

## **Room to Grow:**

## **Jewish Education for Men, Women, and Everybody Else**

by Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla, 2007

delivered at the Union of Reform Judaism's Symposium on Gender And Jewish Education  
on Dec 11, 2007

### **Opening Experiential Exercise**

A. For each of the following statements stand up if you agree. Then take a moment to look around the room and notice who you share this experience with and who you have differences with:

- I like to cook
- I like to fix things
- I sometimes wear a kippah
- I light Shabbat candles
- I like the color pink
- I have been told not to cry
- I usually wear pants
- I have pretended to be less intelligent than I am to protect someone else's ego
- I have felt nervous walking home alone at night because of my gender or sexuality
- As a child I liked to play with dolls
- As a child I liked to climb trees
- As a part of my education I was encouraged (by peers, parents and/or teachers) to abandon activities or hobbies I enjoyed because they didn't "match" my gender
- As a part of my education I was encouraged to pursue activities or hobbies I didn't enjoy because they did "match" my gender
- I feel like my gender has not limited my education in any way
- I would like to feel like my gender does not limit my on-going education in any way

B. Now turn to the person to your right and spend a few minutes discussing what you noticed while doing this activity: Any surprises? Any moments that felt uncomfortable, "Aha!" moments?

## **Room To Grow: Jewish Education for Men, Women and Everybody Else**

Over the past few years I have had the opportunity to teach about gender diversity in Judaism at a number of synagogues and schools across the US. I almost always start with an exercise similar to the one we just did. I have worked with groups of a variety of ages, from a large cross-section of the Jewish religious spectrum. I have found that in almost every group no two people answer these questions in exactly the same way. Each one of us has a unique gender “story” and a highly individual way of expressing our gender in the world.

I have also discovered that although different communities have very different gender roles and expectations for their members, most of us would like to feel like our gender does not limit us in being fully seen, respected and included in our communities. At the same time, most of us have felt like at some point in our lives we were either punished for “gender inappropriate” behavior or rewarded for “conforming” to the gender expectations of our communities. Each of us has been shaped by the way our society expects men and women to behave in both positive and negative ways.

“Who would you be,” asks activist Pat Califa, “if you had never been punished for gender inappropriate behavior? What would it be like to walk down the street, go to work or attend a party and take it for granted that the gender of the people you met would not be the first thing you ascertained about them? What would happen if we all helped each other to manifest our most beautiful, intelligent, creative, and adventurous inner selves, instead of cooperating to suppress them?”

For the next hour or so I want us to try to imagine this world, where there is more space for people of all genders and sexualities to explore our multi-faceted humanity. What would our educational environments look like if there was the space for everyone to explore the limitless potential for change and diversity that God created within us? Allowing room to grow in Reform Jewish education does not just mean finding a way to embrace tomboyish girls and effeminate boys. It also means creating space for butch lesbian moms, single dads and transgender members of our youth groups. And it means simultaneously making space for the girly girl who wants to wear dresses every day and the boy who wants to be rough and tough.

Jewish education where there is room to grow, means space for each of us to be whole. If we can bring our full selves to our education we will be able to learn to our full capacity. As it says in Proverbs: “Hanoach la’na’ar al pi darco, gam ki yazkin lo yasur mimenah” Teach a child in his own way when he is young and when he grows older he will not depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6).

Furthermore, if we make space for more ways of expressing our gender it also creates room for more ways of being human. When we push at the boundaries of rigid gender distinctions

we can (and I think should) also push at other boundaries in our education and ask questions about the messages communicated about Non-Jewish parents in our learning materials; how cultural and racial diversity is dealt with in our classrooms and how accessible our buildings are to people with disabilities. A recent study of Colorado's Jewish community done by Jewish Mosaic: National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity showed that Jewish institutions which are welcoming of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender variant people tend to be open and welcoming of all Jews. As one participant in the study stated, "Being open and welcoming is a sign of a healthy Jewish institution."

## **What's At Stake?**

We live in a world where it is generally assumed that there are two ways to be human. From before we are born people ask "is it a boy or a girl?" From the moment of birth onward most facets of our life – the clothes we are told to wear, the activities we are anticipated to like, the careers and hobbies we are encouraged to pursue, the loving relationships we are expected to have – are guided by the answer to this crucial question. The past few decades of feminist organizing have deeply questioned whether we can (or should) see gender as an essential way to divide up humanity. And yet most of us 21st century people were still raised to believe that whether we are a girl or a boy is the most simple, and unchangeable, fact of our existence.

There are countless people in our communities who are excluded in varying degrees and ways by this rigid understanding of gender. There is the eight year old boy who was suspended from school for wearing his ballet tutu to class; the teacher who was fired because of her refusal to wear make-up and the masculine lesbian mom who was shouted at and harassed in a synagogue women's restroom.

