

Aliyah: Trans(Per)forming Jewish Ritual

By Luke Dzmura

The body is nothing more than a garment. When they are naming souls in the upper world and they call out “So-and-So, the daughter of Such-and-Such,” no body yet exists, not even in the womb. Not only that—what about the couplings in Heaven? The books of the kabbalah are full of couplings—face-to-face, back-to-back—all of them mysteries of mysteries, secrets of secrets. —Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Androgynos*

I. The Social Hall: Creation

Let’s say I meet you at Kiddush. When you and I shake hands for the first time, I am primarily concerned with what I call “the gender of first impression.” Who will you shake hands with? You will see a conservatively dressed, chubby, white man of medium height, with glasses and a goatee. If you typically employ gaydar, it will start to chime. A combination of clothing, hairstyle, voice, and facial hair creates “male” as the gender of first impression, and hopefully it “sticks”: no matter if five minutes later I tell you I spent thirty-five years as a female, you will think of me first as male, and you will see the other years as an aberration. In other words, to you, henceforward, I am “really a” man. That’s good. The reality is more complex, but it’s solid ground for our first meeting.

That’s my favorite scenario. There are others. Your perception matters as much to my identity as does my own. Gender is relational; gender is a dance, a team sport, social intercourse. In the best of all possible worlds, I can choose to live stealth; I can choose to come out. In the real world, sometimes you make that choice for me if you are either a) exceptionally observant or b) savvy to gender variance. For a transperson, each option carries a penalty.

When I choose to “live stealth,” the weight of the hidden part acquires a gravity that constrains my ability to interact with you socially. I’ll avoid behavior that might label me “feminine.” If you ask me what I think of the hummus, I’m not likely to share my recipe with you, because I’m afraid you might see me as possessing “too much feminine knowledge.” You might start to see a girl under my carefully constructed masculinity. I can’t risk that. The rabbis built fences around the Law in Talmud. So, too, I build fences onto my gender expression. Protecting the ambiguous living kernel of truth. So my years of experience as a good cook go by the wayside in order that I might appear to you as unambiguously “male.”



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Does this help you to see the “gravity well” that the hidden part of my identity generates? It gets hard to lug that unwieldy invisible thing around, and it can crash into things and wreak unexpected havoc. It can even get me killed.

When I choose to come out, and tell you I changed genders, I can see the very instant I become “not a real man” reflected in your eyes. And when I choose to reveal my female past to you, no matter how liberal your politics, you feel you have been misled, and that I have deceived you. You were talking to a dude. Hell, let’s be frank: you were hitting on me. And now, ... whoa ... he’s really a ...! It is painful for me to watch you respond with shame—your face gets red, you stammer, you stumble with pronouns—and for you, I become a really hairy, butch woman (not that there is anything wrong with that but of course it’s outside the attraction spectrum for most gay men).

The loss of three quarters of my life experience is the penalty for hiding. The loss of my authenticity as a man is the penalty for coming out. Those are not acceptable losses.

And that doesn’t even bring into the equation the possibility of your violent response to me. Gwen Araujo was murdered in 2002. Biologically male, Gwen lived as a woman. As reported by the San Francisco Chronicle (May 30, 2004), her murderers stated that Ms. Araujo had deceived them into thinking she was a woman. They claimed the “transgender panic” defense, the argument of which is, roughly, that Gwen deserved to be killed because she deceived, and thus stole the heterosexuality of the men she had sex with. Notice how Gwen – and any transperson—is in a double bind. Either she is labeled a “deceiver” if she presents herself as female, or as a “pretender” if she presents herself as a transwoman (“Oh, I get it. You’re NOT REALLY a woman. You’re really a man”).

We should watch carefully those places where we give someone no option but to be a deceiver or a pretender, where no categories for recognition are allowed. Those places are clues that indicate when and where our culture doesn’t fit us any more. These are the cracks queer lives fall between. Disruption of the “gender binary” on as many fronts as possible is necessary to make space for queer lives.

For some reason, knowing a person is transgender doesn’t tell us enough of the story. Even if I am ‘in the know’ I still want to ask “The Question.” What is “The Question?” If she were a drag queen, the name of that question would be “Eurelia Mann” and her cousin “Chaveleh Surgery.”

