining the students and faculty members were a rabbi, a legal expert and a transgender person discussing law, Jewish tradition and “the intense personal feelings that underlie this issue.” The point, says Dean Aaron Panken, was “not to make policy or public statements, but rather to inform our students of the possible presence of such individuals in their congregations and organizations, helping

them to respond with sensitivity to the human beings involved.”

Many transgender Jews feel very strongly about finding their place in the Jewish community and spiritual solace in Judaism. Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig, who organized the HUC symposium, comments that this devotion exists despite the fact that the strictest interpretation of Jewish law forbids transsexual surgery. (“Sex-change operations involving the surgical removal of sexual organs are clearly forbidden on the basis of explicit Biblical prohibition,” writes Rabbi J. David Bleich).

Rabbi Wenig concluded the symposium at HUC-JIR: *Anne Fausto-Sterling, an embryologist at Brown University, has argued that there are not two but five sexes, in addition to male and female. She introduced the terms: “herms” (true hermaphrodites, born with a testis and an ovary), “merms” (born with testes and some aspect of female genitalia) and “ferms” (born with ovaries and some aspect of male genitalia)*

“Male and female God created them? “I believe this verse is an example of the figure of speech called “merism” in which a totality is expressed by two contrasting parts (e.g. “young and old,” “thick and thin,” “near and far.”) In other words: “Zachar u’nikveva bara otam.” “God created male and female and every combination in between.”

So... Is someone who is intersex a man, or a woman, for purposes of gender-specific Jewish ritual? Should a transgendered woman be welcomed into a Rosh Hodesh group? Can a transgendered man be counted in an Orthodox minyan? If one has “transitioned” from female to male with surgery (FtM, in shorthand), is it necessary to have a brit milah, a ritual circumcision, to be considered a Jewish man? And despite the fact that Jewish law, in its strictest interpretation, forbids mutilation of genitals (circumcision excepted), what is a compassionate way to help a Jew live as her or his true self?

We ask because the questions themselves—as you will see from the following pages—may teach us some things about gender and about Judaism. It’s surprising—and refreshing—to note that some of these questions were considered centuries ago by the rabbis who encoded Jewish law and practice; nothing human was alien to them.

SUSAN WEIDMAN SCHNEIDER

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הַאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ
לְמִינֵהּ וְאֶת-הַבְּהֵמָה לְמִינָהּ וְאֶת
הָאָדָמָה לְמִינֵהּ וַיְבָרָא אֱלֹהִים בְּיָמֵינוּ
וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים גַּעֲשֵׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ
בְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרֵדוּ בְדִגְתַּת הַיָּם וּבְעֶשֶׂף הַשָּׁמַיִם
וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל-הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֶמֶשׂ
עַל-הָאָרֶץ: וַיְבָרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם
בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלֵּם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה
בָּרָא אֹתָם: וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר
לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ
וּבְכַשֵּׁה וַיְרֵדוּ בְדִגְתַּת הַיָּם וּבְעֶשֶׂף הַשָּׁמַיִם
וּבְכָל-חַיַּת הָרֶמֶשׂ עַל-הָאָרֶץ: וַיֹּאמֶר
אֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה נַתַּתִּי לָכֶם אֶת-כָּל-עֵשֶׂב וְזֶרַע
זֶרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת-כָּל-
הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר-בָּהָר פֶּרִי-עֵץ זֶרַע וְזֶרַע לָכֶם יִהְיֶה
לְאֹכְלָהּ: וְלָכָל-חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ וְלָכָל-עֶשֶׂף
הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלָכָל חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-בָּהָר

Gender in Genesis

And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them (Genesis 1.27, JPS translation).

So God created the human/humanity (*ha-adam*) in God’s image. In the image of God, God created *him/it*: male and female God created them (Genesis 1.27, my translation).