The fear of gender variance in society, impacts all parts of life. Children who do not gender-conform are often met with physical, verbal and sexual cruelty and are sometimes forced to drop out of school, while youth are frequently disowned by their families and lose economic support systems. Transgender adults face significant obstacles to accessing employment, healthcare, police protection and other essential services. In 2005, Ronnie Paris Jr., a three year old boy, was beaten to death by his father for being a "sissy." This story illustrates the fact that rigidly held gender norms lead to multiple types of violence and oppression.

Sadly, despite our desire to create welcoming educational environments, some of these larger social issues impact our schools. According to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) 2005 National School Climate Survey, two thirds of LGBT students report being verbally or physically harassed at school because of their perceived sexual orientation or gender presentation. Three quarters of students surveyed for this nationwide study reported feeling unsafe in school. This led, as we might expect, to negative impacts on their school performance.

These statistics may be news to many of us who are sitting here today, even full-time educators, because these same students rarely report incidents of verbal and physical harassment to school authorities or parents, in part because they doubt any action will be taken. This perception is fueled by the fact that nearly 20% of respondents reported hearing homophobic and transphobic remarks from faculty and staff, and over 83% reported that faculty and staff do not regularly intervene when they hear anti-LGBT language.

This well-respected survey included a broad range of private and public schools. Jewish education is not immune to these wider problems. A survey of seven Jewish day schools conducted in 2003 by Rachel Timoner, now a rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College, found that “almost every Jewish day school reported anti-gay name-calling, teasing, harassment, or use of gay epithets.” Timoner’s research also found that “gay and lesbian students and teachers in Jewish day schools reported experiences of ostracism and judgment.” The lack of response from educators, rabbis, and other authority figures is pervasive. “Teachers, students, or parents complained of discrimination, invisibility, harassment, or a ‘deafening’ silence,” the report found.

Sexual orientation and gender identity is not the same thing: sexuality refers to our desires, while gender identity refers to our inner sense of self. However, if we listen to the stories underlying many of these statistics we discover that it is often expectations for gender conformity and the fear of overstepping gender boundaries, which elicits both homophobic and transphobic responses in our schools. Much of the mistreatment of gay, lesbian, bisexual, as well as transgender and gender variant people stems from the deeply held belief that there are only two completely opposite ways to be created in God’s image – male or female.

## How I Met the Tumtum

I believe that Judaism provides us with the spiritual resources we need to build a different kind of world. The rabbis of the Mishna who lived in the first two centuries of the Common Era, identify two sexes beyond male and female called the “*tumtum*” and the “*androgynos*.” The Mishna never clearly defines these terms, but the Sages of the Talmud see the *tumtum* as a person whose sex traits are obscured making it difficult to discern whether the *tumtum* should be classified as male or female. The *androgynos* is a person who has both male and female sexual traits. These figures appear frequently in classical Jewish texts – the *tumtum* and *androgynos* appear over 200 times in the Babylonian Talmud alone! And yet gender diversity is seldom discussed as an integral part of Jewish sacred texts or as a spiritual resource of our tradition.

The first time I encountered the *tumtum* I was 19 years old, new to classical Jewish study and learning in an orthodox Yeshiva. I found a startling text from the Mishna buried in a sheaf of handouts which referred to the *tumtum* as a possible sex assignment for a newborn infant. As

soon as I read this text I called over my teacher and excitedly asked her: “Who is this *tumtum*?” “Oh,” she answered, “The *tumtum* is a mythical beast that is neither male nor female – kind of like a unicorn.” Even though I knew next to nothing about Jewish texts and traditions, I had a feeling that my teacher might be wrong. I had spent a lifetime feeling homeless and adrift between the modern categories of “male” and “female” and when I met the *tumtum* I felt like I had found myself in the texts.

It has now been 14 years since I first met the *tumtum*. In a sense I have come a long way. I have spent those years immersed in Jewish texts and traditions, at the same time as exploring my own gender identity. In spring 2006 I both came out as transgender and was ordained as a rabbi by Hebrew Union College. However, in other ways, not much has changed since that first encounter. I still recognize the *tumtum* whenever we meet in the text and I am still surrounded by voices that deny that the *tumtum* and I really exist.

As a new rabbi, an educator and a chaplain, I have had the privilege to talk to numerous people who (in one way or another) can't or won't fit within modern binary genders. Each of these individuals has confirmed that we do exist both in Jewish sacred tradition and in contemporary communities. Every one of these encounters has pushed me to find Jewish resources that shed light on our struggles. I, in turn, have become more and more convinced that Judaism offers us the seeds of a liberation theology for men, women, transgender people and everyone else that can transform Reform educational and spiritual institutions.

