

What Was a Nice Jewish *Girl* Like Me Doing in a *Man's* Body?

*A transgendered woman remembers
his painful search.*

by JOY LADIN

A MAN IS STANDING IN THE SHOWER. It's the weekend, it's Saturday, it's sunny, he's in his thirties, his early forties, taking a long hot weekend shower, listening to his family—first one child, then another, then three together—screaming happily with their mother.

Some part of the man is glowing, far away, or far below, or somewhere within. This glow is happiness, he tells himself. There is another feeling too, a burning sensation, a white-hot flame defying the cold, numb element—him—that threatens to smother it. That's love, he tells himself. He is burning with love for his family, glowing with happiness at the sound of their happiness, and yet he is far away, or far below, or somewhere within. These are among the strongest feelings he has ever had, and yet he cannot feel them.

Eventually the man gets out of the shower. The happiness, the love, the pain—so intertwined he can't imagine one without the others—recede to livable levels. He settles back into his sleeve of numbness: skin, shirt, trousers. He knows this is a good

life, the very best life he can permit himself to imagine. And some day, he promises himself, this good life will finally be over.

There are reasons for his despair. The sex of the body he was given is at odds with the gender of what therapists might call his psyche, and religious people might call his soul. He calls it his “self,” and although it is faint, formless, without a life or a body to live in, it is the only part of him that has ever felt real. He knows that this absence of feeling, this unreality, and the ache and desire for death that accompany it, are called “gender dysphoria.” He knows that gender dysphoria has always been with him; he knows it will never go away.

What he doesn't know is that every day that he fails to live that unrealized self, his gender dysphoria will grow worse. Harder to live with. More costly to ignore.

I WAS NINE OR TEN WHEN I LEARNED THAT, according to the Torah, God has a deep aversion to the transgendered: *‘A woman must not put on man's apparel, nor shall a man wear women's clothing; for whoever does these things is abhorrent*



As long as men and women stayed on their own sides of their closets, God would not abhor us.

to the Lord your God” [Deut. 22:5]. Though far from Orthodox, I couldn’t ignore this sentence. For one thing, it was the only time the Torah—or Judaism—acknowledged the existence of transgendered people like me. For another, I understood how God felt. Despite the conflict between the body that proved I was male and the unshakeable sense that I was female, I longed for the simplicity that the yin and yang of gender dimorphism seemed to promise. If everyone was simply male or simply female, then perhaps every act was simply good or simply evil; every answer simply yes or simply no; every life simply empty or simply full. A binary world, a world in which I couldn’t exist, would be infinitely clearer. As long as men and women stayed on their own sides of their closets, God would not abhor us.

Despite my longing and the law, both God and I knew that I was sometimes going to wear female clothes, so I kept looking for a loophole. I was a child, not a man; perhaps the law didn’t apply to children. But codes of masculinity and femininity were as strictly enforced in my family and school as in Moses’ Bronze Age wilderness. My sister’s wardrobe and mine had noth-

ing in common. Abhorrence of gender transgression was all around me, in the people I loved, in the air I breathed—in myself. I didn’t *want* to transgress gender boundaries; but I wanted—I needed—to be a girl.

Perhaps that was how I could convince God not to abhor me for sneaking up to the attic and stuffing myself into my sister’s outgrown skirts. I wasn’t a male or a female; I was a transsexual. Either I had no gender to transgress, because my female self and male body canceled each other out, or the law was inoperative because I had no way *not* to transgress it. Whether I wore male clothing or female clothing, I was always in some way cross-dressed.

That sounded right to me, but what were the chances that a God revolted by cross-dressing would bother to sort out my gender? God would abhor first and ask questions later. After all, that’s what I did, when I saw myself not through the lens of my long-

ings but in terms of my behavior. Obviously, I shouldn’t wear girl’s clothing; it was wrong, it was stupid, and no matter how much I wanted it to, it would never transform me into the girl I was supposed to be.

