

A letter to trans and nonbinary young people

Elul 5784

Dear trans and nonbinary young people,

I am writing this letter to let you know that you are not alone and you are not a fad. Gender diversity is essential to all parts of the universe. You are surrounded by oceans filled with clown fish that change sex and prehistoric cuttlefish that bend their gender. After the rain 36,000 kinds of nonbinary mushrooms pop out of the soil. Canaries that are both male and female fly overhead. Outer space is filled with mysterious blackholes that are impossible to define or put into categories.

I am so sorry that a lot of really powerful people are making your life more difficult right now. Adults should be supporting you and stepping aside to let you grow. You shouldn't have to fight for your pronouns to be respected, to play sports, to use the right bathroom, or for the healthcare you deserve. And you really shouldn't have to hear some of the terrible messages that are out there about us trans and nonbinary folks.

I am here to help fight for you. You don't know me, but I am your biggest fan. I admire how you are making the world better with your bravery and creativity, and by being yourself even when your adults don't understand. I wish I was as self-aware at your age. I didn't come out until I was 31 years old, right before I was ordained as the first openly transgender rabbi in 2006. I still remember how scared I felt at my ordination. I was wearing a men's suit for the first time, as I announced my fresh name and pronoun. A lot of people made my life harder back then, but what helped were the people who supported me and let me know that I was not alone. So, I want you to know that I am with you from afar.

A lot of the people saying nasty things to us right now claim to be speaking for religion. But as a rabbi, I can tell you that Jewish tradition is bursting with gender weirdness. In ancient Jewish holy texts, there are six genders beyond male and female, known as the tumtum, androgynos, saris and aylonit. Our Sages liked to put things into binary categories like shabbat and weekdays, day and night, men and women. However, unlike in today's world where things that don't belong are seen as dangerous or forbidden, our rabbis recognized that creation is often too complicated and wonderous for human categories. Pages and pages of holy texts are dedicated to exploring the parts of the world that don't fit it, like animals that aren't wild or tame

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or the time between day and night. In fact, the ancient rabbis decided that twilight was the holiest time for prayer because it was so hard to categorize.

Most importantly, Judaism believes that treating people with dignity is more important than defining them. The Torah teaches that every single person is created in the image of God. In the Mishna, Jewish holy books from the 1st century, we learn that even though we all have a common ancestor, Adam, each one of us is totally unique. The fact that we are all created in the image of God but look and act different, is proof of God's greatness! (Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5)

It's almost Rosh Hashana, the New Year, which celebrates the birthday of the world and the anniversary of the creation of the first human being. In English, the word "adam" sounds like a boy's name, but in Hebrew it just means the "earthling." In the Book of Genesis, this earthling is first described as a single male person and then as two people, one male and one female (Genesis 1:27). The sages grappled with the inconsistency of this story. "Who can be both male and female?" they asked each other. They offered some creative theories: perhaps the first person was actually two people connected back-to-back, or a genderless blob of clay? But Rabbi Jeremiah gave an answer that really solved the problem: what if the first person, Adam, was an androgynos (Genesis Rabbah 8:1)?

The androgynos, as well as the other genders beyond male and female, appear hundreds of times in Jewish holy texts. There are stories about them finding love, marrying, having children, leading their communities, and officiating at religious rituals. In one story, Sarah and Abraham, the first mother and father of Judaism, are both tumtums and only later transition to become male and female (Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 64a). In another, we learn how a tumtum can read the megillah on Purim for other tumtums (Tosafot on Babylonian Talmud Megillah 4a). I would love to be at that service!

When I first discovered these stories, I felt like I had found home. It didn't matter so much to me whether or not they matched exactly with modern trans, nonbinary, or intersex identity. What I cared about was that they existed and were treated as people worthy of love and respect. I was raised in a world where there were only two boxes to check off on every form and two change rooms at the pool. Perhaps some of you grew up with more options, but it's hard for any of us to avoid all the people shouting about how two, and only two, sexes are traditional, natural, and holy. And yet, ancient Jewish sacred texts from two thousand years ago, know that there are many ways to be a person.

In the Talmud, these characters are protected from all forms of harm. Anyone who hurts the androgynos either on purpose or by accident is treated exactly the same way as someone who hurts any other person (Mishna Bikkurim 4:5).

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Sadly, today we are not as well protected, with dangerous anti-trans legislation sweeping the country. But there are a lot of us out here fighting for your safety, for your right to keep loving yourselves and each other.

I wish I could go in person with all of you on your first day of school, to synagogue with you on the holidays, or to your family holiday dinners, so I am sending this letter instead. I hope it reminds you that you are a beloved, beautiful part of creation. Trans people have always existed and always will.

Love, Elliot

P.S. Below is a prayer I wrote, based on a traditional morning blessing, that you can say when you're getting ready in the morning or putting on a new gender-affirming outfit (like a binder, lipstick, heels, or a unicorn onesie) for the first time.

Asher Yatzar (The One who forms):

A prayer of gratitude for all genders

Blessed are You, Eternal One our God, Ruler of the universe, who forms the human being with wisdom.

You created in the human body openings upon openings and cavities upon cavities. It is clear and well-known that every one of these unique valves within the complexity of each body is precious to the whole. May the day come when it is also obvious and evident that each unique body is essential to Your world, if just one of us is hidden or suffocated, then it is impossible for all of Your creation to thrive. Blessed are You, Source of all life and form, who placed within us the ability to shape and reshape ourselves; molding, changing, transitioning and decorating our bodies so that the diversity of our desires and the beauty of our souls can be revealed.

Blessed are You Eternal One who has made me Your partner in daily completing the task of my own creation