Genesis 1:27, for all its brevity, is difficult to translate—the original Hebrew eludes our easy understanding. Because of this difficulty, we often ignore this account of human creation altogether, concentrating instead on the other, more familiar account of human creation—in which woman is created from man (Genesis 2:21-23). We forget that there is any other biblical paradigm for thinking about the creation of humans and gender, even though the Hebrew Bible itself repeats Genesis 1:27 practically verbatim at Genesis 5:2.

In part, the difficulty decoding Genesis 1.27 stems from its fluctuation between singular and plural, and from the lack of punctuation in the Hebrew Bible. Seemingly slight differences in punctuation can alter our understanding of a crucial question: how does the phrase ‘male and female’ relate to the phrase ‘in the image of God’? In my translation of the verse, I suggest that

Bet You Didn't Know... what the Talmud says about Gender Ambiguity

Whatever tendencies we might have to think that “gender studies” is a concept new to the world after feminism, the rabbis of the Talmud have been deeply fascinated by the exceptions and margins of gender for well over 1500 years.

The rabbis who created Jewish law lived in a male dominated society, so it is unsurprising that rabbinic law treats the male as the norm and the female, by definition, as an anomaly—a deviation from the norm. Still, the sages do perceive women as human beings, creatures similar to men in important ways. Women are both ‘like’ and ‘not like’ men.

This leaves the rabbis in a quandary when they stumble across individuals whose gender categories are even more unclear than those of women. Women, at least, have a role that is obvious to the sages—they are exempt from certain commandments, while Jewish men are obligated to all commandments under most circumstances. So, what is to be done with those who do not fit neatly into one of these categories?

It is not perfectly clear how many genders the rabbis recognized: perhaps as few as two (male, not-male), or perhaps as many as seven. In Tractate Yevamot (begins on

79b) the Babylonian Talmud discusses the following gender categories:

- *Androgynos*: a person who has aspects of both male and female genitalia
- *Tumtum*: a person whose genitals are obscured, making their gender uncertain
- *Aylonit*: a female who fails to produce signs of female maturity by the age of twenty.
- *Saris*: the general term for a male who does not produce signs of maturity by the age of twenty (there is some debate about whether he needs to fail to produce all signs, or only some of them to be considered a *saris*). The category of *saris* can be further broken down into two: a *saris khama* is a male who is sterile because he was born that way, and a *saris adam* is a male who is sterile because he was castrated.

Note that the rabbis define a person's gender strictly according to external physical attributes, not behavior; that is, they do not have the modern notion that a person might have male genitalia and still identify as a woman.

The discussion in Tractate *Yevamot* is typical of the talmudic process, attempting to clarify which people must observe which aspects of Jewish law. Generally, *tumtumim* are treated like women (exempt from many commandments), and *androgynoi* are somewhat in between the legal categories of men and women. For example, *tumtumim* and women cannot fulfill the obligation to blow the shofar for themselves or for others; *androgynoi* can fulfill their obligation for themselves, but not for others. A man, however, can blow the shofar for himself *and* for others. In this way, the Rabbis of the Talmud managed to include intersex Jews into their system of Jewish law and ritual participation.

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not only did God create human(ity)—male and female—in God's image, but that God's image is both male and female.

During the rabbinic period (1st–7th centuries CE), some of the rabbis resolved the problem of the two creation stories by understanding the first human as a two-sexed being (*androgynos*), who is then quite literally split into two differently gendered beings (Genesis Rabbah 8:1; Leviticus Rabbah 14:1 and parallels). This interpretation reflects, and simultaneously helped to construct, certain *ideals* about gender differentiation during the rabbinic period.

As transgender Jews and allies look to our traditions, we can now ask again what becomes of the first human: male and female? Can we read our texts in order to reflect, and simultaneously help construct, new ideals about gender for our own society? Perhaps we can. First, we can note that according to Genesis Rabbah 8:1, even though *adam* is split into two separate genders, God remains one: both male and female.

