

# Gender Fluidity in the Jewish Tradition

Source Sheet by Joseph Meszler, with great thanks to Abby Stein

*Jewish tradition understands the original creation of Adam to be both male and female and then split down the middle. The Hebrew word for "rib" is also a word for "side":*

## Bereishit Rabbah 8:1

(1) God said: Let us make Adam in our image, in our shape: R' Yirmiyah ben Elazar said, when the Eternal created Adam initially, **he was created as both genders**; thus is it written, "male and female did God create them." R' Shmuel bar Nachman said, when the Eternal created Adam initially, God created him with two faces, one on each side, and [when God made Chavah,] God split him along the middle, forming two backs. They challenged him: but it is written, "And God took one of his ribs!" He said to them, ["*mitzalosav*" doesn't mean rib, it means] one of his sides, similar to that which is said, "and to the '*tzela*' of the Tent," which is translated "the side of the Tent."

## בראשית רבה ח:א'

(א) ויאמר אלהים נעשה אדם בצלמנו כדמותנו. אמר רבי ירמיה בן אלעזר: בשעה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא את אדם הראשון, אנדרוגינוס בראו, הדא הוא דכתיב: זכר ונקבה בראם. אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמן: בשעה שברא הקב"ה את אדם הראשון, דיו פרצופים בראו ונסרו ועשאו גביים, גב לכאן וגב לכאן. איתבון ליה, והכתיב: ויקח אחת מצלעותיו?! אמר להון: מתרין סטרוהי, היך מה דאת אמר: (שמות כו): ולצלע המשכן, דמתרגמינן ולסטר משכנא וגו'.

*One passage in the Talmud claims that Abraham and Sarah were both tumtumin (of indeterminate sex) and later became male and female respectively:*

## Yevamot 64a-64b

**Rabbi Yitzhak said: For what reason were our ancestors initially infertile? ... Rabbi Ami said: Abraham and Sarah were originally *tumtumin*, people whose sexual organs are concealed and not functional, as it is stated: "Look to the rock from where you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit from where you were dug" (Isaiah 51:1), and it is written in the next verse: "Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you" (Isaiah 51:2), which indicates that sexual organs were fashioned for them, signified by the words hewn and dug, over the course of time.**

## יבמות ס"ד א' ט"ו-ס"ד ב' א'

א"ר יצחק מפני מה היו אבותינו עקורים ... אמר רבי אמי אברהם ושרה טומטמין היו שנאמר (ישעיהו נא, א) הביטו אל צור חוצבתם ואל מקבת בור נוקרתם וכתוב (ישעיהו נא, ב) הביטו אל אברהם אביכם ואל שרה תחוללכם

In this passage, Moses compares himself to a nursing mother, showing no qualms about using a completely feminine metaphor:

### Numbers 11:12

(12) Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, 'Carry them at your breast as a nurse carries an infant,' to the land that You have promised on oath to their ancestors?

### במדבר י"א:י"ב

(יב) הָאֲנֹכִי הִרִיתִי אֶת כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה אִם־אֲנֹכִי יִלְדֵתִיהוּ כִי־תֹאמַר אֵלַי שְׂאֵהוּ בְּחִיקָךְ כַּאֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂא הָאִמָּן אֶת־הַיֶּנֶק עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְתָּיו:

The Rabbis recognized more than just the binary understanding of female and male. They used the term "androgynus" to describe someone who exhibited both male and female biological characteristics. The term comes from Greek and relates to the English word, "androgyny." A "tumtum" described a person whose biology was unclear. The Rabbis sought to accommodate this reality in the context of Jewish law:

