

Shaar Zahav: “Oh, let me behold Your Presence!”

Shabbat shalom and Hag sameach. It's good to be back at Sha'ar Zahav. This congregation gave me my first taste of coming out in public. It was the mid-80's, and the kiddishes were full of interesting men who made me feel interesting too – until I came out as the congregation's only heterosexual male member. Those were complicated moments. By coming out as a member of the majority non-gay population, I was revealing that I was in the extreme minority at Sha'ar Zahav. Should my heterosexual privilege be challenged or should my vulnerability in the present moment be acknowledged? One thing was clear: I wasn't the kind of nice Jewish boy they were hoping to meet. Men who had been charmingly chatting me up suddenly got quiet. Some assured me that it was just fine that I was heterosexual; others explained why the congregation used the terms “gay” and “non-gay” rather than “gay” and “straight.” No one suspected that in coming out as a heterosexual man I was being only slightly more straight with them than when I had allowed them to assume I was gay.

That was fine with me. No matter how honest I wanted to be – and at synagogue I wanted to be very honest indeed – I knew that my life depended on no one guessing that I wasn't a real man, that the man I seemed to be wasn't a man at all but a way of not being seen.

When I risked coming out as trans in private conversations, no one, gay or non-gay, friend or lover, rabbi or therapist, seemed to understand. This was the Stone Age. The internet was new, cable channels were limited, and even those like me who were looking for material about transsexuality found it difficult to locate. I'm told that terms like “GLBT” didn't exist back then. It was hard enough to be gay and lesbian without trying to imagine an umbrella identity that would include other persecuted minorities. Even now, when “GLBT” is a section in Barnes and Noble, most people, gay and non-gay alike, are pretty fuzzy on what the “T” means. Many people struggle with and against with conventional definitions of masculinity and femininity, and many of us mess with the

conventional modes of expressing those genders. But those of us who are transgender feel uncomfortable not only with this or that way of expressing what it means to be male or female; we're uncomfortable with gender identity itself. My brain says one thing about what I am; my body says another. Even in the GLBT world, there aren't many places where these kinds of conflicts are acknowledged, understood, and welcomed, because – thank God – for most of us, they aren't a matter of life and death.

For transsexuals like me, and for many others who identify with the “T” part of “GLBT,” gender identity *is* a matter of life and death, a struggle with life- and self-defining categories we can neither fit nor escape. Even now, after four years of living as a woman, I'm not sure whether I can ever really win this struggle, or whether, like Jacob wrestling with the angel, the best I can do is hang on until the lips of gender (one is male, one is female) part and give me a blessing.

It may seem strange that I'm still struggling. After all, I seem to have solved my transgender problems. I'm no longer pretending to be a man; in fact, thanks to the *New York Post*, which put my transition on page three, and a forthcoming memoir, I'm as out as anyone this side of Chaz Bono can be. I'm lucky enough to be able to pass as a “born” woman, which means I can live without fear of the kind of violence that claims the lives of several dozen trans Americans every year, or the abuse that rains down on thousands of others. I not only have a job (a miracle for anyone these days), but I've been accepted as an out transwoman by the Orthodox Jewish college at which I teach. Despite how hard it can be for them, my children – I see them several times a week – accept me too. I even have a girlfriend who loves me despite the complexities of gender. Despite the fact that trans people are still not legally and socially considered full citizens, I'm out and thriving.

So what – other than a congenital need to *kvetch* – is my problem?

That's hard to explain. When I was living in hiding as a man, I dreamed of living openly, honestly, as a woman, so that anyone who saw me would see me as I truly was, as I was inside. Now that the living openly part of the dream has come true, I've discovered that it's not that simple. My

children still see me as a man; I am, and may always be, “Daddy” to them. My friends who stuck with me through transition see me as some complicated combination of the Jay I was and the Joy I am. Though we don't talk about it much, I know it's hard for them – as it's hard for me – not to notice the things about me about that still seem male: a voice that's too low, shoulders that are too wide, a way of walking that comes from growing up without fear of sexual harassment or rape. Sometimes the man they knew seems present again, and the woman I'm trying to be seems like an ill-fitting dress; sometimes they fear they've lost the man they loved in the shuffle between genders. Those who know me only as Joy don't have this problem – for better or worse, they'll never know me as a man, and so will never be the person I lived as for 45 years.