Furthermore, we might stress that Genesis Rabbah 8:1 records another interpretation of *adam* in which the first human is a “golem”—an undifferentiated, perhaps ungendered, being. That this undifferentiated *adam* is created in God's image provides us a model

for a God who trans(cends) gender altogether—a God who is both male and female, meaning neither

Although Genesis Rabbah 8:1 does not imagine a world where a person who identifies as both female and male can refuse to be split in two, we can work to shape a world where *ze* proclaims *hir* creation in the image of God. Even though Genesis Rabbah does not envision a world where a person might choose to identify as *neither* female nor male, thus existing outside of a rigid bi-gender system—we must affirm all gender expressions and identities.

I began by stating that Genesis 1:27 is difficult. What I mean to say is that Genesis 1:27 is complex. In fact, what is most queer about this verse is its ability to challenge—or dare—us to understand it easily. It prophecies, as it were, gender *trouble*. This verse, which at least mythically purports to usher gender into the world, simultaneously canonizes gender ambiguities.

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In the Image of God

BY DANYA RUTTENBERG



Kate Bornstein, author of *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*, describes trying to end her Jewish marriage with a *get*, a divorce document. She says “I couldn’t give a *get*. I went to four or five rabbis who said that only a man could give a *get* to my ex-wife, but I had already transitioned [from male to female.] I finally found a radical dyke rabbi in the East Village who helped.” It was, she muses, “more of a comedy than anything.”

The “trans” movement has, in a way, taken

some of feminism’s work and pushed it even further. If a culture that thrives in part on gender oppression loses its concrete anchor on “gender,” the system as a whole must shift.

The division of people into the rigid categories of male and female isn’t as universal as we might expect. The Talmud records seven genders [See “What the Talmud Says about Gender Ambiguity” page 25]; Navajo culture identifies forty-nine; many African and Asian cultures have been documented as believing in sex/gender transformation. For some, a “trans” identity is really about leaving the gender assigned at birth and fully embracing another. For others, it’s about moving beyond the concept of binary gender. After all, what do you call a femme dyke who identifies more with drag queens than straight women? Or someone who self-identifies as a “trans-but- boy-dyke-fag”?

Letting go of the need to label can be liberating. Some people live happily in the gray areas of gender, experimenting with gender identity. Still others identify themselves as between, or outside, the concepts of male and female. Transgendered people can help us see even more clearly the assumptions and biases of a binary-gender society.

Jews who make the transition across genders—some of whom have found one another on listserves and through outreach programs—are adapting Jewish ritual for a whole new set of life-

cycle events. Bay Area rabbi Jane Litman has led mikveh rituals with people at various stages of gender transition—which, she reports, were extremely powerful. Litman says that, for her, the rituals were “closest to a conversionary mikveh . . . it’s a chance to let go of the past, to let go of the pain of what it is to be in a wrong presenting-gender body, to allow mikveh to heal some of that and to welcome the future, while taking in the present moment. Conversion is a rebirthing ceremony, and this is a similar rebirthing.”

Ritual is almost always used to get us through changes—from the weekday to Shabbat, from single to married, from gentile to Jew. So marking gender change with ritual seems like a natural move for a Jew. Litman’s mikveh rituals tend to include a specific *kavanah*, or meditation, for each dunk: on the first dip in the water, the participant is invited to think about what aspects of the past need to be relinquished; then, after saying the blessing for immersion, dunking while thinking about a positive vision for the future, and then comes the *Shehechyanu*, the blessing for being in the present moment. The third dunk, Litman says, is typically “an opportunity for people who have had an ambivalent relationship with their bodies to feel fully present in that body and blessed by G-d.”

Participants’ reactions to the ritual are, she says, often quite profound: “A lot of people cry. The emotional rush of feeling seen, of feeling acceptance, is very powerful.” She tells one story of a yeshiva boy who, growing up, was always extremely jealous of the women going to the mikveh; after a mikveh ritual marking her transition to female, she looked at Rabbi Litman and paraphrased the words of b’nai mitzvah with particular poignancy. “Today I am a woman,” she said.