We see it as our right to make a genital assumption about every person we meet. Genital status is in the public domain. Our binary clothing styles are a genital code. We crack the code without thinking about it. Being able to make the genital assumption about people adds a degree of predictability – of social safety – we take for granted.



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Even though that information is held at a subconscious level, we go on trolling for it until we find out. Transpeople confound that system, and compromise our safety. Transpeople are dangerous.

So here I am at Kiddush, shaking your hand, and all these thoughts are swirling. There is something like the metaphor of the “closet” to these thoughts. Something like the closet, but smellier.

II. The Public Restroom: Revelation

You and I exchange small talk for a minute after we shake hands. Then you excuse yourself and I move on to the next introduction. Another minute with a blue-haired *bubbe* who thinks I am a *yeshiva bocher* and a good prospect for her granddaughter, and I am ready for a change of scenery. I swallow the last bite of challah and excuse myself from the social hall. A few steps down another corridor, I open the door to the men’s room.

I feel the familiar discomfort any transperson feels in the public restroom (there is no place for me, since I am not a woman and I am not biologically male; I am anxious at being “outed”). You are standing at the urinal. You heard the door open, but we don’t make eye contact. There is another urinal but I walk into the stall and close the door. In here, one must be all male, all the time. After all, that’s what the sign says: MEN. I am hiding in the open. Think too closely about it and I start to recognize (It’s a lie! Your body is lying!) I’m not really welcome here, and if folks knew, like as not I’d be out on my kiester (or worse). (You have deceived me!)

I stand with my back to the stall door and close my eyes. The lack of a space designated specifically for a person of one’s own gender takes this most private of activities and makes of it an anxiety-ridden gender performance. There is no “relief” in the act of relieving oneself; no rest in the restroom.

It comes to me then that the public restroom might be to transgender persons what the closet is to queers. The closet, extended into three dimensions: the public water closet.

But there are differences. First, when I am “in the closet” as a gay man I am not actually hiding in a two-foot-by-four-foot enclosure in my bedroom, as I am now, in the water closet. The gay closet is a metaphor; a virtual location for an “identity”, a non-corporeal aspect of personality. The closet’s unreality reinforces the notion that gay and lesbian bodies are not different from heterosexual bodies unless and until they transgress gender boundaries. But this closet is real.

Second, while gay and lesbian identities are said to be located in “the closet” or “out” of it, a stigmatized gender presentation can hardly be excised and located elsewhere. Gender ambiguity may be hidden or camouflaged, but the hiding (and the revelation) is always ever



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incomplete in as much as it doesn't tell the whole history of a body. Gender is about the embodiment of identity in a way that sexual orientation is not; gender is a physical as well as a psychological and/or perceptual phenomenon. If a queer person must "pass" for "straight" to gain access to the public facilities, a transperson must pass both for straight and for "male" or "female" in order to enter the public facility. The rule is "One Body, One Gender."

As a transperson in the public restroom, some part of one's gender identity is held in reserve; the "fit" is always imperfect. If one fails to pass, it is not a failure of attitude or "orientation" (which may be hidden) or proper clothing or accessories (which may be removed), it is a failure of one's body.

The Talmud says we can't think about Torah in the bathroom (BT Shabbat150a), but we must. My shul repeats and emphasizes that its lineage of inclusion harkens back to the roots of Judaism, that the passion and love of God at the heart of Judaism contains some truth for all peoples. My shul says that it subscribes to the deepest intentions of the rabbis who founded Judaism, invented the Kabbalah, and documented Beshtian Hasidism. Of course, that's a lot of rabbis and a lot of opinions. We judge "authenticity" by being able to trace lineage back along one path; my shul's claims, like my own, are multiple and conflicting. I experience the same inauthenticity or lack of nuance when I say, without qualification, "I am a man." It's impossible to be both simple and authentic when several conflicting yet truthful narrative voices (I was a woman I am a man; we claim lineage with the BESHT, we follow the Sages) complicate reality. My shul faces the same lack of authenticity in claiming its diverse and pluralistic lineage when the experience we have in shul points to One Undifferentiated Truth. What havoc might be wrought by identities hidden in the closet and hidden-in-the-open in the public restroom?

