

Manners Equivalent to Men

By Noach Dzmura

“Androgynos is in some manners equivalent to men and in some manners equivalent to women; in some manners equivalent to both men and women; and in some manners equivalent to neither men nor women.”

(Mishnah Ze’raim, Bikkurim)

I don’t know how many men have studied this text in yeshivah or on candlelit kitchen tables over the centuries. As I translate with my study partner, I know I am one of only a few to fit an anomalous gender category. I am a transgender man at an Orthodox yeshivah. I arrive every morning at 8.30 and return home around 10 at night, exhausted, exhilarated. This time to study is a gift.

What is it like to be transgender in Jewish contexts? Sometimes it is like being a man. Like men, I enjoy the obligation to study.

There is often a brisk wind on the rooftops in Jerusalem, but at ground level, it is still warm. I am in the courtyard of an Orthodox shul. I remove my jacket. A man approaches, extending his hand in greeting. I shake; what man thinks twice about shaking hands? Later, I wonder. Should I have touched him? From his perspective, I was an enthusiastic guy from the yeshivah down the road. What he could not see is that I was born female.

What is it like to be transgender in Jewish contexts? Sometimes it is like being a woman. Like women, I face limits on participation in Jewish ritual and social life imposed by tradition and custom.

I was in Haifa in my second week of ulpan (intensive Hebrew study) when the war with Hizbollah began. I thought, “Bombs fall on the evening news, not on me.” The Mediterranean sparkled at the base of the mountain below my classroom at the university, just there, past the oil refinery. When I looked up from my textbook of Hebrew verbs that morning, I saw a large metal canister falling incongruously through my sky. The oil refinery was the target, but they hit Stella Maris, a beautiful old Catholic monastery, instead. I stood blinking, waiting for some explanatory words to run along the bottom third of the screen.

What is it like to be transgender in Jewish contexts? Sometimes it is like being both men and women. Like both men and women, if you drop a bomb on me, I bleed.



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I discovered my Holy of Holies in Jerusalem. The scriptorium and tiny shul are in a dark, cavern-like space on the men's side of the Western Wall. I examine the work of the sofrim, or scribes, as commissioned Torah scrolls grow slowly under their capable fingers, and pull out a volume from the library to browse. It is ironic to me that, while the women and most of the men must seek God against unyielding stone under the glare of the desert sun, men who know this place may daven in a cool and restful womb.

Earlier this year, men who look no different from those who daven here beside me beat an observant woman who would not move to the "women's seats" on the back of the bus. Men who look no different from these hung posters in the strictly Orthodox neighbourhood of Meah Shearim just before the International Gay Pride Celebration, stating that it was a religious obligation to kill gay people. It is hard not to jump to the conclusion that these men would kill someone like me. In this potentially dangerous Jewish context, I keep my identity to myself.

What is it like to be transgender in Jewish contexts? Sometimes it is like being neither men nor women. Like neither men nor women, I am obliged to walk a different Jewish road.

The rabbis' careful thoughts about our ancient hermaphrodite sibling may help to resolve the question of transgender space in Jewish life. What is my obligation? Reveal myself, risk the loss of community, and give the Orthodox man a chance to refuse my hand?

We are a people of communal obligation. Rather than hiding unknown among you, I prefer to identify myself, and work through these challenging differences sitting beside you in the Beit Midrash, with the texts of our tradition. In my hometown of Berkeley, California, we have started to address the question of transgender Jewish lives. Some of our discussions are Talmudic, some are academic, others occur in shuls where people of all genders congregate.

Transgender lives are something neither the rabbis nor modern society could anticipate, yet here we are. Most are neither hermaphrodites nor transsexuals, who in some cases fall into the purview of modern halachic teshuvot, or responsa. We are outside of all that, but inside your shul. We want to study with you, to seek together the authentic, inclusive life of our tradition.

In the end, we will shake hands.

(Originally appeared 1/6/07 in the Jewish Chronicle, UK under the title "My Struggle as a Sex-Change Man." Horrible Title! What struggle? To live a transgender life is a double blessing!)

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