Another ritual slowly becoming a mainstay for transgendered Jews is a name-changing—or name-taking—ritual. In Josh Goldman’s ceremony at New York’s Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, he changed his Hebrew name from Shulamit Chaya to Shmuel Chayim and combined the traditional baby-naming blessing with elements of the blessing for converts. In a self-published periodical *Timtum: A Trans Jew ‘Zine*, Micah Bazant writes: “Names are very powerful things. For a lot of people, the names given to us by our parents represent a gender identity which was wrong, humiliating and forced. So don’t ask people what their old name was. And don’t ask if our current names are our ‘given names.’ If someone wants you to know, they will tell you. And if you know someone’s old name, don’t share it with other people.”

Many of the Jewish “transguys” in California, former Jennys and Jessicas, have chosen to take names that are recognizably Jewish; in my own circle I know or know of at least four Micahs, two Isaiahs, a Jaron, a Mordechai, an Avi, several Aris and a Levi.

The trans movement has, in a way, taken some of feminism's work and pushed it even further.

Why? Micah Morris says that “A lot of us started out with names that were not very Jewish to begin with, and coming out as ‘trans’ is a way to get back in touch with who we are and what our identity is—which also for a lot of us means getting back in touch with our Jewish identity.”

There are other ways Judaism is being integrated into the gender transitioning process. For Benjamin Harvey (not his real name), his adult bar mitzvah helped to mark his becoming, literally, a man. And Micah Morris has created a personal ritual of reciting the Kaddish while injecting hormones. He says that, for him, the Kaddish is “both about mourning and thanking God, and when I was first starting to transition, there was an aspect of mourning what I was giving up, and there still is an aspect of thanking God for helping me get to this point.”

Jews often express a yearning to have synagogue be a safe, accepting, space. Josh Goldman, a 26-year-old FtM says, “I’m comfortable most of the time being read as male, but with my friends and family and faith, I want to be the full me, which is “trans” and not “guy”; I have 23 years of female experience. In a religious environment, you’re supposed to be fully seen and understood—you can’t ‘pass’ in front of God!”

If you want to make your shul a comfortable environment, Micah Morris, a 22-year-old religious-school teacher, suggests that “the golden rule really applies—if you don’t want people to ask you about your genitals, don’t ask about theirs. If you don’t want people to ask about your medical history, don’t ask about theirs. Keep in mind the principle of *lashon hara*, gossip: if something’s not necessary to say, don’t say it!” If someone who shows up to services doesn’t appear to be clearly male or female, suggests Jaron Kanegson, director of the Berkeley-based Youth Gender Project, “Give up your need to know. You probably don’t need to know, but think you need to know, and that creates a lot of anxiety.”

Before beginning gender transition, Ali Canon, a 37-year-old writer, invited over “more than a minyan” of friends and family for a ritual to mark the beginning of the journey. He also visited the men’s section of Jerusalem’s Western Wall as “a rite of passage as a Jew and the man I was becoming.” In fact, he asserts in an essay in the forthcoming anthology *Queer Jews*, the experience of “passing” at the Wall served as the catalyst for his gender transition and FtM identity. For, he writes, “I had claimed something most sacred about myself as a man before those ancient stones.”

But writer and editor T.J. Michels had a different experience at the Wall, which she also recounts in *Queer Jews*. Michels, who identifies as a “transgender butch,” was attempting to visit the women’s section of the Wall, when she was stopped by a screaming Israeli soldier who had evidently perceived her as male. Michels

“backed away from him” and moved over to the men’s section, where she “felt a wave of unwanted [male] privilege” and a sense that she needed, as a way of rejecting that privilege, to pray from the women’s section. She returned to the women’s section, where the guard looked her up and down and asked, with deep disdain, if she was a woman. Though the word didn’t resonate with her gender, Michels writes, she “had to say yes. I headed up to where the women were gathered, and prayed. Sobbing, I asked God to guide me, with patience, to become a better Jew.”

