

Beyond Stick Figures: Sermon on Parshat Va'yehi

By Rabbi Elliot Kukla

You're in a mall, a restaurant, a movie theatre, a synagogue... you look up and see a sign with two stick figures, one in pants and one in a triangular skirt. What does it mean? To many of us this is the most familiar and **unquestioned** symbol we could possibly encounter: a bathroom. But for some of us, standing underneath this sign and trying to choose between the two options can be the scariest moment in the day.

Jason plans his entire schedule carefully in order to not need a public restroom and face these two possibilities and the exclusion and humiliation that can lie behind each door. Jason is a transgender man; he was assigned female gender at birth and raised as a girl, but transitioned into living as a male as an adult. He is regularly shouted at and harassed in men's *and* women's bathrooms. In crossing the threshold into the segregated space of a public restroom, Jason is crossing one of the most fiercely defended borders in modern society.

Many of us assume that there are only two possible answers to the bathroom dilemma and we *must* fit under one sign or the other: either the stick legs or the pyramid skirt. We refuse to see how many of us can't or don't want to fit into the confines of these 2-dimensional symbols.

My three-year old nephew loves to dance. He is the only boy in his ballet class at the local YMCA. He insists on attending class dressed up in a construction worker's uniform including a hard hat and tool belt. He is lucky enough to have open-minded parents and live in a liberal community that supports his blossoming approach to gender. But I have to wonder how long his community will be so supportive. How will the world react if he still wants to dress up as a construction worker and dance ballet at age 12 or 17, or as a 40 year old man?

There are countless people in our communities who are excluded in varying degrees and ways because of our rigid definitions of gender: the eight year-old tomboy who was pushed off the football team in upstate New York, the flight attendant in Atlanta who is currently suing her employer for firing her because of her refusal to wear make-up, and the transgender woman who is shouted at and harassed every time she uses a public restroom right here in Los Angeles.

In this week's parsha, *Va'yehi*, Jacob calls his children to his deathbed and blesses them, bringing to a close the great family saga of Genesis. The most famous and acclaimed of Jacob's children is undoubtedly Joseph, the seer and political leader. And yet Joseph was also a gender non-conformist. We learn in the Torah that he was despised by his

brothers, in part because of his love for wearing a *c'tonet pasim*, an elaborate multi-colored or patterned robe that is actually women's apparel. The only other reference to such a robe in the *Tanakh* is when Tamar appears before Amnon clothed in one. A *c'tonet pasim* we read in Second Samuel, is the proper garb of "King's daughters" and in it "virgin maidens" are robed (13:18).

In the midrash Joseph is even more feminine in his appearance. According to *Bereshit Rabah* Joseph penciled his eyes, curled his hair and lifted up his heels (Bereshit Raba 134:7). Despite the innovations of feminism and egalitarianism in the last decades, I have to wonder if a man who girlishly kicks up his heels, could ever attain a high government position in contemporary America!

The idea that there are two, and only two, totally *opposite* genders, that are clearly and simply demarcated on the body, is one of the most untouchable assumptions of modern society. If we question the idea that everyone is necessarily either a man or a woman, we are also forced to question the other basic divisions we use to categorize the people around us: religious or secular, white or people of colour, working class or middle class, householder or homeless, Jew or Gentile.

Our desire to maintain neatly drawn categories of the human

experience runs so deep that we will even cause physical damage to maintain it. On November 28, 1998 Rita Hester, a transgender woman, was murdered in Northern California. Like many other hate crimes against transgender people, the murder remains unsolved. A website called “Remembering Our Dead”, that is dedicated to Rita, lists the names and biographies of hundreds of trans-men and women who have been murdered because of their gender. In the past year alone, more than 20 transgender people worldwide have been killed by hate.

We are even willing to harm infants in order to reinforce our strict definitions of sexual identity. Approximately 1 in 2,000 babies born in the United States is not easy to classify as either male or female. Think about what this number means. Each of us has met far more than 2,000 people in our lifetime, and intersex people are born in every region and within every socio-economic group, which means that the odds are that we *all* know someone who is intersex. Yet many of us may never realize this. Intersex people are invisible in our society, as their gender is usually "normalized" during infancy, childhood or adolescence with invasive medical procedures. These interventions frequently result in loss of sexual sensation, infertility, cancers, psychological scars and even occasional deaths.

Andie, an intersex teenager writes: “I have not suffered because of

my birthright, which is really how I now feel about having an intersex condition. I have suffered because of well intentioned intervention along the way that was meant to shape me into a person that someone else wanted me to be, that someone else believed I should be, that someone else thought was best for me. I was prodded and poked, photographed, examined and cut. I was six years old.”

