

## An Understanding of Gender in the Torah from Binary to Merism

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How can I curse what God has blessed? That is what Balaam, the go to prophet-for-hire in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE says to the King of Moab.

We will read these words tomorrow in Parshat Balak in chapter 22 of Numbers (verse 18): “Bilaam replied to Balak’s officials, ‘Were Balak to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the Eternal my God.’”

As many may know, Balaam ends up offering one of the most beautiful blessings upon seeing the Israelites, “How good are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel.” מַה־טֹבֹו : אֶהְלִיךָ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ שְׂרָאֵל : *Ma tovu ohaleckha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael* (Numbers 24:5.)

Balaam saw the Israelites in their homes for who they were and found them to be beautiful.

I love the simplicity of the Hebrew. They were *tov*, good. Balaam said things were *tov* because that is what God said. The only question then is, how does one know what is God says?

Communities and societies think they know what is good; there are norms that are so ingrained that it is assumed to be God given. As we step back and are more curious, we may realize how much we do not know.

Tonight, as we enter the last week of a month celebrating Pride, I want to talk about what is good, what is a blessing, and what God commands related to one specific topic: the spectrum of gender identity. What the Torah says may be surprising.

We read the beginning of Genesis with societal assumptions of a binary understanding of gender. “And God created the human in [God’s] image, in the image of God, [God] created it (in the singular); male and female [God] created them.” (Genesis 1:27)

The singular first being, *adam*, is described in the second part of the verse as plural, male and female. Even without reading this as both male and female were within that first being who is described by the pronoun “them”, which seems to be a contextual reading, we have the stated binary of male and female.

What is less understood in the first chapters of Genesis, *Bereishit*, is that many binaries that are listed are not binaries at all, rather merisms. A merism is when “two contrasting parts are made to represent the whole”. For instance, instead of saying I searched everywhere, I could say I searched high and low, which means I searched high, low, and everywhere in between.

God created the heavens and the earth and everything in between. There was evening and there was morning, day one, means there was evening, there was dawn, there was noontime, afternoon, and dusk. Saying evening and morning was a way of encompassing all the times of day and aspects of light. In the Garden of Eden was the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which means the tree of knowledge of everything, the alpha and omega.

According to my homiletics teacher Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig, “So too in the case of this verse, the whole diverse panoply of genders and gender identities is encompassed by only two words, ‘male’ and ‘female.’ Therefore, read not God created every human being as either male or female, but rather, God created humankind *zachar un’kevah*, male and female and every combination in between.”<sup>1</sup>

This may well have been more accepted in the ancient world. In the time of rabbinic Judaism, two thousand years ago, six terms related to gender are used in the Talmud and mentioned hundreds of times, each one having a relationship to the anatomy, the male and female body parts, but with a more sophisticated understanding of differentiation. The laws related to each of these genders are stated without judgement, rather factually.

Today, the fact that one’s *gender identity*, how one sees oneself, and one’s *gender expression*, how one presents oneself, do not always conform to one’s sex, that is the anatomical classification of male, female, or intersex (meaning a person with male and female anatomy) is mostly old news.

But it is important news, whether this is new or old.

According to a study in the journal *Pediatrics*, 2.7% of adolescents in Minnesota consider themselves transgender or gender nonconforming. This study in 2016 included over 80,000 students.<sup>2</sup> Other studies put the number lower or higher.

We have more work to do to make sure our spaces do not make assumptions of a male and female binary, which of course happens all the time. And we are learning and continuing to do better. Honoring choices about pronouns, having forms that all for more than two options, having thoughtful curricula in our Religious School, have been done for years at Mount Zion.

What is still a work in progress is deciding when introductions should include pronoun choices, how to manage overnight retreats, and language for B’nei Mitzvah which is where we have the most gendered differentiation in our synagogue life even as we have equal honoring of all kids.

And this matters.

Among adolescents and young adults who identify as nonbinary or trans, 50% considered or attempted suicide. We need to provide as much community scaffolding of love and openness as we can muster. This is about *pikuach nefesh*, saving lives which supersedes any other considerations including our own comfort level with understanding a gender spectrum.

Male and female, God created them, meaning every gender identity in between. And it is good, *tov*, and a blessing; a merism, not a binary - and all part of God’s beautiful creation.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Reform Jewish Quarterly, Symposium: Gendered Judaism – Gender-Based Programs in Jewish Life*, “Making Room for “They”: A Yes, And Approach to Nonbinary Inclusion and Single-Gender Spaces,” by Rabbi Nikki DeBlosi, PhD, and Bonz Swencionis, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/141/3/e20171683>