While Orthodox Judaism—which maintains and enforces the mechitzah at the Wall—is not likely to dismantle most gendered aspects of Judaism anytime soon, some Orthodox rabbis have begun to address transgender issues. In 1998 a *beit din* in Jerusalem ruled that transsexual pop star Dana International, now a woman, could be counted in a minyan. The Israeli newspaper *Maariv* quoted the rabbi as saying, “One who is born male remains so his entire life.” Yet others have begun to use Jewish law and Jewish legal process to honestly address the needs and interests of transgender Jews. Another Orthodox Rabbi has ruled in his not only that a MtF transperson doesn’t count in a minyan, but that her ex-wife doesn’t need a *get*, because she’s no longer an *eshet-ish*—a woman’s husband.

God-language is another way transgender Jews are addressing the tradition. Some Jewish feminists have argued that replacing “King of the Universe” with “Queen,” for example, helps take the sting out of a patriarchal deity. But Bari Mandelbaum, 27, identifies herself as “genderqueer,” which, she says, is “when you have a gender that is defined outside traditional concepts of gender. I don’t think I’m “trans”—I’m not crossing over anything, I’m stepping outside the definitions. I’m not a girl who wishes she was a boy, I’m not a girl who’s kind of butchy. I’m something else entirely.” And as a result, she says, “I’d personally like to see gender taken out of God altogether; any attempt to gender God is to try to make God a clergy member or a president or someone like that, who’s considered higher than us but is like us. To lay humanity over God, including to gender God, is to misperceive what the great unknowable actually is. God is an entity, an energy, greater than the whole and the whole itself.”

For many Jews, our cultural identities are marked, like transgender life, by questions of either/or, of “passing.” Are we white or “other”? Do we want to be a community unto ourselves or to engage with the rest of world? In these ways we may all be boundary crossers, with something to learn from those who are pushing the boundaries further.

DANYA RUTTENBERG, who first brought to Lilith’s attention the subject of transgender Jews, edited *Yentl’s Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism* (Seal Press) www.yentlsrevenge.com

Shul Matters

It's Friday evening and I'm all set—I've packed my kippah, a map, and a clean white shirt. The boulevard is an ocean of cars and I am a stealth minnow on my bicycle, getting soaked, searching for the dome of the synagogue. I lock up my bike, enter the lobby and start stripping off my raingear. I have prayers under my tongue and as I reach down for my kippah, I see a sign at the entrance to the sanctuary:

Please respect our traditional seating arrangement.

Men sit at the front, women at the back.

I read the sign and I respect it, although it does not even recognize that I exist.

I get back on my bike and head out into the rain.

I am not a man or a woman; I am a transgendered person with my own unique gender. When I am forced to choose between one of two options, a boy-oriented identity is what feels more comfortable and honest to me. However, as a person whose body is a mix of female and male characteristics, and whose gender expression does not fit into a rigid, socially acceptable masculine or feminine role, I often do not fit into most peoples' ideas of 'male' or 'female'. Internally, my sense of my own gender identity also does not fit into these boxes. Transpeople are often made invisible. Many of us do not fit on either side of the *mechitzah*.

—MICAH BAZANT

To learn more . . .

- Caryn Aviv and David Schneer, eds., *Queer Jews*. (Routledge, Fall 2002)
- Kate Bornstein, *My Gender Workbook: How to Become a Real Man, a Real Woman, the Real You, or Something Else Entirely* (Routledge, 1997), and *Gender Outlaw: On, Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (Vintage Books, 1995). A personal, frank book that combines auto-biography with cultural criticism.
- Amy Bloom, *Normal: Transsexual CEOs, Crossdressing Cops, and Hermaphrodites with Attitude*. (Random House, Fall 2002)
- Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (Basic Books, 1999)
- Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Firebrand Books, 1993). Novel about gender and sexual identity, featuring secular Jewish protagonist Jess Goldberg, and *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Beacon Press, 1997).
- *TimTum: A Trans Jew Zine*, edited by Micah Bazant. Available through www.panderzinedistro.com
- *The Trans-Jews list: a listserv for transgender, intersex, genderqueer and gender-questioning Jews and their allies*. trans-jews-owner@groups.queernet.org
- *The Transgender Page at Twice Blessed: Everything Jewish & LGBT*
<http://www.usc.edu/isd/archives/oneigla/tb/Transgender.html>
- *My Dad, a Great Woman*, a film originally shown on French television, about Alyson Meiselman. Her rabbi and children are also featured in the film. To borrow a copy, contact Meiselman at famlaw@his.com
- For more information about Rachel Pollack's tarot decks, comic books, fiction or non-fiction essays, contact her through rachel@rachelpollack.com

