

Gender in Jewish Tradition

Compiled by Rabbi Rachel Ackerman

GENESIS 1:26-27

And God said, "Let us make adam (human) in our image, after our likeness...And God created the adam in [God's] image, in the image of God (b'tzelem Elohim) [God] created him, man and woman [God] created them."

Question: The word "adam" here can be understood not as Adam, the person (who really comes around in Genesis 2), but as a human being (or more literally "earthling"). If we read the text this way, what complications do you imagine that the midrashic rabbis had about the first adam, the first human being? Also, according to what was the first adam created?

GENESIS RABBAH 8:1

AND GOD SAID: LET US MAKE ADAM, etc. (Genesis 1:26). ...

Rabbi Yermiah ben Elazar said: When the Holy One, blessed be God, created adam, [God] created him an androgynos, for it is said, male and female [God] created them and called their name Adam (Gen.5:2).

Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman said: When Adonai created Adam, [God] created him double-faced, then [God] split him and made him of two backs, one back on this side and one back on the other side...

Rabbi Tanhuma in the name of Rabbi Benayah and Rabbi Berechya in the name of Rabbi Elazar said: [God] created him as an amorphous mass (golem) extending from one end of the world to the other...

Question: Here we see three different interpretations of Genesis 1:26-27. How did each of the rabbis understand the first adam, human? What did the first adam look like? What were its physical features and qualities?

RABBI MARGARET MOERS WENIG, 21ST CENTURY

Men, women, and every possibility in between were created simultaneously. This verse is a merism, a figure of speech in which a totality is expressed by two contrasting parts

(e.g. "young and old," "thick and thin," "near and far")...God created male and female and every combination in between.

Question: Rabbi Wenig understands the words "male and female" as a merism, a grammatical concept used in other places in the Torah. How does this influence our understanding of gender and sex (not particularly distinct concepts in Biblical literature) in the Torah? Do you think this was the intention of the text? How is this reading similar and different to the midrashic interpretations above? What value does reading the phrase "male and female" as a merism offer us?

CATHERINE* AND ABBY, FEBRUARY 2017, L'TAKEN SPEECH

...[U]nder this new administration, my rights...are more under attack than they have been in the past few years. I find myself worrying more often than ever about being treated the same as my straight peers when I enter the workforce, and being subject to hate crimes that have no legal ramifications... My trans friends have been harassed in the hallway, are constantly misgendered...and face real, imminent dangers when they do something as simple as use the bathroom...And these are just the struggles that [my peers and I] face in one of the most progressive areas in the United States....*

...Jews are guided by the basic belief that all human beings are created in the image of God. "B'tzelem Elohim." "In the Divine Image." No human is wrong, and no human deserves to be judged for who they love or how they identify.**

Question: What challenges do you see those in our communities who are trans facing today? What role do you see religion play in all of this? What can you offer from a Jewish perspective when it comes to supporting those members of our communities who are trans?

MAX, 7TH GRADE, TEMPLE SHALOM

My [public school] teacher taught me that students have three rights in school: To learn, to be safe, and to feel safe.

Question: How do guidelines surrounding trans students in schools impact students' abilities to learn, be safe, and feel safe?