So it's hard to feel that anyone sees me as I truly am – because who I truly am is not simply a woman named Joy or a man named Jay or a sequence of before-and-after pictures. I'm all of those, and none of them: there was no man named Jay and there is no woman named Joy; my true self is a struggle between male and female, gender past and gender future, a sometimes agonizing, sometimes ecstatic, process of becoming.

This is a special kind of loneliness: the loneliness of knowing that there is no form, no face, that can make one visible. That loneliness tends to be acute for trans people, but others experience it too. You can hear that loneliness in the voices of those whose circumstances – joblessness, homelessness, lack of money, the wrong accent, the wrong shade of skin – render their talents and strengths invisible to others, of those who are seen as old when they feel young, in the nail-bitten calm of those whose public responsibilities conceal private agonies.

I've felt that loneliness all my life, but it wasn't until I was eight or nine that I recognized it in someone else's voice. The voice, in archaic English translation, was in the Torah, and the someone else was God, who, in the guise of a burning bush, had struck up a conversation with an 80-year-old shepherd named Moses.

To me God's loneliness was obvious. Who but a profoundly lonely person would hang around

in a burning bush in the hopes of hooking up with a shepherd? Maybe I was projecting, but it seemed to me that God and I had a lot in common. Neither of us had a body, neither of us had a face, and neither of us found it easy to answer what for most people is the simplest of ice-breaking question: what's your name? Of course, I always told people my name was "Jay," but when people referred to me as "Jay" – or "my son," "my brother," "him" or "he" – I knew that I wasn't the boy those words referred to. I didn't have a name back then; for that matter, I didn't have a name until a few years ago. The Torah doesn't portray God as transsexual, God also seems to have trouble identifying with a name. When Moses asks God's name at the burning bush, God answers *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, which can be translated as both "I am what I am" or "I will be what I will be." I wasn't sure what either version meant, but even at eight years old it was clear that for God, as for me, "What's your name?" was a question that had no easy answer, as though God, like me, had no self that could be named.

But when God met Moses, God got lucky; rather than accepting God's evasiveness, Moses longs to know what trans people might call God's "true self," the self behind the thunder and lightning, the promises and plagues, the self that God insists cannot be known.

Moses' longing sparks the revelation we read about in tomorrow's parshah. As so often with the Torah, we can't understand one portion without knowing what comes before it. Moses has recently returned from 40 days alone with God, receiving the Torah atop Mount Sinai. While he's gone, the Israelites have a theological crisis: in the absence of Moses, God's visible representative, they realize how hard it is to commit to a long-term relationship with a God who can't be seen. They resolve their anxiety by making an idol – the famous Golden Calf. When Moses sees the idol, he smashes the Ten Commandments that God just gave him, and, after a lot of blood and repentance, goes back up the mountain to try to patch things up with God, who is toying with the idea of wiping Israel off the face of the earth. Moses convinces God not to kill off the Israelites, and to continue leading them to the Promised Land.

At this point, many people, no matter how passionate their love, would be craving a little time

away from their beloved. But not Moses, who begs God, “Oh, let me behold Your Presence!” Moses' longing to see God is different from the longing that inspired the Golden Calf. No matter how much they longed for God, the Israelites preferred to “behold” an image they created rather than to struggle with a Presence that couldn't fit within their familiar modes of understanding. The God who had thundered to them from Mount Sinai was invisible, incomprehensible, uncanny, too there and not there at all. The Golden Calf was a comforting image that fit Bronze Age ideas about how gods were supposed to look. But Moses wasn't trying to fit God into a familiar image. In Hebrew, the word I've translated as “Presence” in Moses' plea, *kvodecha*, comes from a root meaning heaviness, weight, substance. Moses is begging to experience the physical truth of God: not a God tailored to fit his limited understanding, but God as God really is.

It's hard for me not to read Moses' longing and God's reticence in terms of transgender experience. When I transitioned, I learned that most people preferred to see a version of me that fit conventional ideas of gender; even people who loved me found it hard to look at the physical truth of me. I know how they feel: when I look in the mirror, I want to see someone who fits common ideas of what a woman looks, not someone who looks like a man trying to look like a woman. I approached transition the way the Israelites approached creating the Golden Calf: as a way of creating a comfortable, comprehensible image that could keep me and everyone else from having to confront the reality of a self that was neither.

It seemed obvious to me that creating such an image was the closest I could come to being seen, known, loved – until I found myself loved, as God in this parshah is loved, by someone who longed to see not a comforting, familiar image of womanhood but me as I am, my true category-confounding self.