"Today I am a Man" Takes on New Meaning

L.A. native Benjamin Harvey (a pseudonym) transitioned from female to male in 1982, and celebrated his bar mitzvah three years later. Here he talks about fitting together the Jewish part of the puzzle with his gender identity:

I always enjoyed learning about Judaism, but I never had a bat mitzvah. My family was very assimilated—we didn't have a Christmas tree, but we never went to services. About the time I transitioned, I was in this support group for FtMs and I mentioned that I wanted to have a bar mitzvah; somebody recommended I talk to a local Reform rabbi who was running a b'nai mitzvah class. I had to learn the prayers, the aleph-bet, everything. I never stood on the *bimah* and said, "today I am a man," but for me, the bar mitzvah was a sign of accepting responsibly in the Jewish community as a man. Up until then I hadn't had my birth certificate changed; the bar mitzvah was the impetus—legally, I wanted to be a man by the time I had my bar mitzvah. I had the birth certificate changed in October and my Bar Mitzvah in December—I wanted everything to line up.

Before my bar mitzvah, I had meeting with the rabbi, to tell her my situation—somebody had told me that, in order to be bar mitzvahed, I was going to need a certificate of circumcision. I'm like, I don't have that! (laughs.) The rabbi was very surprised—she asked me if I had felt like my life was at stake [in my decision to transition gender.] I knew I would have killed myself if I hadn't transitioned, and I told her that. She said, "There's nothing to it, you did what you needed to do. When a person converts, it's an insult to call them an ex-Christian. It's the same thing, you're a man now."

For my bar mitzvah speech, I talked about the part of the Torah that says, "You should love your neighbor as yourself." I said, "We're instructed in the Torah to do this, but what if you don't like yourself?" I didn't mention specifically being trans. [I said,] "If I am not for myself, who will be for me—if I don't like myself, who will respect me? And if I don't respect myself, how can I respect others? And of course, there's no time like the present. You've got to have self-respect, you've got to like yourself—or how can you possibly treat others that way?" The people [at my bar mitzvah] who knew me knew exactly what I was talking about, and the people who didn't still got something out of it.

My dad and uncle came to my bar mitzvah, but my mom couldn't deal with being in a room with 150 people all calling me Benjamin. Which, needless to say, hurts a lot.

Today, if I go to services, people see me as a short Jewish guy. I can't imagine going to a service where [my gender identity] would be something they would even think about. But I didn't want to go to the congregation until I had had chest surgery—I didn't want to wear a binder [to bind down my breasts] to temple. It was uncomfortable and hot, and if somebody pats you on the back—I didn't want to deal with questions that might come up. I just wanted to go to a service, to be accepted as how I felt myself being without anything getting in the way. And, I'm sorry, 38Cs will get in the way! (laughs.)

People have asked me, "Why did you go through all of this? [Female-bodied] is the way God made you." Which, according to their argument, means that there's no such thing as a birth defect, because God never makes a mistake. According to this logic, a kid with a club foot should never be corrected. But—on the other hand—the same people who say "God made you that way" to me would try to "correct" a child born with ambiguous genitalia.

—D.R.

Illustrations by RACHEL POLLACK from the Tarot deck *The Shining Tribe*