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A gaping faultline exists in our tradition along the boundary of the invisible mechiza we find even in the most liberal reform shul, and we wonder that attendance is going down. We can binarize ourselves right out of existence. There's a man with a vagina in the men's room. And he belongs there. Authenticity requires that all our disjointed narratives be declared in the central myth, all our selves ritualized.

I want my shul to build a good case for the inclusive Judaism it preaches but doesn't practice. I want to be able to trace that lineage myself as if I were following the logic of a resolved proof, not just assume its presence. And I want to share that story with the liberal Jews of my congregation, so that I might participate equally in the social life of my shul as a gay transgender man. The lesson of that inclusivity must also come from the bimah in order to penetrate to the bubbes and the straight congregants who, all unknowing, invite a transman to Shabbat dinner. And we can put a label on the shul door that says EVERYBODY.



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It's not going to happen today or tomorrow. But next year, maybe, in Berkeley.

III. In the Sanctuary: Redemption

When I enter the sanctuary, I do not even have time to put on my tallit. You're serving as gabbai today and you are shaking my hand, asking me if I would like to take an aliyah. I thank you for the honor, but decline with visible embarrassment, saying that my Hebrew is not up to snuff. (Liar!)

I walk to a seat in the back and say the blessing before putting on my tallit. When we come to the Torah reading, I start to contemplate my refusal to take an aliyah. As a Jewish transman, I find the public restroom stretches into the sanctuary. There are roles for men, roles for women, but none for me. Like a post-modern Fiddler on the Roof, I am balancing on the *mechiza*.

Aliyah is a Hebrew word meaning "to go up." To "take an aliyah" is to go up to the bimah and say the blessings before and after a Torah portion is read; any role in the Torah service is an honor, but an aliyah is one of the highest. When one takes an aliyah, one is 'going up' to the bimah, but one is also making a spiritual ascent. In an Orthodox congregation, men perform this service. In a more liberal congregation, a woman may as well.

[I have declined every invitation extended by a *gabbai* to take an aliyah, or I have intentionally arrived late to services so I wouldn't be asked. Why? At first there seemed to be four reasons: performance, process, parents, and pronoun. That is, performance anxiety (even persons who are well acquainted with the ritual may freeze like a deer in the headlights when it is their time to perform), the procedural mechanics or choreography of the ritual itself, the naming of parents (I don't always feel comfortable "outing" myself as a convert), and the traditional use of "the pronoun" (ben or bat; not exactly pronouns, but words meaning son or daughter) when the gabbai calls out the name of the individual honored with an aliyah; if a transgender person identifies as male but still looks significantly female, (or vice versa), the gabbai might use the wrong pronoun.

But I eventually realized that I am not burdened with any of these anxieties. So why have I declined this honor?

It took me a long time to figure this out as I converted to Judaism, but it's about sex. I have the same anxiety about taking an aliyah that I have about making love with a new partner. On the surface, the Torah service is dignified and wholly sacred. Just below the surface, though, it's all about sex: public, communal, ritualized, sacred sex. The hieros gamos, the sacred marriage. And when you're talking about sex, gender matters on a much deeper level than a simple pronoun.



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The Torah is fully dressed when She is tenderly embraced and lifted from the Aron ha Kodesh (commonly, 'the Ark of the Covenant'). The congregation stands when the Torah—in other guises, the Shechinah, the Sabbath Queen—is displayed in all her finery. She is laid down on a table and reverently undressed: Her fine garments and adornments (various ornate coverings, the crowns on the scroll handles, and a binding cord) are removed and set aside. To stand in the presence of the naked Torah scroll is to be intimate with a body: the Torah is the Covenant made flesh, a body with literal skin, physical weight, and an undeniable Presence. It is easy to see Her as the embodiment of the Shechinah. Her "life" is every Jewish life that was and will be. God's word is inscribed on Her flesh. As Jews we are instructed to love what She represents *uvechol levavcha, uvechol nafshecha, uvechol meodecha*, "with all of our heart, all of our soul, and all of everything else that is ours." "All"—all in that last clause means our bodies, even the parts of our bodies we use to connect intimately with other humans.

