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Shabbat Bereshit Torah Study
From Male to Female: Two Creation Stories, Two Genders?

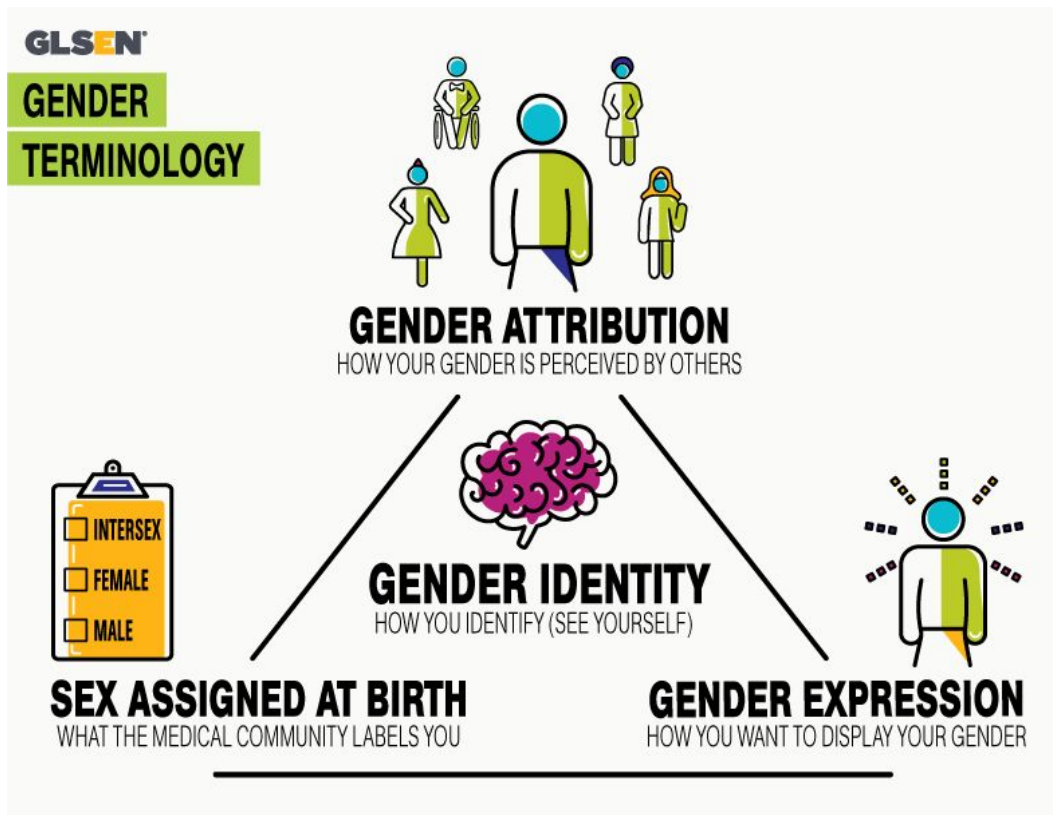
Reflection Questions

- What are your associations with the term “man”?

- What are your associations with the term “woman”?

- Do those associations change if you modify each word with the adjective “Jewish”?

Source 1: “Gender Terminology,” GLSEN



Source 2: Bereshit (Genesis) 1:26-28

And God said, “Let Us make a human in Our image, after Our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, and the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.” And God created the human in [God’s] image; in the image of God [God] created them; male and female [God] created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and master it, and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, and the whole earth, and all the living things that creep on earth.”

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיְבָרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם: וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים-יִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹּשׁוּהָ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַיָּה הָרֹמֶשֶׁת עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

Source 3: Genesis 2:18-22

The Eternal God said, “It is not good for the human to be alone. I will make a fitting helper [ezer k’negdo] for him.” And the Eternal God formed from the earth every living thing of the field, and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the human to see what he would call it—and whatever he called every living thing, that would be its name. And the human gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky and all the wild beasts; but for the human no fitting helper was found. So the Eternal God cast a deep sleep upon the human; and, while he slept, [God] took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. And the Eternal God fashioned the rib that [God] had taken from the human into a woman; and [God] brought her to the human. Then the human said, “This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called *woman*, For from man was she taken.”

וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹנֵק אֱלֹהִים לֹא־טוֹב הִיּוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה־לוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ: וַיִּצַּר יְקֹנֵק־אֱלֹהִים מִן־הָאָדָמָה כָּל־חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה וְאֵת כָּל־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיָּבֵא אֶל־הָאָדָם לְרִאוֹת מַה־יִּקְרָא־לוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא־לוֹ הָאָדָם נָפֶשׁ חַיָּה הוּא שְׁמוֹ: וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שְׁמוֹת לְכָל־הַבְּהֵמָה וּלְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְכָל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה וְלֹא־מָצָא עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ: וַיִּפֹּל יְקֹנֵק אֱלֹהִים־יִם תְּרַדְמָה עַל־הָאָדָם וַיִּישָׁן וַיִּקַּח אַחַת מִצְלָעָתָיו וַיִּסְגֶּר בָּשָׂר תַּחְתָּנָה: וַיִּבֶן יְקֹנֵק אֱלֹהִים־יִם אֶת־הַצֶּלַע אֲשֶׁר־לָקַח מִן־הָאָדָם לְאִשָּׁה וַיְבָאָה אֶל־הָאָדָם: וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם זֹאת הִפְעַם עִצְמוֹ מֵעַצְמִי וּבָשָׂר מִבָּשָׂרִי לְזֹאת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה כִּי מֵאִישׁ לָקַחָהּ־זֹאת:

Discussion Questions

- ❑ Do these two texts contradict or complement one another? In what ways?
- ❑ What important characteristics about human beings does the text offer? Are those characteristics based on sex or gender? How?
- ❑ What do these texts teach us about what it means to be a man? about what it means to be a woman? about the relationship between men and women?
- ❑ What might it mean for a person to be *ezer k'negdo*?

