

D'var Torah
Transgender Day of Visibility / Passover 2021

By Michael Prince

When I completed *Introduction to Judaism* with the incredible Rabbi Sabine Meyer as part of my conversion, she asked what it meant to say that the Torah is “sacred;” I answered that, to me, the Torah is sacred because it is a surviving, ancient point of connection to God and Divinity. I don’t believe that makes every word *literal*, but the Torah is inspirational and incredibly important, culturally and personally. I am moved by stories from the Torah, not because I believe “*this story definitely, literally happened,*” but rather because I believe “*this story is metaphorically happening right now, continuously.*” Because I look at my own life and see a story of bondage, and Exodus, and a desert, and hope for a promised land. So I believe the Torah is *true* because it speaks truth to our hearts, and it is *real* because it speaks to us in our own realities.

And there are so many ways the Passover story can speak powerfully to each of us in our lives today. Placing myself in the narrative, I see a metaphorical reflection of my journey as a transgender person, and a literal reminder that fighting for social justice against systems of oppression is our ongoing and sacred obligation.

Passover transports us to the ancient land of Egypt: *Mitzrayim*, meaning “the Narrow Place” in Hebrew. Here, the Israelites suffer the cruelty of slavery: a socially constructed system of oppression that works by designating people into categories based on the circumstance of their birth, and dictating their fate based on the prescribed expectations of those categories. This system denies the Israelites their fundamental human rights to freedom and self-determination, and this system is enforced through structural violence.

I was *not* born into slavery and subjugation like the ancient Israelites faced. But I was born into a society built on an oppressive, socially constructed system of gender that forcibly assigns each of us into a binary category based on the appearance of our bodies at birth, and for the rest of our lives these categories seek to confine us within their prescribed expectations.

This system restricts all of us from our fundamental human rights to bodily autonomy and authentic self-expression, and make no mistake, this system is also enforced through structural violence.

From a young age, I had a deep internal understanding that my authentic self did not fit within the expectations of my assigned gender. I was always androgynous, always seeming to simultaneously belong and not belong within either binary gender. Others were often confused

and unsure what to make of me, because when they interpreted me as a girl or woman, I seemed too masculine, and when they interpreted me as a boy or man, I seemed too feminine. Suffice to say, I know what it's like to be a stranger in a narrow place.

Being visibly gender nonconforming as a child came with bullying from peers and interrogations from strangers. After I began openly expressing my transgender identity as a teen, negative reactions escalated, with the worst including instances of targeted physical and sexual violence.

I wish I could say this kind of violence is rare, but the data shows that trans people continue to be affected by disproportionate rates of discrimination and violence—exponentially moreso for trans people of color caught at the intersection of racism and transphobia.¹ We all need to raise our voices in demanding safety and legal protection for trans people in all spaces—especially gendered spaces such as public bathrooms and locker rooms where we are at the highest risk for victimization. We must demand an end to discrimination against trans people in all areas of life, including housing and employment.

This is part of the fight for gender liberation.

In the land of Egypt, Moses and the Israelites are entangled in a tense tug-of-war with Pharaoh, whose standards for granting them freedom seem to change arbitrarily and without warning. The Israelites are left uncertain about their future, and amidst terrible plagues upending their communities, they are left uncertain about their health.

My first puberty created severe dysphoria, a profound discomfort and disconnect is common, but not universal, among trans people. Unlike negative social reactions to my gender, which I could escape through solitude, there was never anywhere I could go where my body wouldn't follow. When we cannot exist comfortably within our bodies, it can have a profoundly negative effect on our mental health and wellbeing in all areas of our lives. That is why access to gender-affirming healthcare for my transition has been nothing short of lifesaving. Hormone therapy and gender-affirming surgeries have given me the transformational blessing of a comfortable home within my body, a sense of peace and belonging in my skin.

Each trans person is unique in their journey, and not every trans person will need or want these kinds of procedures. But for those of us who do need them, having access to this healthcare is *critical* and *lifesaving*. This includes trans and questioning youth, who are not given hormones and surgery as young minors. Again, to be perfectly clear: trans and questioning youth, under a doctor's supervision, may be prescribed puberty blockers that *temporarily* and *reversibly* delay

¹<https://www.metroweekly.com/2020/11/human-rights-campaign-issues-report-on-anti-trans-violence-as-u-s-deaths-reach-record-high/>

the body's initial puberty, in order to give these young people more time to make an informed decision about what kind of puberty they need to undergo in order to be healthy and happy.²

We need to raise our voices against the wave of anti-trans legislation that is callously disregarding youths' welfare by criminalizing providers giving trans and questioning youth the care they need. We must demand access to safe, affordable, and affirming healthcare for all trans people.

This is part of the fight for gender liberation.

Fleeing the land of Egypt with Pharaoh's army in pursuit, the terrified Israelites find themselves trapped between the threat of approaching soldiers from behind, and the dangerous churning waters of the sea in front of them. There is no escape in sight, nowhere to go, until the miraculous power of the Divine parts the waters to create a brave new path forward into the unknown wilderness.

The effects of my transition rippled throughout my family, with sometimes tense divisions between relatives who recognized and respected my gender, and those who did not. When I chose Michael for my official, legal name, the linguistic meaning of the name wasn't an important factor. I named myself Michael to honor the blessed memory of my Uncle Mike. And in doing so, I wanted to help my extended family find meaning in my transition, which some of them struggled to understand.

As I've learned more about the Hebrew language since choosing Judaism, I've gained an entirely new appreciation for the meaning behind the name Michael. A quick web search can tell you that its meaning is a question: "Who is like God?"

It is a powerful rhetorical question meant to draw our attention to God's unique Oneness, using the name El to refer to God. We see that same essential question (the end phrased just a little bit differently) at the heart of the Passover narrative, when our people stood at the shores of the sea, led by Miriam in song to celebrate their miraculous deliverance: It's the joyous expression of freedom that has become central to our liturgy, the *Mi Chamocha* prayer... "Who is like you, Adonai?"

Knowing that we are created in the Divine's image, it's a question I would like each of us to try adjusting inward towards ourselves.

²Young trans minors may be prescribed reversible puberty blockers before they are old enough to receive hormone therapy (age 16+) and surgery (age 18+): <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lgbt-rights-health-analysis/who-should-decide-when-a-child-can-change-gender-idUSKBN2080SI>

Who is like you, among all the individuals that make up our collective humanity? Who shares all of your experiences and perspectives, and brings all the same gifts?

In asking this, we can appreciate that no one else is exactly like us, because we each bring something unique to the tapestry of humanity that only we can.

Recognizing the blessing in this diversity is part of the fight for gender liberation, because it isn't *just* about the freedom of trans people to transition outside of our gender assigned at birth...

It's also about the freedom for each individual—cisgender or transgender; woman, man, or nonbinary—to determine what their gender means to them personally, and express themselves on their own terms...

It's the freedom from heteronormativity that says loving and desiring women belongs only to men, and loving and desiring men belongs to only women...

It's the freedom of women to become spiritual leaders who build and bless our sacred communities....

And so much more.

Most of all, it is the promised land that awaits all of us on the other side of the wilderness, if we're willing to join together and march.