### Mishnah Bikkurim 4

- (1) An *androgynus* is similar to men in some ways and to women in other ways, in some ways to both and in some ways to neither.
- (2) In what ways are they similar to men? Like men, they are considered unclean through semen; required to perform *yibum* (to marry the widow of a childless brother) like men; dress and cut their hair like men; marry others and are not married off like men; and are obliged to perform all the commandments in the Torah like men.
- (3) How are they similar to women? They impart ritual impurity through a red discharge like women, may not be secluded with men like women, if a brother dies childless, they do not marry the widow, they do not receive a portion of an inheritance, and they do not eat the sacrifices of the highest degree of sanctity (in the case of a *kohein*). After giving birth, their mother counts the number of unclean days that one does for a female. They may not serve as witnesses, and if they have a disqualifying sexual relationship, they may no longer eat *terumah*.
- (4) How are they like both men and women? A person is liable for striking or cursing them. If they are killed, the accidental manslaughterer is exiled and the intentional murderer is executed. After giving birth, their mother brings a sacrifice, they may

### משנה ביקורים ד'

- (א) אנדרוגינוס יש בו דרכים שוה לאנשים ויש בו דרכים שוה לנשים ויש בו דרכים שוה לאנשים ונשים ויש בו דרכים אינו שוה לא לאנשים ולא לנשים:
- (ב) כיצד שוה לאנשים מטמא בלובן כאנשים וזוקק ליבום כאנשים ומתעטף ומסתפר כאנשים ונושא אבל לא נישא כאנשים וחייב בכל מצות האמורות בתורה כאנשים:
- (ג) כיצד שוה לנשים מטמא באודם כנשים ואינו מתייחד עם האנשים כנשים ואינו עובר על בל תקיף ולא על בל תשחית ולא על בל תטמא למתים כנשים ופסול מן העדות כנשים ואינו נבעל בעבירה כנשים ונפסל מן הכהונה כנשים:
- (ד) כיצד שוה לאנשים ולנשים חייבים על מכתו ועל קללתו כאנשים וכנשים וההורגו שוגג גולה ומזיד נהרג כאנשים ונשים ויושבת עליו דם טמא ודם טהור כאנשים וכנשים וחולק בקדשי קדשים כאנשים וכנשים ונוחל לכל הנחלות כאנשים וכנשים ואם אמר הריני נזיר שזה איש ואשה הרי זה נזיר:

eat sanctified things that can be eaten outside of Jerusalem, and they inherit as a sole heir.

(5) How are they like neither men nor women? *Terumah* is not burned from impurity because of their discharge, nor does their discharge make them liable if they should enter the Temple. They cannot be indentured as a Hebrew servant and they cannot be valued like a man or a woman. If a person says, "I am a *nazir*," as they are neither a man nor a woman," they are not a *nazir*. **Rabbi Yosi says an androginus is a unique creation, but the Sages say they are either a man or a woman but just don't know which. A tumtum is not this way – some are men and some are women.**

(ה) כיצד אינו שוה לא לאנשים ולא לנשים אין חייבים לא על מכתו ולא על קללתו לא כאנשים ולא כנשים ואינו נערך לא כאנשים ולא כנשים ואם אמר הריני נזיר שזה לא איש ולא אשה אינו נזיר רבי יוסי אומר אנדרוגינוס בריה בפני עצמה הוא ולא יכלו חכמים להכריע עליו אם הוא איש או אשה אבל טומטום אינו כן פעמים שהוא איש פעמים שהוא אשה:

*One midrash claims that Dina was originally going to be male, but due to the prayer of her mother Leah became a female:*

#### Berakhot 60a

We learned in a mishna: **One whose wife was pregnant and he said: May it be God's will that my wife will give birth to a male child, it is a vain prayer. Is a prayer in that case ineffective? Rav Yosef raises an objection:** It is stated: **"And afterwards she bore a daughter, and called her name Dina"** (Genesis 30:21). **What is meant by the addition of the word: Afterwards? Rav said: After Leah passed judgment on herself and said: Twelve tribes are destined to descend from Jacob, six came from me and four from the maidservants, that is ten, and if this fetus is male, my sister Rachel will not even be the equivalent of one the maidservants; immediately the fetus was transformed into a daughter, as it is stated: And she called her name Dina;** meaning she named her after her judgment [*din*]. The Gemara rejects this concerning prayer: **One does not mention miraculous acts to teach general conduct.**