And yet there I was, again and again, cross-dressing. It didn’t matter how much God abhorred me for doing it. I couldn’t stop. Maybe that was the loophole I was looking for. Starving Jews are allowed to eat non-kosher food. I was starving to be a girl, and the non-kosher food of female clothing was the only way I knew to feed my malnourished self. Perhaps the law really meant, “God will abhor you for cross-dressing, unless you are dying to do it.” After all, God had made me a boy who was dying to be a girl. How could God abhor me for being what I was made to be?

Unfortunately, neither God nor I were comfortable with the claim that my desire to be female constituted a revelation that superseded Torah. I knew that overwhelming desire to do an abhorrent thing didn’t make the thing permissible. Maybe I wasn’t a basically good child doing an abhorrent thing; maybe I myself was abhorrent.



Jay Ladin



Joy Ladin

My suffering is no more important than the suffering of my life-partner and children, whose lives have been shattered by my transition from living as a man to living as a woman.

THE LAW IN DEUTERONOMY WASN'T CUTTING ME off from God; it was showing me that God and I had something in common. We could abhor me together.

Despite God's Deuteronomic disgust, like many transkids, I spent nights bargaining with God. In exchange for becoming myself, I offered God... terrible things. I don't care, I whispered to the silence, whatever you want I'll give you—just let me wake up different.

If God keeps old prayers, there must be a special section for those of transsexual children. Strange prayers, prayers that precede overdoses of pills and crudely knotted nooses, prayers ravishing in their loneliness: *You made me what I am; You, at least, must understand.*

How, I wondered, could such prayers fail to evoke a response from God? It didn't seem like that much to ask. The only difference, after all, was a little bit of flesh between my legs. I would get out of bed in the morning and standing would be different—my feet would feel the floor, and my hair would be longer, a tickling tumble over my shoulders, and I would stand up straighter, and I would open my door and pad in my new but not so different flesh across the hall to show my parents what had happened—what I had become—what I had always been....

And then my life would begin.

Except that it never did. I was trapped; God, like a righteous or sadistic jailer, could, but wouldn't, set me free.

I WISH MY CHILDHOOD WRESTLINGS WITH GOD

had prepared me for a life of indomitable determination to triumph over every obstacle until I became the woman I knew I was meant to be. Everyone loves that story, and many transsexuals and non-transsexuals live it. I didn't. I did everything I could to give up on life. Instead of struggling heroically against the rejection, hatred and ignorance that surrounds transsexuality, I devoted myself to quarantining and killing my desperate craving to become.

But though I tried for decades, I never managed to die inside. Against my will, beneath my awareness, life grew inside me, shower by despair-soaked shower. My life, the life that would include me. The life that would require me to make the unimaginable transition from living as a man to living as a woman. The life that would cost me all I knew of life.

Rabbi Hillel crystallized the transsexual dilemma two thousand years ago. "*If I am not for myself,*" he said, "*who will be for me? But if I am for myself alone, what am I?*" I and other transsexuals know that if we are not for ourselves, if we are not committed to becoming ourselves, no one will be for us. No one expects us to become ourselves, no one needs us to become ourselves, and those whose lives are bound up with ours—in my case, my wife, my three children, my best friend, my employer, my students—would be much happier if we never became ourselves. Our journey toward selfhood can only begin with a radical act of being-for-ourselves that can seem selfish, solipsistic, even psychotic, for we are being for selves that do not yet exist. But if we are not for ourselves, our selves will never be.

Sometimes it seems that this radical being-for-ourselves seals our isolation, our differentness, from the rest of the human race. But Hillel's follow-up question applies as much to us as to anyone. *If we are for ourselves alone, what are we?* For years, I tried to treat my peculiar gender—a gender defined by the dissonance between my physical sex and my internal sense of self—as a private, idiosyncratic condition. I could be myself, I told myself, if I could be for myself alone. But Hillel was right. When I was for myself alone, what was I? A wish, a longing, a perversion. To become myself, I needed to be for, with, among others. "Female" designates a physical condition; "woman" designates a social status, someone who has achieved a mature female identity in the world. Since my genes determined that I could never be female, to become a woman I had to engage in a process of becoming that was neither private nor idiosyncratic, to remake myself as a woman in the eyes of those who knew me as a man.

