

Add Yourself to the Acronym: Understanding (Trans)Gender in Jewish Life
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There seems to be little debate that the image photographed by the amazing Annie Leibovitz on the cover of Vanity Fair is breathtaking. Her work often is. Of course, you know the image to which I refer: that of Caitlyn Jenner, this particular name and image new to the news, but her story dating back at least a few months, but really for decades.

While there is little debate about the beauty of the image itself, there is, however and unsurprisingly, great debate about the meaning of the image: about who she is, who he is no longer, what she will be called, or why or if she deserved to win an Arthur Ashe Award for Courage. While I have no particular interest or opinion about the award, I believe what is behind that debate, the endless news articles, the Facebook posts from varying angles, is not really about whether or not she deserves that award - is not really about why she chose to wear particular clothing in the photo over something that better reflects her "maturity" - but rather the source of these conversations is likely rooted in the discomfort many feel about the status of a transgender individual.

"What is transgender, really?" some wonder, "How do we talk about it? What are the proper pronouns I'm supposed to use? What happens to their spouse once they transition? Do they become gay? Wait, I thought the proper word was hermaphrodite, or intersexed, or transsexual, or transgenderED." The ability to share and reshare articles with the click of a button, coupled with our possible discomfort or confusion, gives us the illusion of being free from the responsibility to learn, explore and truly understand the nature of transgender individuals in our midst.

In honor of June's being Pride Month, the celebration of the LGBTQ community, and perhaps more personally to us, when realizing that our David Passer's birthday¹ was on Monday, I want to begin to understand tonight about issues of transgender individuals in society and Jewish text.

The Book of Genesis offers us the language and value of *B'tselem Elohim*, being created in God's image, that all are equal regardless of difference. The Book of Genesis (1:27) teaches: God created *ha'adam* [the first human being] in God's own

¹ David Passer, Shir Tikva's Executive Director, passed away in August of 2014. A beloved member of Boston's Jewish Community, David and his partner Marc Maxwell were pioneers of LGBTQ inclusion in Jewish life.

image; in the image of God He created him – male and female [God] created them. *Zachar U'nekeva Bara Otam*, male and female God created them.

Here we are offered what is known as the gender binary most commonly seen in the fabric of modern humankind. Words have provenance and *Zachar U'nekeva*, male and female, are linked to words for pointy sword and crevice, with obvious meaning behind each. *Zachar U'nekeva* in modern days become the grammatical labels for the Hebrew language, which, like many others, is gendered; thus, the fabric of society as it is built upon language and our capacity to send messages to one another through language is, at its core, along the lines of the gender binary.

A midrash on Genesis, however, turns our understanding of this binary on its head. It is not just that males and females were created in God's image equally and at the same time, rather Genesis Rabbah (8:1) offers the teaching that “the first human being was half male and half female, and was then split into two separate beings. Still others say, [the text continues]: The first human being was an infinite, genderless mass.”

WOW.

And Jewish text does not stop here. The gender binary is extended throughout Torah, as we understand the roles of men and women in Israelite society. The differences between genders are further developed in the rabbinic and medieval periods, and Jewish text offers us another and lesser known lens through which to see gender.

In fact, beyond the dominant gender binary, there are four additional types of gender found in Jewish text. (This learning is sourced from the [Keshet program bank](#), the preeminent local and national LGBTQ Jewish organization from which Idit Klein visited us in November as our first annual David Passer Social Justice Lecturer.)

First, *Androgynos*: “A person who has both “male” and “female” sexual characteristics. The term occurs 149 times in Mishna and Talmud and 350 times in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.”² I share the extent of occurrences with you to demonstrate that it was not a rare mention.

² Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari, Rabbi Elliot Kukla, Rabbi Dev Noily, Gender Diversity in Jewish Sacred Texts and Our Communities, [online available] <http://keshet.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Gender-Diversity-in-Jewish-Sacred-Texts.pdf>

Another class of gender was known as the *Tumtum*. “A *tumtum* was a person with indeterminate or obscured sexual characteristics. This type of gender is referenced 181 times in Mishna and Talmud and 335 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.”³ Again, the occurrence of reference is significant.

A lesser known category was the *Ay'lonit*, “a person who is identified as ‘female’ at birth but develops ‘male’ characteristics at puberty and is infertile.”⁴

And finally, *Saris*, more commonly known as a eunuch, is “a person who is identified as ‘male’ at birth but develops ‘female’ characteristics at puberty or later, whether naturally or through human intervention.”⁵ The word eunuch, for example, is not obscure; rather, it appears in Megillat Esther (the Scroll of Esther read on Purim). I remember being quite surprised as I read it aloud from the Megillah during my first Purim at Shir Tikva.

