



## JEWISH MOSAIC THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY

P.O BOX 18743 DENVER, CO 80218 T: 303.691.3562 F: 303.557.6211 WWW.JEWISHMOAIC.ORG

### *torah* **QUEERIES**

Welcome to Torah Queeries, a joint project of Jewish Mosaic and the World Congress of GLBT Jews! Check back regularly for creative and incisive “queer” takes on the weekly Torah portion or Jewish holiday, brought to you by some of the Jewish world’s most dynamic scholars, rabbis, activists and lay leaders.

---

#### ***Surely God is in This Place: A d’var Torah for Transgender Day of Remembrance***

by **Vanessa “Vinnny” Prell**

**Parashat Vayetzei – Genesis 28:10-32:3**

on November 17, 2007 (7 Kislev 5768)

Earlier this year I attended a workshop titled “We are all Transgender.” Although I do not believe that we really are *all* transgender, I would argue that “transgender” includes more than just people who want to have or have had sex reassignment surgery. As I use it, transgender is an umbrella term that includes transsexuals — people who have used surgery and hormones to change their sex — along with androgynous folk, those who identify between genders or with no gender, and others who don’t fit in to society’s expectations of gender. For me, this umbrella includes butch women, femme men, tomboys, and those of us who satirize gender. I fit into this description in several ways, so when I speak of transgender communities I say ‘we.’

This week, as we commemorate [Transgender Day of Remembrance](#) (officially on November 20, although community memorial events will vary), I want to share a little bit about how we, as queer Jews and allies, can understand and connect with what it means to be transgender. As a people, one of the ways we traditionally seek to understand something Jewish-ly is by turning to the Torah. With that in mind, I went to this week’s parasha to see how I might better explain and understand what it means to be transgender. At first glance, Parashat Vayetzei isn’t overflowing with relevance. It covers almost 20 years of Jacob’s life, beginning with this flight from his brother, Esau, and ending with his decision to return to his homeland. In Vayetzei, Jacob has his famous vision of the angels climbing a ladder to heaven, works 14 years to marry Rachel and Leah, fathers about 10 children, and grows substantially in wealth. While reading Vayetzei more closely, one passage caught my attention:

“Jacob woke from his sleep and said, surely God is in this place, and I did not know it!” Shaken, he said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.” ...Jacob named the site Beth-El; but previously the name of the city had been Luz.” (Genesis 28:16-18)

Jacob’s re-naming is not uncommon in the Torah; our patriarchs and many other figures experience trials and blessings and then re-name the locations (an ancient form of Jewish geography). This formulation is astonishing for our purposes. I cannot think of a better way to convey the meaning behind a transgender person’s name or pronoun change: “Surely God is in this place...” Taking on a new name or pronoun marks the moment when we gather up the courage and the vision to find and embrace the image of God inside us. It is a moment of empowerment; a moment of being at home in oneself. “Surely God is in this place...”

As (mostly) gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, from a young age many of us knew the feeling of being different from others in a way we could not fully name or explain. Whether we first reacted to this difference with fear, pride, or stubbornness, we have learned the words to explain it: bisexual, gay, lesbian, homosexual, queer... there are many others. Transgender people feel this as well, and with the ridicule, prejudice, and silence around gender difference that permeates our society, the search for the right explanation for this feeling is not easy. As if that were not enough, this journey is often combined with a struggle to understand our bodies. Not just to change our bodies, but to understand why they aren't the way we expect, and to love them as they are. Such self love most certainly requires the vision and courage to see that "surely God is in this place..."

The experience of being transgender has as much in common as being lesbian, bisexual or gay. As people who challenge accepted notions of sexuality and gender, we all face hatred from religious fanatics, discrimination under the law, stigmatization from society, bombardment with messages of shame, and our acceptance is often based on the caprice of friends and family members rather than love. As gay, lesbian and bisexual people, so much of the violence we face is because we don't act like men and women are "supposed to act." On the school-yard boys, who are sissies are also called fags. Women who don't show interest in men — perhaps the most important social role for women — are called dykes. Transgender people receive these same taunts and are subjected to this same hostility. We are told that we aren't really men or women, called "it," and denied basic human rights because we do not meet rigid definitions of man or woman.

I don't know when gay, lesbian and bisexual began to be grouped with transgender people, but it is clear to me that our fates are linked. We are all targets of violence, dehumanization and inequality. We live in a world where it is hard to be different; I think we all know this. But the way to bring about change is not to blend in. In Parashat Vayetzei, Jacob teaches us that the way to change the world is to see holiness, to name it, and to never forget. Let us see the holiness in each other, respect the names we give those holy places, and never forget those who have died, because "surely God is in this place..." This year, I invite you to join me especially in remembering Nakia Ladelle Baker, Keittriat Longnawa, Moria Donaire, Michelle 'Chela' Carrasco, Ruby Rodriguez, Erica Keel, Bret T. Turner, Victoria Arellano, Oscar Mosqueda, Maribelle Reyes, and those whose names and deaths were not reported. *Zichronam l'Vracha*. May their memories — and their names — be for a blessing.

---

### ***About the Author:***



**Vanessa "Vinny" Prell** has dedicated one quarter of his life (and counting) to anti-oppression work, and continues these efforts as the Executive Director of the National Union of Jewish Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, and Intersex Students (NUJLS). An old hand at program development and workshop leading, she has conducted workshops on topics as varied as becoming an ally, sex education, religion and abortion, rape culture, and identity politics. Her background in youth empowerment has led him to work with high school and college aged youth. She graduated from UC Santa Barbara with honors, and degrees in Literature and the Study of Racism and is honored to serve as Vice President for Membership at Bet Mishpachah,

Washington DC's egalitarian Synagogue embracing a diversity of sexual and gender identities.