The doctors who treated Andie without his or his parent’s consent were unable to conceive that he might be able to come to terms with his intersex identity without painful and risky medical procedures. They were simply unable to expand their vision of the possible.

Jewish tradition speaks in a different voice. According to the great texts of our tradition, the realm of the possible is constantly expanding and there is rarely a yes or no answer to any question. Judaism is a tradition that likes to draw lines: between Kosher and Trayf, Jew and Gentile, Secular and Holy. But it is the areas that fall between those lines that most interested our Sages... the time between day and night, the produce that is between fruit and bud.

The Mishna and the Talmud extensively explore the role of the intersex person in society. Unlike in our world, intersex people were not invisible to our Sages. In addition to *ish* and *isha*, man and woman,

rabbinic literature identifies four other genders. There is the *androgynos*, a person with both male and female sexual characteristics. The *tumtum*, a person with neither fully developed male or female genitals. The *ay'lonit*, a person who is assigned female gender at birth but develops male characteristics as an adolescent. And the *saris*, a person who is assigned male gender at birth but lacks male genitals. Our Sages non-judgmentally explore the role of intersex people in regards to many facets of ritual and civil law such as circumcision, redemption, oath-taking and menstruation.

The midrash, in *Bereshit Rabah*, posits that Adam, the first human being, was actually an *androgynos*. While in the Babylonian Talmud (Yevamot 64a-64b) the radical claim is made that Abraham and Sarah were *tumtumim*, gender non-conforming people. According to our tradition the first human being and the first Jews were gender outlaws. This teaches us that it is those that transgress the apparently rigid lines of Judaism that have caused the tradition to grow.

Reform Judaism has always tried to reach out to those who are marginalized. We have led the way in opening the doors of our tradition to women, Jews by choice, and interfaith families. We are learning how to include gay men and lesbians into our synagogues and communities, but we have barely begun to find ways to embrace those who break down gender

lines. A few years ago Jason was turned down for conversion to Judaism by every Reform synagogue in a large urban center because of being transgender, while Henry, another transgender man in the same city, converted with a Reform rabbi but only on the condition of being closeted about his true identity.

There are many ways that we can create a congregation or communal organization that is welcoming to trans-men and women, intersex and gender non-conforming people and to all others who do not fit comfortably into traditional gender roles. First of all, we can educate ourselves about the diversity of gender identities that exist in our community so that we are able to encounter people as individuals and not be confused or blinded by their gender. The more we are able to see others as full, well-rounded human beings, the less essential their gender may seem to us.

Secondly, we can begin to explore the way “transphobia”, the fear of gender non-conformity, exists in ourselves and in our communities. Do transgender, gender non-conforming and intersex folks make us uncomfortable or afraid? If so, how does this discomfort play itself out in our words, actions and assumptions? Do we know non-transgender people who are friends or allies to gender non-conforming people, who might be able to help us get information and work through our feelings?

Finally, we can look at ways to make our congregation or community a welcoming space. We can host support groups for transgender people and their friends, and also educational programs for the general community to help everyone become educated about gender diversity. Judaism provides us many ancient tools that we can draw upon to develop rituals for gender transitioning that focus on the spiritual side of the experience. We can even think about our bathrooms. Creating at least one single use, gender neutral bathroom in our congregation or community organization allows anyone, regardless of gender, privacy and safety without having to publically declare their gender identity.

Gender rigidity impacts us all even if we are not transgender or intersex. "Who would you be," asks transgender activist Pat Califia, "if you had never been punished for gender inappropriate behavior? What would it be like to walk down the street, go to work or attend a party and take it for granted that the gender of the people you met would not be the first thing you ascertained about them? What if we all helped each other to manifest our most beautiful, sexy, intelligent, creative, and adventurous inner selves, instead of cooperating to suppress them?"

The word *Ivrim*, Hebrews, literally means the crossing over people. We were the tribe that crossed over the Jordan to enter into a new land and

we are the people who cross boundaries to see the world from another perspective. Let us truly be *Ivrim*, people who traverse the borders that divide up our world and push open the boundaries in society that marginalize and exclude.

Two stick figures, one with legs and the other in a triangular skirt... these images are too flat to express any of our realities. May we create a joyful and expansive Judaism where *each* of us is free to express the fullness of our multi-dimensional humanity. *Ken Y'hi Ratzon!* May it be God's Will!