But if I cannot be for myself alone, if I need others to become myself, then I cannot ignore the pain that results from my becoming. However much I've suffered, my self and my life are no more important than the suffering selves of the life-partner and children whose lives have been shattered by my transition from living as a man to living as a woman. The best moments of the life I am making will always be intertwined with the worst moments of the lives of those I love. It isn't fair; it isn't what I want or intend; but it is true. What can I make of myself—what self can I make, what service can I do, what love can I give, that would in any way be worth such pain? If I am not for myself alone, what, other than a source of anguish, am I?

TRANSSEXUALS' FATE IS TO CONFRONT OTHERS

with the fact that since we are all complicit in each other's identities, none of us are, or can be, for ourselves alone. Transsexuals are constant reminders that neither gender nor identity is "in" us. Who we are for ourselves is constantly being remade through what we are to others.

Life as a transsexual is tough enough without serving as a public proving ground for existential insecurities. But the fact that I tend to destabilize the sense of gender and identity of those around me means that, no matter how isolated I feel, I am not for myself alone. What I am is part of what you are; I define you as you define me. My journey from shame-soaked depths to the clothes-wearing, job-holding light of day involves everyone around me.

Truly, I couldn't have made, or continue to make, this journey to the surface without you. ■

Joy (formerly Jay) Ladin, David and Ruth Gottesman Professor of English at Stern College for Women of Yeshiva University, is the first openly transgender employee of an Orthodox Jewish institution. Ladin is the author of three books of poetry from Sheep Meadow Press: Alternatives to History (as Jay Ladin); The Book of Anna (as J. Ladin); and the just-published Transmigration, her first book under her true name. A book of original psalms is forthcoming from Wipf & Stock Press in 2010. This essay is drawn from a yet-unpublished collection of autobiographical reflections; these reflections have also spawned stories in Parnassus: Poetry in Review and Prairie Schooner. Ladin is the proud, problematic parent of Gabriel, 15; Yael, 10; and Nasia, 6.

Author's Note: I started writing psalms because I was in crisis; I felt shipwrecked with God, in a narrow space where God and I had no choice but to face each other. This psalm explores how hard it is for two such different beings to empathize with one another.

Psalm 6

God, you're lost in me again.
I've grown too large, too hollow
For you to follow
The breadcrumbs of Being you dropped
As you wandered
My intestinal dark. Your voice echoes inside me
From ceilings you can't reach
Because you are a child again, an unborn child
With no womb to curl in
And no way out
But crawling deeper in. At times like these
You regret the love
That lured you into the sticky mess
Of creation. And then, and only then,
You remember your wish
To understand
How the creatures you love so much
Could ever wonder where you are
When you are all around us.

— from Joy Ladin's forthcoming book, *Psalms*.

Becoming a Woman at Yeshiva University

IT WASN'T EASY FOR YESHIVA University to accept that a male professor to whom it had recently given tenure was returning to work as a female professor. Transsexual transition is problematic for most employers, and Yeshiva's status as Orthodox Judaism's flagship educational institution made my transition even more difficult. At first, I was placed on involuntary—and open-ended—research leave; I continued receiving full salary and benefits, but was not allowed on campus. Though this would be a dream-come-true for most academ-

ics, discrimination hurts, and I missed my students and the joy of teaching at Stern. When, after almost a year of leave, I sent a letter demanding to be allowed to return to work, to my surprise—and that of my Lambda Legal attorneys—the school agreed. My return to teaching in Fall 2008 made page 3 of the New York Post and precipitated discussion throughout the Jewish world, but, to my surprise, stirred little controversy among my students and colleagues—suggesting that attitudes toward gender and identity may be more flexible than the official positions

of conservative institutions suggest.

The most important consequence of my transition, in terms of students at Stern, was the publication of an issue of the student newspaper, *The Observer*, devoted to transsexuality and Judaism. This groundbreaking issue included a variety of Jewish views of transsexuality, and, in what is to the best of my knowledge a first, interviews with transgendered Jews living in hiding in Orthodox Jewish communities. I feel proud and lucky to work with the young women at Stern.

— Joy Ladin