#### ברכות ס' א:י"א-י"ב

היתה אשתו מעוברת ואמר יהי רצון שתלד כו' הרי זו תפלת שוא: ולא מהני רחמי מתיב רב יוסף (בראשית ל, כא) ואחר ילדה בת ותקרא את שמה דינה מאי ואחר אמר רב לאחר שדנה לאה דין בעצמה ואמרה י"ב שבטים עתידין לצאת מיעקב ששה יצאו ממני וארבעה מן השפחות הרי עשרה אם זה זכר לא תהא אחותי רחל כאחת השפחות מיד נהפכה לבת שנא' ותקרא את שמה דינה אין מזכירין מעשה נסים

*Even HaBohan is a book dated to 1322 authored by Rabbi Kalynomus ben Kalynomus. A prolific translator and author, this book often satirizes Jewish society. In this particular passage, he criticizes the blessing "for not having made me a woman." However, beneath the feeling of parody, we might detect a heartfelt prayer that he truly would rather have been a woman. Referring to Dina in the Gemara above, the meaning of the text depends upon the tone in which it is read:*

**Even Bohan, Kalonymus ben Kalonymus,**

What an awful fate for my mother / that she bore a son. What a loss of all benefit!... Cursed be the one who announced to my father: "It's a boy! . . . Woe to him who has male sons / Upon them a heavy yoke has been placed / restrictions and constraints. Some in private, some in public / some to avoid the mere appearance of violation / and some entering the most secret of places. Strong statutes and awesome commandments / six hundred and thirteen / Who is the man who can do all that is written / so that he might be spared? Oh, but had the artisan who made me created me instead—a fair woman. Today I would be wise and insightful. We would weave, my friends and I / and in the moonlight spin our yarn / and tell our stories to one another / from dusk till midnight / We'd tell of the events of our day, silly things / matters of no consequence. But also I would grow very wise from the spinning / and I would say, "Happy is she who knows how to work with combed flax and weave it into fine white linen." And at times, in the way of women, I would lie down on the kitchen floor, between the ovens, turn the coals, and taste the different dishes. On holidays I would put on my best jewelry. I would beat on the drum / and my clapping hands would ring. And when I was ready and the time was right / an excellent youth would be my fortune. He would love me, place me on a pedestal

**ספר אבן בוהן, רבי קלונימוס בן קלונימוס**

אוי למי שבניו זכרים: הוטל עליהם  
עול כבד סיגים וגדרים... חקים חוקים  
ומצות נוראות, שלשה עשר ושש  
מאות: ומי האיש הלזה, שיקיים מה  
שכתב בזה?

אילו בראני, אומן שעשאני, אשה  
הגונה - היום הייתי חכמת לב ובעלת  
בינה. בידיה טוו אני ורעיותי מחזיקות  
בפלך מוזרת לבנה, מספרות זו עם  
זו פעם באור פעם באפלות, דברי  
הימים והבלי טפלות...

ולעתים מזומנים כדרך נשים  
כמשפט הבנות, בתוך האפר  
אשכבה בין שפתים, מקום שפיחת  
הקדרות בין תנור וכירים, חוטבת  
עצים וחותר בגחלים, וטועמת מיני  
תבשילים. ולמועד ורגלים, הנזם על  
אפי והעגילים...

ולקץ ימים בהגיע פרקי ומזלי, בחור  
טוב יעלה בגורלי: יאהבני אישי  
יושביני בקתדרא, יעדה עדי זהב על  
מעילי, הנטיפות והשירות וגם כל  
חלי. וביום מועד, בעדן חדוה והכנסת

/ dress me in jewels of gold / earrings, bracelets,  
necklaces. And on the appointed day, in the season of  
joy when brides are wed, for seven days would the  
boy increase my delight and gladness. Were I hungry,  
he would feed me well-kneaded bread. Were I thirsty,  
he would quench me with light and dark wine. He  
would not chastise nor harshly treat me, and my  
[sexual] pleasure he would not diminish / Every  
Sabbath, and each new moon / his head he would rest  
upon my breast. The three husbandly duties he would  
fulfill / rations, raiment, and regular intimacy. And  
three wifely duties would I also fulfill, [watching for  
menstrual] blood, [Sabbath candle] lights, and bread. .