I never expected to meet someone who would love me that way, and I suspect that a God who goes by either “I am what I am” or “I will be what I will be” never expected to find a love like Moses'. Like many trans people, the God we see in the Torah is used to being ignored, feared, disdained,

misunderstood, seen as a problem to be solved or avoided when seen at all. When that's your experience of relationships, intimacy can be difficult. That's why, even after their 40-day-long conversation atop Mount Sinai, Moses is still longing to behold God's presence. In some crucial respect, he felt that God wasn't fully there – even though, as Moses knew better than anyone, according to the first of the Ten Commandments, loving God means accepting that God is nothing we can see, nothing we can touch, nothing we can understand.

Maybe I'm projecting again, but I sense something analogous to transgender experience in God's insistence that true intimacy requires those who love us to acknowledge that they don't fully know us – that in some ways, our true selves can never be seen. After a lifetime of being translated into gender roles that are comfortable for others but agony to us, it can feel liberating for trans people to say to those closest to us, “No matter what you see when we're together, you don't see or understand me.” But it's tough to love someone who insists you can't know them, and it's tough – for God and for many trans people – to feel loved by those who can only prove their love by admitting they don't know us.

So it's not surprising that the Torah portrays God and Israel as having a lousy relationship. When God says – I'm paraphrasing here – “Don't be afraid to enter the Promised Land, I'll be leading the way,” Israel says, “You and what army?” When God says, “Love Me,” Israel says, “Where are You when I need You? I want a normal relationship with a normal deity, the kind who's always there, the kind I can touch and see.” When God says, “By rejecting Me, you're rejecting your share of this world and the world to come,” Israel says, “I will be what I will be. If that's all I can expect from You, that's all You can expect from me.”

Moses doesn't argue with God, but he also doesn't give up on his longing for intimacy. And that changes the game. When Moses pleads “Show Yourself to me,” God – this is *so* God – responds by saying yes and no: “I will make all My goodness pass before you... but you cannot see My face, for a human being can't see My face and live” (Ex. 33.19-20). It sounds like another dodge; Moses can see

God's "goodness," but he can't see God. But then God takes what a marriage counselor would call an extraordinary risk. God says, "I will put you in a cleft in the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen" (Ex. 33.22-23).

There is no moment in the entire Torah when humanity and God come closer. Instead of disrupting nature as at the Burning Bush and the thunder and lightning of Sinai, God creates a place that is safe for Moses, a space that reflects both his longings and limitations. The God who erupted in fury at the Israelites' desire for a visible representation of their invisible Redeemer here meets human longing halfway: "You can see My back, but My face cannot be seen." And even though Moses can only see God's back – what God has been, not what God is or will be – Moses feels close enough, loved enough, held enough to feel he sees and knows the God he knows he can never fully know or see.

From the fratricide, betrayal, and incest of Genesis through the threats and curses that make up so much of the Prophets, the Torah is a veritable anthology of relationships gone bad. But in this passage, the Torah offers a model not only for Divine-human understanding, but for human intimacy. The farther I feel from someone, the more tenuous the relationship, the more eager I am for them to accept the image I project as who I truly am. If they indicate by a look or a tone that they suspect there is some other truth behind my self-presentation, I feel exposed; vulnerable; criticized; rejected. I think this is a common response, but I'm most aware of it in terms of gender. When I was presenting myself as a man, I was terrified that someone might see through my persona, glimpse the fractured identity I was trying to hide. Now that I'm living as myself, I worry that the seams in my gender expression will be noticed, that some slip or flaw will make someone question whether I'm really the woman I present myself as being. It's only when I feel close to someone, confident that they love me, that I feel safe enough to admit that there are aspects of me that don't fit my self-presentation, aspects that can't be fully expressed or understood because there is no name, no language, for them. When someone accepts that they can never fully see me, I feel truly seen.

I see the same dynamic in this moment of intimacy between God and Moses. Moses' longing to know the God he knows he cannot fully know enables God to show Moses as much of God's true self as possible. "I will make all My goodness pass before you," God says, and that's what Moses sees, and enables us to see: God's love, faithfulness, mercy, eagerness to forgive. Because Moses' love was strong enough to embrace the aspects of God he cannot see, God's Presence, both the knowable parts and the unknowable whole, has been illuminated for all of us, forever.

May these golden festival days bring us as close as we can come to one another, and to the God we glimpse twinkling through the holes in these fabulously fragile sukkahs of ours, the bodies that some of us experience as makeshift shelters, and some of us call ourselves.

Hag sameach, and Shabbat shalom.