



**Holiday: Pesach**  
**Liberation and Transgender Jews**

by Rabbi Ayelet S. Cohen on Thursday April 13, 2006  
15 Nisan, 5766  
Exodus 12:21-51, Passover

We prepare for the holiday of Passover in our kitchens and in our liturgy like little else in the Jewish year. Yet ironically, all of the preparation that we do comes to help us remember the last minute rush that was *yetziyat mitzrayim* (the Exodus from Egypt).

Our ancestors left Egypt in such tremendous haste that the Torah had to create a word for it. Nothing before had ever happened in such a hurry, with such trepidation and fear. The Children of Israel were leaving everything they knew for the promise of something completely unknown. And their lives depended on it. The Torah introduces the word "*chipazon*" for this intense combination of hurry and fear. This is how our ancestors first tasted freedom. "This is how you shall eat it," they were told, "your belts fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your walking stick in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly, *bechipazon*." (Ex 12:11)

*Avadim Hayinu l'Pharoh b'mitzrayim. Veyotzieinu Adonai Eloheinu misham b'yad chazakah u'bizroa netuyah.* We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. And God brought us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.

Our Passover Hagaddah reminds us that in every generation each of us is obligated to see ourselves as if we had personally left Egypt. Jews know Egypt. Jews in every generation have too often experienced "Egypt," or *mitzrayim*, narrow places where we are enslaved – physically or metaphorically – and silenced for being who we are. Gay and lesbian Jews are even better suited to fulfill that commandment, for everyone who has left the closet has known Egypt and has left Egypt in their lifetimes.

But what if *mitzrayim* was not a place, or not even a set of expectations, or societal norms, or religious prohibitions, or legal limitations. What if *mitzrayim* was your own body? And every time you looked at your reflection, every time someone called you by your name, you knew that you were imprisoned, enslaved in a body that was not your home. And like the generations of our ancestors born in Egypt, you were born into that narrow place. And even though you had never known anything else you knew, in your heart of hearts, that you did not belong there.



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For so many transgender people, this is the experience of the world. Called by names that do not describe them, dressed in clothing that feels foreign to them, every day. Forced by birth or by society to inhabit a body that does not belong to them, they must move through the world betraying their knowledge of themselves or transgressing the definitions and roles of male and female that this culture holds so sacred.

*Avadim Hayinu l'Pharoh b'mitzrayim. We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt*

There is no one transgender experience. Each transgender person is coming from a different place. And each chooses a different journey. And for no one is that journey easy.

For a transgender person every moment can become complicated. Even the most mundane can become dangerous. Which bathroom to choose? Which will be safer, and where will you be less likely to get harassed?

Judaism, for better or for worse, loves categories. It likes to know what things are, to name them, and to keep them separate. *Kodesh v'chol*, Shabbat and the six days of creation, dairy and meat, woman and man. And just as men and women sit separately in Orthodox synagogues, women and men say different blessings every morning. In Orthodox communities up to this day, every morning men say "*Baruch... shelo asani Ishah / Blessed are you... that I was not created a woman.*" And women say "*Baruch.. Sh'asani kirtzono / That God has made me according to God's will.*"

In egalitarian communities such separations make little sense. And we have dissolved many of them. We don't use those blessings. We all sit together in prayer. But despite these equalizing measures, egalitarian Jewish communities have not actually collapsed traditional gender boundaries, nor have most gay and lesbian communities.

An astounding poem by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai expresses a little boy's despair at being trapped on the wrong side of those categories, on the wrong side of the *mehitzah*.

I studied love in my childhood synagogue

In the women's section with the help of the women behind the partition

That locked up my mother with all the other women and girls.

But the partition that locked them up locked me up

On the other side. They were free in their love while I remained



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Locked up with all the men and boys in my love, my longing.  
I wanted to be there with them and to know their secrets  
And say with them, “Blessed be God who has made me  
According to His will.” And the partition –  
A lace curtain white and soft as summer dresses, swaying  
On its rings and loops of wish and would,  
Lu-lu loops, lullings of love in the locked room.  
And the faces of women like the face of the moon behind the clouds  
Or the full moon when the curtain parts: an enchanted  
Cosmic order. At night we said the blessing over the moon outside, and I  
Thought about the women.

Amichai’s child is on the wrong side of the *mehitzah*. And it isn’t funny and it isn’t tragic, and it isn’t grotesque. We need to understand that this child is nowhere else but in the depths of *mitzrayim*.

*Avadim Hayinu I’Pharoh b’mitzrayim.*

The fact that gender is complicated is not a new idea for the Jews. As much as they liked categories, the sages of our tradition were aware of a certain fluidity of gender. While they were limited in their understanding of gender by their focus on biology and sexual acts, we know from the Mishnah that the rabbis were aware of at least four genders.

But are we so much more highly evolved? Even within the gay and lesbian community transgender people often face ignorance and discrimination. And in the straight world every day they are subjected to ridicule and targeted for discrimination and are too often victims of horrific violence. Again and again transgender people are denied legal protections even as gay men and lesbians are finally achieving them.

*Avadim Hayinu I’Pharoh b’mitzrayim.*



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We have a great deal of work to do. While individual transgender people have pursued their own liberation, the transgender community is still very much experiencing *mitzrayim*.

One transgender person shared with me what liberation might look like for him: “Liberation from society’s expectations and assumptions, and liberation to become who you are. It’s definitely a journey. And you don’t quite know where you’re going to end up, even if you know that you have to move/change. It’s about having trust that if you follow that internal voice you will be led to a better place, where you don’t have to think about killing yourself quite so often.”

*Avadim Hayinu l’Pharoh b’mitzrayim.*

Our ancestors in Egypt ate the Passover sacrifice – the first taste of freedom, in *hipazon* in haste and in fear. We eat matzah on Pesach to remember their flight from Egypt, their *hipazon*. They had no time for the bread to rise. But don’t make the mistake of confusing their haste for a lack of readiness. To say they did not prepare is to deny the extreme readiness of our ancestors for freedom. It was more than time.

The Torah tells us that for seven days “you shall eat unleavened bread, bread of distress – for you departed from the land of Egypt hurriedly – *bechipazon*– so that you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt as long as you live.” (Deut 16:3)

The journey of a transgender person, like the journey of the Children of Israel, involves leaving everything known for the promise of something completely unknown. And even if what is known is *mitzrayim*, it is terrifying. And their lives depend on it. And even when they are ready, they still must contend with Pharaoh who does not want to let them go.

We eat matzah so that we will always remember.

*Avadim Hayinu l’Pharoh b’mitzrayim. Veyotzieinu Adonai Eloheinu misham b’yad chazakah u’bizroa netuyah.* We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. And God brought us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.

It takes God’s outstretched arm and it takes all of us together raising our hands to fight injustice within our own communities and beyond. Only then can we say that we remember leaving Egypt. Only then can we imagine creating a path through the sea so that we may rejoice together on the other side.



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