



Inside Old/New Sexualities

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Sexuality is, arguably, among the most *and* least bounded of all human activities. On the one hand, differences within gender and between the genders seem fundamental. And yet, the very meaning of gender has exploded in recent years. This issue of *Sh'ma* is devoted to the exploration of sexuality and gender expression previously spoken little about, now more visible in public life. We focus our attention on the mutability and porousness of sexual preference and the diversity of gender — and how Jewish cultural, religious, and communal life might begin to reflect and address the wider breadth of human experience. — SB

Bind These Words

Ari Lev Fornari

"Impress these My words upon your very heart: bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead." (Deuteronomy 11:18)

Chest Binder: an undergarment worn to flatten the appearance of the chest

Tallit Katan: An undergarment traditionally worn by men, which has knotted fringes tied to its four corners as a reminder of the 613 mitzvot.

There are four knotted strings that hang from the corners of my chest binder. Standing in front of the full-length mirror in my room, I unfold the *tallit katan* chest binder and inspect the *tzitzit* to make sure they are properly knotted.

"B'shem mitzvat tzitzit v'mitzvat hityatzrut. For the sake of the mitzvah of ritual fringes and the mitzvah of self-formation." (Rabbi Elliot Kukla)

I say this *brakhah* quietly to myself as I tighten the velcro fabric that presses my chest flat. The thick and sweaty fabric is uncomfortable, making it difficult to breathe and making my sternum ache. I struggle to find God beneath the layers of dark clothing and the self-conscious slouch of my shoulders. I struggle to find God in choices that cause physical pain to my body. How can I make my gender sacred? How can I make my gender a sign of my covenant with God?

In a Jewish world where *tallit* and *tefillin* are still male markers, what does a transfeminist Jew look like? What is the significance of women and gender-variant people wearing a *kippa* and wrapping *tefillin*? Does transfeminist Judaism require transformation of the rituals themselves? If it does mean participating in traditionally male rituals, how do we engage with traditional forms without idealizing the Jewish man? As transmen, how can we take on those obligations, rituals, and roles that have been traditionally associated with male privilege in a way that increases gender participation and expression for everyone?

For me, the words in the *Sh'ma* and the *V'ahavta* resonate with the practice of wearing a chest binder. My chest binder signifies part of my relationship to my body and my gender, in much the same way as a *tallit katan* is a daily reminder of my relationship to God. By integrating the two practices, I have created a new ritual object that sanctifies my gender and my Judaism.

Ukshartam l'ot al yadecha, I wrap the leather tightly around my arm seven times using my palm as a spool for the remaining leather. V'hyu l'totafot bein aynecha. I place the tefillin on my forehead. I unwrap the remaining leather on my left hand, and



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carefully rewrap it to form a *shin. L'shem yhud*, I leave marks on my body where the *tefillin* and my chest binder lay. With the *tefillin* tight around my left arm, I place my right hand over my eyes *Sh'ma Yisrael*... "Hear O Israel, the divine abounds everywhere, and dwells in everything. The many are one." (Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings*) I hold these words in my prayers as I recite the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma* and kiss the *tzitzit* tied to the edges of my chest binder. I am learning to love myself and simultaneously unlearning my own internalized transphobia.

I am trying to decipher what Jewish "thickness" looks like, what binds us as a community, what serves as our common assumptions, practices, and prayers. As a trans person, I am both outsider and insider, continually transforming rituals, squirming, and wiggling, and creating more space, not only for myself, but for people of every gender. Wearing a *tallit* or wrapping *tefillin* is not inherently sexist. It is not the rituals that are problematic but rather the cul-

ture and customs that surround and sustain them. Just as femme-identified women have reclaimed and "queered" many traditional markers of femininity (such as lipstick and high heels), trans people have the potential to liberate rituals and traditions from their oppressive boxes and binaries.

Wearing a tallit katan chest binder is simultaneously observing and reclaiming Jewtradition. It is reclaiming what observances looks like "on the heels" of feminist Jewish thinkers who have challenged me to do it differently and inspired me to accessorize along the way. My observance is a commitment to engage with Jewish texts and traditions and be transformed through that engagement. I want to fulfill the commandments, both in light of and in spite of my attempt to simultaneously subvert gender norms and transgress gender boundaries. This helps me affirm the presence of God and holiness in my body and in my gender. Vayira Elohim et ha'adam b'tzalmo.

ReMapping the Road from Sinai

Judith Plaskow, professor of religious studies at Manhattan College and a Jewish feminist theologian, and Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla, a Chaplain Resident at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF) Medical Center and a transgender activist, writer, and educator, explore the potential and limits of a shared transgender and feminist movement.

Dear Judith,

When I was a teenager exploring Judaism, I read your book *Standing Again at Sinai*. What struck me most vividly was your insight that deep within Jewish thought a hierarchical rejection of difference exists that goes far beyond the marginalization of women. Inviting women to shape the future of Judaism, then, leads to fundamental theological shifts within the tradition, as it questions all the binary distinctions of Jewish life and law.

In the 17 years since you wrote that book, quite a lot has happened in the Jewish world. Women's mounting participation in Judaism has continued to reshape its essence. At the same time transgender liberation movements have increasingly questioned gender itself and asked whether the categories male and female can (or should) be the basic way we divide up humanity.

Sometimes the goals of feminist and transgender thought appear to be at odds with each other. And yet I believe that to raise the voice of women and trans people within Judaism, we must begin with similar agendas and goals: recognition of marginalization, rejection of hierarchical binary thinking, and an attempt to create more space within the covenant for a variety of identities and embodiments.

How might women and trans people support each other in this project of renewing the tradition? How can we deconstruct the binary divide between men and women while working to lift the subjugated voice of women within Judaism?

You asked nearly two decades ago how the central categories of Jewish thought would be altered by women shaping Torah. What does Sinai look like to you now? How will the tradition be transformed as we begin to find ways for women, transgender, intersex people, and everyone else to also stand again at Sinai? — Elliot Kukla

Dear Elliot,

When I reflect on Standing Again at Sinai