It seems important that the Mishnah, Gemara, Talmud, and later texts recognize these four genders that are neither male nor female. It seems significant that the rabbis, too, debated their status. This reality is revelatory to many unaware of these categories of humanity within Jewish text.

To correspond to this learning from Jewish text, I offer a few other points of information and education, sourced directly from Keshet, that are useful to our modern understanding of gender and sexuality.

When one refers to another’s SEXUAL IDENTITY, one refers to a person’s assignment at birth as biologically male, female, or intersex.

A person’s GENDER IDENTITY is *their* understanding of what gender(s) to which they belong or identify. This is each person’s unique knowing or feeling, and is separate from a person’s physical body or appearance (although often related).

When reading about Caitlyn Jenner, you may discover that in her life as Bruce Jenner, she experienced Gender Dysphoria. Her Gender Identity and her Sex did not align. Transitioning genders, from Male to Female, allowed Caitlyn to live a life of spiritual and physical alignment; thus, she becomes a TRANSGENDER or TRANS individual, an umbrella term for anyone who knows themselves to be a gender that is different

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.* 80 references in Mishna and Talmud; 40 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.

⁵ *ibid.* 156 references in mishna and Talmud; 379 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.

than the gender they were assigned at birth. Some trans people may have an alternate gender identity that is neither male nor female, may not use gendered pronouns, or may adapt the spelling - HIM - spelled HYM - as example. For some people, their gender identity may vary at different points in their lives. Furthermore, some transgender people modify their bodies through medical means and some do not.

Idit Klein shared much of this with us in November, but it bears repeating because it is quite honestly confusing, thought provoking, and different from our otherwise accepted gender binary. Daily, I am still struck by new terms and language I hear from our teens, from Keshet, from the Human Rights Campaign, or other LGBTQ positive organizations.

As a 22 year old, working as a Legislative Assistant at the [Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism](#) focused primarily on issues of LGBTQ rights, I found myself in a high level meeting about the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act. This legislation sought to protect victims of hate crimes committed through the lens of discrimination for perceived or real sexual orientation and gender identity. A woman, I thought, walked into the room, a representative of the gay rights organization, PFLAG. But she had a low voice, an adam's apple, and lacked what I understood to be other female characteristics. This was the first transgender individual I had ever met and it *was* confusing. And I *was* curious and I *had* questions.

And ten years later, of course, I still do. At Eisner Camp two summers ago, I met a child who at the time was not yet openly transgender. He had a male pronoun and name, but wore feminine clothing and had long hair. "Your name is Michael?⁶ That's an interesting and cool name for a girl," I said. "I'm a boy," Michael responded. A clear mistake on my part. I've learned it is best to never say anything about another's name, physical appearance, or clothing unless they bring it up, and even then the conversation must be held with care.

I *still* find myself on occasion staring at individuals and wondering about the status of their gender. I find myself curious about the story they journeyed to whom they identify as today. I share that with you because I get it. In many ways, I get why Caitlyn Jenner's very public transition has yielded so much public feedback and reaction, whether positive or negative, loving or hateful.

⁶ Name changed

The only vaccine to hate, anger, confusion and discomfort, however, is education. We can inoculate ourselves against hateful messages communicated through a gendered language system by learning the proper language to describe individuals who we and others may not fully understand. As we seek out education about the LGBTQ community, we have the opportunity to add ourselves to that acronym in solidarity. We need not be L, G, B, T, or Q to consider ourselves active supporters and champions of the equality due to this marginalized community.

And yes, despite our best intentions, we will make mistakes with our language. We will say transgenderED, in the past tense, instead of transgender. It is incorrect but the easiest one to make.

We may still utilize the term homosexual, which, from its clinical and historical usage, has become not descriptive but antagonistic and offensive to many in the LGBTQ community.

We may still say sexual preference when what we mean is sexual orientation, because sexuality is not preference but a biological disposition.

When trying to understand the best language to use, we have options. Keshet offers us terminology, as do most LGBTQ affirming websites.

And even better, when you meet someone, anyone, regardless of gender or sexuality, and they put out their hand to introduce themselves, “Hi, my name is...” that’s the name or term you should use to refer to them.

Calling someone by the name and pronoun they ask you to call them is one giant leap towards the *Shleimut*, the wholeness all of God’s creations deserve.