There are many ways to read these texts and the Sages' approach is very far from perfect. They certainly do not argue for sex and gender liberation, as some of us might wish that they had. But they also never question whether gender diversity really exists, or whether gender-nonconforming people should be seen and recognized within our study houses and sanctuaries.

In the Babylonian Talmud we learn the story of a *tumtum* who becomes a parent of seven children (Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 83b). In the same tractate the radical claim is made that the first ancestors of the Jewish people – Abraham and Sarah – were actually originally *tumtumim*. According to this text, they only later transitioned genders to become male and female (BT Yevamot 64a). We learn in the Midrash that Adam HaRishon, the first human being created in the image of God, was actually an *androgynos*.

Chapter 4 of Mishna Bikkurim is wholly concerned with the ritual and civil status of the *androgynos*. We read: “the *androgynos* in some ways legally equivalent to men, in some ways legally equivalent to women, in some ways legally equivalent to both men and women and in some ways legally equivalent to neither men nor women.” (Mishna Bikkurim 4: 1) Through out this chapter our Sages take care to define the ways that the *androgynos* deserves protection and the ways in which life is holy for the *androgynos*.

At the end of this chapter of Mishna, Rabbi Yossi offers the opinion that the androgynos is: “*Bri’a b’ifnei atzmah hoo*” (he is a created being of her own.) This Hebrew term blends male and female pronouns to poetically express the complexity of the *androgynos*’ identity. The term “*Bri’a b’ifnei atzmah*” is a classical Jewish legal term for exceptionality. The *koi*, an animal that is neither wild nor domesticated, is referred to by the same phrase (Tosefta Bikkurim 2). This term is an acknowledgement that not all of creation can be understood within binary systems.

Jewish Sages often tried to sort the world into binaries however they also recognized that not all parts of God’s creation can be contained in orderly boxes. Distinctions between Jews and non-Jews; Shabbat and the days of the week; purity and impurity, are crucial to Jewish tradition. However, it was the parts of the universe that defied binaries that interested the rabbis of the Mishna and the Talmud the most. Pages and pages of sacred texts are occupied with the minute details of the moment between fruit and bud, wildness and domestication, innocence and maturity, the twilight hour between day and night.

We read in the Babylonian Talmud: “Our sages taught: As to twilight, it is doubtful whether it is part day and part night, or whether all of it is day or all of it is night.... Rabbi Yosi said: Twilight is like the twinkling of an eye as night enters and the day departs, and it is impossible to determine its length.” (Shabbat 34b) We might have thought that the ambiguity of twilight would have made it dangerous or forbidden within Jewish tradition. But in fact our Sages determined that dawn and dusk, the in-between moments, are the best times for prayer. (Babylonian Talmud Brachot 29b)

Jewish tradition acknowledges that some parts of God’s creation defy categories and that these liminal people, places and things are often the sites of the most intense holiness. After all, the word for holiness in Hebrew, “*kedusha*”, literally means set aside or out of the ordinary. Transgender activist and HUC rabbinical student Reuben Zellman says: “Twilight cannot be defined; it can only be sanctified and appreciated. People can’t always be defined; they can only be seen and respected, and their lives made holy. This Jewish approach allows for genders beyond male and female. It opens space in society. And it protects those who live in the places in between.”

## **Education for girls, boys, men, women, intersex and trans people, and everybody else**

When I teach these texts at synagogues and schools I am frequently asked about the “*Nafka Mina*”: what is the practical implication of these texts? The boundaries around gender and sexuality have certainly shifted through-out history. It is certainly true that an exact equivalence cannot be made between pre-modern gender diversity in Jewish sacred texts and contemporary gender-variant lives. However, it is important to note that identities beyond, or on the edges of, male and female have existed across millennia and discussions of pre-modern

gender diversity can inform and enrich the way we think about the space we create for gender variance in contemporary communities.

Most importantly, I think that these texts demonstrate that it is a Jewish value to question our assumptions about the basic ways we divide up humanity in every era. Reform Judaism has always tried to reach out to those of us who are marginalized. We have led the way in opening the doors of Jewish tradition to women, Jews by choice, and interfaith families. But we are just beginning to find ways to embrace those who break down mainstream gender lines.

So how do we open up space in our educational environments for people of all genders and sexualities to learn? Expand the horizons of our classrooms is a lifetime project. However, as a way to begin the conversation I would like to share with you five practical suggestions for Jewish educators of “dos and don’ts” that I adapted from a longer list created by Dr. David Shneer of Jewish Mosaic.

