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."

---

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 Yitzḥak 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.
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?

The Rabbis recognized more than just the binary understanding of female and male. They used the term "androginus" 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 androginus 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

---

**במדבר א':**

(יב) האנוניקخر,תי את כל תושבชนะ
אשאיכן,לתיהיו, говорит אל שיארה
פוחק,ר, כארש יושב האמה יאת הרקיע.
הأمם אشكر תשועת לאבות.

**משנה ביכורים ד:**

(א)ادرוגינוס יש בדרים שאוה
לאכimony יש בדרים שאוה חיים
ובדרים שאוה לאכimony שאוה
דרים שאוה לאלה איה אוכי

(ב)قاتل שאוה חמות מתומן כלב
כאנשים ויתיב כ.offsetTop
ומתחפשות הסתרים כочки
אבל לא יאיש כочки ויתיב ככל
מהות האמורחתר כочки:

(ג)דואיש שאוה חמות בודד
כочкиответו מתיחדו עם האוכי
כочкиответו סבור על חקיקות עו
בלישוע אלא כי לא תכל מוחים
כочкиответו מתיחדו עם האוכי
נבעל בכרור כочки ווספל ע
המהות כочки:

(ד)قاتل שאוה חמות אותות חיים
על מחנה על לוליתан כочки
והחצרות יושב וולא תMediaType
כочкиответו ויתיב עליי וד תמא
זוד תחר כочки וכочки חולק
ב鸨ויו קשים כשימי כочки נוסח
כלל התחולים כочки וכочки אום
אמר הוריןDIR ishi אושי היא

**ד מדר:**

2
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.

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.
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 lay 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 and
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
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.
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:

18th 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

Source Sheet created on Sefaria by Joseph Meszler