Source 4: Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 8:1

“Rabbi Jeremiah the son of Elazar said: When the Holy One, blessed be He,¹ created the first human [*adam harishon*], He created him as an *androgynos* [that is, a person with both male and female sexual organs], as it is written, ‘Male and female He created them.’ Rabbi Samuel the son of Nachman said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the first human being [*adam*], He created him with two faces, then split him and made him two backs—a back here and a back there.”

אמר רבי ירמיה בן אלעזר: בשעה שברא הקב"ה את אדם הראשון, אנדרוגינוס ברא-- הדא הוא דכתיב: זכר ונקבה בראם. אמר ר' שמואל בר נחמן: בשעה שברא הקב"ה את אדם הראשון, דיו פרצופים בראו, ונסרו ועשאו גביים--גב לכאן וגב לכאן.

Source 5: Bereshit 2:19-23

Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother, and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. Now they were both naked, the man and his wife, but they were not ashamed.

עַל־כֵּן יַעֲזֹב־אִישׁ אֶת־אָביו וְאֶת־אִמּוֹ וְדָבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ וְהָיוּ לְבֶשֶׁר אֶחָד: וְיִהְיוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם עַרְוִיִּים הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְלֹא יִתְבַּשְׂשׂוּ:

¹ While Jewish tradition emphasizes that God has no body, the rabbis use the metaphor of a male-gendered God most regularly. For more on the topic of gender and God, Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai* and *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (among many other sources).

Discussion Questions

- ❑ First, let's unpack the images presented in Midrash *Bereshit Rabbah*. How would you rephrase or elaborate on the way these rabbis view the first creation of human beings?
- ❑ What do these various accounts imply about attraction and desire? Do only "opposites" attract?
- ❑ What does this *midrash* imply about the nature or being of God, in whose image human beings are created?
- ❑ What do you make of the detail of "they were both naked, the man and his wife, but they were not ashamed"? What does text want us to know about them?
- ❑ What is the importance of "one flesh"? What is gained when a couple joins? What is unable to be achieved?
- ❑ Does the Midrash change your perception or interpretation of what it means for a couple to become "one flesh"?

Source 7: Tucker Lieberman, "Hearing beneath the Surface: Crossing Gender Boundaries at the Ari Mikveh" (Excerpt)

My body is not an abomination but it is unorthodox.

Like many Jews, at the age of 24 I joined the Birthright tour for a free trip to Israel, and as part of the itinerary found myself in Tzfat, once home to Rabbi Isaac Luria, the "ARI" [...]. When several of the men from my tour group decided to immerse themselves into the Mikveh of the Holy ARI, I decided to join them, although the prospect terrified me. What neither my tour group nor our host city's residents knew was that I am a female-to-male transsexual. Beneath my masculine appearance is a torso that is ambiguously sexed. Undoubtedly, it would be unwelcome in an all-male mikveh.

[...] For me, the short walk to the mikveh was long, grappling with fear, a Jacob's angel wrestling match on the banks of the river that flows through and divides me. One side of my brain tried to calm myself, assuring that I was merely a tourist and that this scenario existed merely for my amusement. The other side raced with fear.

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As my sandaled feet progressed ever closer to my destination, I felt like a kid confronted with an impending encounter with the sacred, *mysterium tremendum*, the terrifying unknown. The mikveh was enclosed in an unassuming building on the crest of a hill overlooking a field, marked with the banner reading “No women allowed beyond this point.” [...]

The inside of the building looks like the inside of a stone eggshell, and contains a changing area, a bathroom, and the mikveh itself, fed by a spring and surrounded by stone. The immersion itself was simpler than I had feared. The pool accommodated one man at a time, so we waited in half-darkness, single-file (I, discreetly wrapped in my towel). When it was my turn, I dropped the towel and climbed down the ladder. Facing the blank stone wall, there was a kind of privacy. The icy water sealed over the top of my scalp. [...]

Turning towards the rest of the waiting men, I hoisted myself out of the pool and grabbed my towel in what I hoped was a single, quick motion. After dressing, I emerged from the cave and walked into the waning afternoon sunlight, across the boundary marked “no women,” alive and whole. [...]

Water in the mikveh is used as a tool to separate clean from unclean, work-week from Shabbat, men from women. Yet water itself is amorphous, concealing our bodies in refracted light and shadow and a rush of sound, making it difficult to distinguish male from female. Where we seek clarity and definition, we find boundaries beginning to soften and join us together.

Reflection Questions:

- ❑ How might you reconcile Tucker Lieberman’s personal reflection with the Biblical and midrashic texts we read together today? Do we need to reconcile the texts with one another?

- ❑ How have the notions of “opposite sexes” been challenging, affirming, limiting, or empowering for you?