**Father in heaven / who did miracles for our  
ancestors / with fire and water / You changed the  
fire of Chaldees so it would not burn hot / You  
changed Dina in the womb of her mother to a girl  
/ You changed the staff to a snake before a million  
eyes / You changed [Moses'] hand to [leprous]  
white  
and the sea to dry land. In the desert you turned  
rock to water / hard flint to a fountain. Who  
would then turn me from a man to woman? Were I  
only to have merited this / being so graced by  
your goodness. . .**

What shall I say? Why cry or be bitter? If my Father in  
heaven has decreed upon me / and has maimed me  
with an immutable deformity / then I do not wish to  
remove it. And the sorrow of the impossible / is a  
human pain that nothing will cure / and for which no  
comfort can be found. So, I will bear and suffer / until  
I die and wither in the ground. And since I have  
learned from the tradition / that we bless both the

כלה ובשבוע הבן, תרבה שמחתי  
וגילי...

חוק ומוסר לא יפרע, ועונתי לא יגרע:  
שבת בשבתו וחדש בחדשו, עלי יניח  
צדיק ראשו: שלש אלה יעשה לי  
כמצות שוכן מעונה: שאר כסות  
ועונה. גם אני שלש כנגד שלש  
אשמור ואקים, שלשה המה לא  
נפלאו ממני ולא רחוקים: דם ואש  
וחלת לחם... עליהם אין להוסיף  
במספר ומנין, אין לשאול אחריהן:  
הני נשים במאי זכיין?

אבינו שֶׁבִשְׁמַיִם / שְׁעֵשִׂית נְסִים  
לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בְּאֵשׁ וּבַמַּיִם / הַפְּכֵת אֹר  
כְּשָׂדִים לְבַל תִּשְׂרֹף בַּחֲמָה / וְהַפְּכֵת  
דִּינָה בְּמַעֵי אִמָּה / וְהַפְּכֵת הַמָּטָה  
נַחֵשׁ לְעֵינַי אֶלְפֵי רַבְּבָן / וְהַפְּכֵת הַיָּד  
הַטְּהוֹרָה לְבָן / וְהַפְּכֵת יַם סוּף  
לִיבְשָׁה / וְקִרְקַע הַיָּם אֶרֶץ נְגוּבָה  
וְקִשָּׁה / הַהוֹפְכֵי הַצּוֹר אֶגָּם מִיָּם /  
חֲלָמִישׁ לְמַעַיְנו מִיָּם / מִי יִתֵּן  
וְתִהְיֶנּוּ מִזְכָּר לְנִקְבָה! / אֱלוֹ זְכִיתִי  
לְכָךְ כִּמָּה חֲנַנְתָּנִי טוֹבָה / גְּבַרְת  
הַבַּיִת הַיִּיטִי וְחִנִּיתִי לְבֵיתִי מִצָּבָא /  
וּמָה אֲדַבֵּר וּמָה אֲמַר / לָמָּה אֲבַכָּה  
וְלָמָּה אֲתַמְרָמֵר / אִם אָבִי שֶׁבִשְׁמַיִם  
גָּזַר עָלַי / וְנָתַן בִּי מוֹם קְבוּעַ אֵי  
אֶפְשָׁר לְהַסִּירוֹ מֵעָלַי / וְהִדְאָגָה בְּמָה  
שָׂאֵי אֶפְשָׁר כְּאֵב אָנוּשׁ וְחָבַל / וְלֹא  
יֹעִילוּ בָּהּ תַּנְחוּמִין שֶׁל הֶבֶל / אֲמַרְתִּי  
אֲשָׂא וְאֶסְבֵּל / עַד אֲגוּעַ וְאֶבֶל / וְאַחַר  
שָׁכַךְ לְמַדְתִּי מִפִּי הַשְּׂמוּעָה /

good and the bitter / I will bless in a voice / hushed  
and weak / Blessed are you / O Lord / who has not  
made me a woman.