Over the course of the year, those who stand in front of the Torah view every inch of Her flesh, their fingers in voyeuristic proximity but never touching her delicate skin. Those who stand in front of the Torah watch the slow and deliberate revelation of every last one of Her secrets; yet every following year She can still surprise and delight—like an old lover with newly acquired expertise. As is common to secular public sex functions, there is a person whose job it is to see that she is not violated when She lies thus exposed—that person instantly corrects when an error is made. This long foreplay is a tantalizing nearness that stimulates desire.

What is penetrating? Who is being penetrated? Of course, we make love to words and ideas through stories and layered meanings, but the deeper meaning of the ritual in traditional Judaism is that God is the Bridegroom, Torah is the *ketubah* (marriage contract), and Israel is the Bride. God and Israel come to union through the Scroll. The reader, the congregants, the *oleh hatorah*, the gabbai—all of these who interact with the scroll represent Israel, the Bride. The ritual was designed to facilitate a sacred union between a male God and male humans without the onus of homosexuality. Men, feminized (transgendered) through their union with the Torah, may through a mystical understanding of the same activity, become God's lovers without shame.

Queers, women and transgender persons take aliyot in liberal congregations: any adult may be called up to the Torah, and the master story of the Divine Feminine sails under the radar for most people. We are so far removed from the sources of our rituals that the deep meanings can be lost to us; maybe part of why shul attendance has dropped for all denominations (except perhaps the Orthodox) is because we can't connect what we do in shul with Divine Union, or Sacred Sex. But for me, my gender identity will go up to the Torah with me when I finally have the courage to take an aliyah. And when we meet, the Scroll will present a male torso to me, and with no shame will present a male backside to God. That's what authenticity requires; the tradition can require no less. The Torah must become a Man for a man with female genitals. I



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am asking God's Chosen to step with me into a master story where queer no longer signifies same-sex-genitals interacting, where the Torah is not just an incubator for 'the white' (to use the Rabbinic euphemism) of two heterosexual men, but rather where the Scroll is recognized – even though it sounds like a piece of plumbing hardware—as a kind of universal connector between all Jews and God.

My Judaism is lived between the leaves of my Siddur (prayer book), enclosed within the walls of my apartment, and in the company of Jews so liberal and tolerant that “anything goes,” or so unschooled that I know more of the tradition than they do. Because of my reluctance to meet God publicly in such an intimate and public encounter as an aliyah, my Judaism has been limited: cut off from the source of communal life; limited to the space behind the closed door of a bathroom stall; “closeted.”

Most Jews I know are unaware of, or unconcerned with, the master story that makes Judaism heterosexist, gender normative and homophobic, but we have to pay attention to our myths. It's the origin of the faultline in our communities. Time to tell a new, more nuanced set of myths. When the tradition invites re-reading, as it so clearly does, it is amazing to me how few people step up to the plate. Feminists have started to read through a feminist lens. Queers are starting to. And now, transgender persons. The wellspring of that master story holds something in it for me and my Jewish transgender brethren (and sisteren and otheren), something that was set there back when the Universe was created. It is our job to seek it out, uncover it, and share the revelation. Where it can't support us, we can build a “traditionally non-traditional” scaffold.

In an inclusive Jewish world, God's intimacy with Torah and His Peoples' intimacy with Torah connect, embrace, make love, through the transgenerating body of the Scroll. There is a pagan element, a Kabbalist's mystery that suffuses my Torah: S/he is a shape-shifter, the object that connects the world above to the world below, the mediator of a universal Jewish coupling.

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Luke Dzmura recently completed his M.A. at the Richard S. Dinner Center for Jewish Studies of the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in Berkeley, CA; his thesis is entitled “Textual Relations in the Restroom: Countering Inauthenticity in Jewish Transgender Lives.” A recipient of the Haas-Koshland Award, Mr. Dzmura will be studying at Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies in Jerusalem in 2006-07. He invites responses to be sent to brerrabbi@hotmail.com.

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