1. **DO avoid “opposites.”** If you need to randomly divide up your classroom for team activities don’t simply say “girls over here” and “Boys over there.” While there may be some circumstances when it makes sense to offer single-gendered activities, using this as a random way to divide up a classroom reinforces the idea that gender is the most salient part of our identity and creates discomfort for gender nonconforming children, youth and adults.

Furthermore, focusing on opposites when teaching Hebrew, such as Hebrew learning games emphasizing “abba” and “ima” encourage students to think in binaries rather than in inclusive spectra. Binaries are almost always exclusive rather than inclusive and make presumptions about society that do not generally work in pluralistic classrooms. If you do use an “abba-ima” game, you as the teacher should be the one to break the binary by offering an example involving an “abba-abba.”

2. **Do not make assumptions about your students’ family structures or backgrounds.** Don’t assume that all of your students have two parents (let alone just a mother and a father). If they do have a mother and a father, don’t assume that the mother is the primary care-giver. Furthermore, don’t assume that all of your students have parents that are Jewish or that all your students are Ashkenazi. Let the students tell you their own family narratives. When we make room for these stories we discover just how diverse the Jewish community and our classrooms have become.
3. **DO teach Classical Jewish texts that offer complex visions of sexuality and gender.** There are a number of texts, that you are probably teaching already, that can be used to highlight gender and sexual diversity in Judaism. Teach both of the Creation stories from Genesis: the first where man and woman are created simultaneously and

perhaps even in the same body as an *androgynos* (Genesis 1:27), and then the more well-known story of Eve emerging from Adam's rib. Teaching both stories and the rabbinic commentary that surrounds them, shows that the Torah encourages a wide range of interpretations and highlights a more gender-inclusive vision of creation.

Do explore the same-gender relationships found in the Bible. Although David is a classic character in “heroes” curricula, his deep love for Jonathan, sexual or not, is rarely discussed. Also include Ruth and Naomi in your list of heroes, and discuss the possibility of their relationship as an intimate one.

4. **DO encourage the uncomfortable laughter that can come from posing examples involving gender crossing.** However, as Dr. Shneer highlights, it is very important that the teacher be the one to offer up the uncomfortable example, not the shy student with same-sex parents or the child who is silently questioning her or his gender. For example, for a Purim play a male teacher can offer to play the role of Esther. If students respond with statements like “but boys can't play Esther,” the teacher should acknowledge and address the discomfort of the students and ask them what it is that makes them feel uncomfortable. The students are then forced to examine inclusion and consider a range of alternatives.

In doing this educators should be sensitive to the fact that it is still generally much harder for boys, than for girls to blur gender lines. Although it is now acceptable in many Reform communities for girls to play tough sports and women to be rabbis, it would still be shocking in most synagogues and Jewish schools to see boys openly playing with dolls or male teachers crying in public. The reasons behind this are too complex to explore right now, but I think that it is connected to the persistence of sexism in our society which continues to see “feminine” activities as degrading.

5. **DO include visual representations of LGBT people or families and people with diverse gender expressions.** When doing units on family, communities, or history, provide a broad range of options. This is one concrete way that we begin to create a world that looks different and is more embracing of difference.

## Created Beings of Our Own

Small steps like these begin to create the space for a different kind of world where all of us have room to grow and express ourselves. Synagogues and schools where gender nonconformity is regularly seen in public, has a huge impact on students. Take a moment to consider how comfortable your community would be with seeing a bar mitzvah boy with long hair? Are female rabbis in your synagogue expected to wear skirts on the *bimah*? How comfortable would a male teacher be wearing earrings to teach in your school?

Last year at Kol Nidre services I delivered a sermon on the power of diversity. Afterwards, in the swirling crowd I felt someone tug at my jacket. I turned around to find a nine-year old boy in lavender shiny “power puffs” sneakers. “I really liked your sermon,” he whispered before disappearing into the crowd. During Sukkot his mom told me that he had been hassled about his shoes at school all week, but after hearing my sermon he had decided to keep wearing them. I don’t think it was my words that impacted him, but the visual power of a gender non-conforming rabbi on the *bimah*.

Wearing lavender sneakers may seem like a small statement. But I don’t think it is in the fourth grade. I see this boy as incredibly brave. It is this type of insistence in being fully ourselves in the face of adversity, which world change is built upon. Classrooms where nine year old boys can wear lavender sneakers are one step toward creating a society where each and every one of us can grow to our full potential.

In the Mishna, when Rabbi Yossi refers to the androgynos as a “*Bri’a b’ifnei atzmah*”, a created being of its own I believe he is making a theological statement. God creates diversity that is far too complex for human beings to understand. There are parts of each of us that are uncontainable. Every one of us must be appreciated as a “created being of our own” and educated with care and respect so that we are given the space to evolve into the unique manifestation of God’s own image that we are meant to be.