*Translated by Rabbi Steve Greenberg*

שְׁמֵבְרָכִין עַל הַטּוֹבָה וְעַל הָרָעָה /  
אַבְרָךְ בְּקוֹל נְמוּךְ בְּשִׁפְהַ חִלּוּשָׁה /  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי שְׁלֹא עָשִׂיתָ אִשָּׁה.

*Rabbi Elliot Kukla has done groundbreaking research in the area of gender fluidity in Jewish tradition:*

### **Terms for Gender Diversity in Classical Jewish Texts by Rabbi Elliot Kukla**

*Zachar*: This term is derived from the word for a pointy sword and refers to a phallus. It is usually translated as “male” in English.

*Nekevah*: This term is derived from the word for a crevice and probably refers to a vaginal opening. It is usually translated as “female” in English.

*Androgynos*: A person who has both “male” and “female” sexual characteristics. 149 references in Mishna and Talmud (1st-8th Centuries CE); 350 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes (2nd -16th Centuries CE).

*Tumtum*: A person whose sexual characteristics are indeterminate or obscured. 181 references in Mishna and Talmud; 335 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.

*Ay'lonit*: A person who is identified as “female” at birth but develops “male” characteristics at puberty and is infertile. 80 references in Mishna and Talmud; 40 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.

*Saris*: A person who is identified as “male” at birth but develops “female” characteristics as puberty and/or is lacking a penis. A saris can be “naturally” a saris (saris hamah), or become one through human intervention (saris adam). 156 references in Mishna and Talmud; 379 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.

*The Rabbis were always concerned about modesty. While they were concerned about an androginus being alone with a woman, they held back from saying this was a punishable offense. Maimonides is quoted word-for-word in the Shulchan Arukh:*

#### **Shulchan Arukh, Even HaEzer 22:12**

(12) *A androginus* may not be alone with women, but if they do seclude, there is no punishment [lit. lashes] because they have doubtful status [and there may not have been a transgression]. A man is permitted to be alone with an *androginus* or *tumtum*.

#### **אבן העזר כ"ב:י"ב**

(יב) אנדרוגינוס אינו מתייחד עם הנשים ואם נתייחד אין מכין אותו מפני שהוא ספק אבל האיש מתייחד עם האנדרוגינוס ועם הטומטום:

Many Kabbalistic texts use masculine and feminine imagery. Here, the idea is explored that sometimes a male soul winds up in a female body, and visa versa. Isaac is seen as having transitioned from female to male:

### 18<sup>th</sup> Century Hasidut

It is known that when **Issac was born, he was born with the soul of a female**, as it is written in *Or Hachaim*, and through the *akeidah* (binding of Issac) he got a male soul that can impregnate... But, this is known according to the *Sod* (Secret/Mysticism) of they cycling of souls - that **at times, a female would be in a male body, because in the reasons of *gilgal* (the cycling of souls) the soul of a female would come to be in a male.** ... that is why it says by Issac that the Eternal answered to him and not to her (Rebecca), because he needed divine help to be able to have children.

*Translation by Abby Stein, edited by Joseph Meszler*

### ספר רזין דאורייתא, בשם הרבי ר' מיכל מזלאטשוב

אולם הכוונה, דנודע אשר יצחק נולד  
בנשמת נוקבא, וכמו שכתב בעל אור  
החיים הק', ועל ידי העקדה היה לו נשמת  
דכר להשפיע... רק זאת נודע סדר  
הגלגולים. ולפעמים נקבה תסובב גבר כי  
בסבת הגלגול נשמת נקבה תבוא בזכר,  
כאשר י'תרעם ה'גלגל ו'יתרעש ה'חוזר  
לבוא בגלגול שני ושלישי. ואם נקבה אשר  
תסובב בגבר, שני נקבות אינם מולידים,  
רק עח ידי מעשי הטוב מחליפין הנשמה,  
וליצחק החליפו הנשמה. לפיכך לו ולא לה,  
כי יצחק היה צריך לאותו דבר ולא רבקה:

*Source Sheet created on Sefaria by Joseph Meszler*