

If I asked you to picture a typical woman from a shtetl in 19th Century Ukraine, what would you envision? Maybe an older bedraggled woman, lugging around piles of laundry to hang on pegs outside of her home. Or maybe a young woman, dutifully working next to her mother preparing a shabbos meal in the kitchen.

Whomever you're picturing, I want you to now envision the following:

“In our shtetl of Krivozer, Ukraine, everyone knew Beyle, the girl who sold herring, geese and other foodstuffs. She was a tall redhead and sturdily built. She also spoke with a deep bass voice and walked about with hard and heavy steps. The way she carried herself always brought forth an uncertain feeling: something like, she's not quite a woman, but also not quite a man.”

Berel-Beyle's father took his child to many rabbis to seek spiritual guidance and help; their response was always “God will help, God will help.” Eventually, God — and an unnamed but “important” professor — did help.

When Berel-Beyle was 23, he left for Odessa and met this professor, who supported his transition.

Upon Berel-Beyle's return to the shtetl:

...half the shtetl ran to the bridge to greet her, or better said, to greet him. And she wasn't called Beyle anymore: Now she was Berel. And when we saw 'her,' it was as if we were stunned: Before our eyes was a handsome, healthy, redheaded man. Anyone who didn't know Beyle previously would never have known that he had been a girl. From then on in the shtetl, 'she' was called Berel-Beyle.”

Berel-Beyle was welcomed and accepted back into the shtetl. He learned to daven, presumably with the help of the other men in his community, and attended synagogue every day. He even married his previous girlfriend.

That account was written by an immigrant from Ukraine named Yeshaya Katofsky in the late 30s in an op-ed to the Forward in Yiddish. Apparently, American media was up in arms about

American athletes who went over to compete in the women's games in 1936 in Berlin, and coming home as men. He didn't understand the big deal about this new trans thing so he shared this story. He ended it with the following succinct line:

“In our shtetl, Berel-Beyle always had a good name as a fine, upstanding Jew.”

So many of us tend to think that being Trans is a contemporary concept. More and more, we are learning of anecdotes that there have been people throughout the history of humanity that have not fit into the typical gender binary many of us were raised with. The Talmud itself attests to 8 different gender identities.

As much as there was recent historical understanding and even ancient examples, in our contemporary world, Jewish leaders are at the forefront of a great many efforts of inclusion when it comes to young LGBTQ folks. Much of that will be happening over the coming months.

Summer is nearly here and for so many in this community, camp is a safe haven. Free from homework, standardized testing, and the early morning carpool, camp is a place where kids can feel free to be themselves. Camp Indigo Point in southern Illinois is no different.

It was started by an old USY friend of mine, Shira Berkowitz. On a personal level, it was created in response to their own experience of harassment over their sexuality at other Jewish camps. Then last year, in reaction to conservative politicians across the country aggressively pushing anti-transgender legislation — efforts that have contributed to a darker climate for a community of young people who are already uniquely vulnerable, Shira decided enough was enough and Camp Indigo Point was created.

On one hand it's a totally normal camp. Organizers hoped to give campers a chance to spend time with other young people like themselves — and also let them simply experience summer camp, with all the fun and frustration that comes with piling into cabins with virtual strangers. On the other hand, it's totally different. Sometimes, in conversations around the campfire, they talked about family members who refused to use their preferred names and about friendships that had frayed because of their gender identity.

The following speaks to the power of a community like this:

“By Saturday morning, their final morning at Indigo Point, the knotted-stomach feeling from the first day was back, but for different reasons. A week earlier, campers were anxious about making friends in an unfamiliar place. Now, they would return to their regular lives, their regular friends, their regular struggles. In the dining hall, a question was posted on a wall: What will you miss most about camp? On sticky notes, the campers replied: “My friends.” “The gay ppl.” “Not having to wonder if people around you will accept you.”

Think about it for a second. For so many young people, camp is the place where they feel accepted. For this particular group of young people, camp has not been that until Indigo Point was created.

Because ultimately, that's what all of this is about. Do this and you will be living out the mandate of what it means to live in God's image. The rest is commentary.

This notion doesn't just go back to Berel-Beyl or the Talmud's understanding of gender identity. The idea that each of us is equal in the eyes of God is deeply embedded in the Torah. The beginning of chapter 7 in Parshat Naso says the following:

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם כִּלְאוֹת מִשְׁחָה לְהַקִּים אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן וַיִּמָּשַׁח אֹתוֹ וַיִּקְדָּשׁ אֹתוֹ וְאֶת־כָּל־כֵּלָיו וְאֶת־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְאֶת־כָּל־כֵּלָיו
וַיִּמָּשְׁחֵם וַיִּקְדָּשׁ אֹתָם:

On the day that Moses finished setting up the Tabernacle, he anointed and consecrated it and all its furnishings, as well as the altar and its utensils.

That word that describes when Moses finished, *b'yom kalot Moshe* is etymologically linked to the words from creation that the heavens and earth were created, *vayechulu* and God finished *vaychal*. This linguistic connection is picked up by the Midrash Tanchuma 11 where it teaches the following:

Come and see. When the Holy One said to Moshe that he should tell Israel to make a mishkan - Tabernacle, the Holy One said: 'Moshe, My Temple is built above (on

high)' ... But out of love for you, I left my Temple on high to come down and dwell among you...

And when God said to him: "And make me a sanctuary [that I may dwell among them]" (Exodus 25:8), Moshe said

"Even the heavens and the heavens above the heavens cannot contain you!" (in I Kings 8:27) ... So, how can we make for God a sanctuary? **The Holy One, said to him, "I am not asking [for a sanctuary built according to My ability] but rather in accordance with their abilities"**

When Israel heard this, they arose and donated gladly and made the Tabernacle.

When they had made the Tabernacle, immediately it was filled with the light of the Holy One's Glory. The princes said, "Now is the time for us to offer sacrifices with joy, because the Divine Presence is dwelling among us."

We are in partnership with God. All the tasks that the Torah describes and all the work we do is done according to each of our capabilities and attributes. Note that the Midrash paints the exuberance of the people directly in line with the knowledge that everyone brought what they were capable of bringing. There's no gate checking or vetting or ostracizing.

That inclusive process led to God's divine light shining forth as if God were saying,

I see the fullness of all the people's participation and that warrants my divine light coming into the world.

The very thing that allows an uncontainable God to be contained is the knowledge that every person's abilities are being honored.

That notion of gifts relative to each individual is echoed again in our portion when we learn of each tribal chieftain's gift. Interestingly, each offering is listed in detail even though each one is exactly the same as all the others. For a text that is remarkably intentional in its language, it's puzzling. If the silver, the flour, the gold, the incense, and all the animals are the same, why list each one individually?

R' Sholom Noach Berezovsky, The Netivot Sholom of Slonim offers a powerful answer:

From the descriptions of the gifts of each of the heads of the tribes, each and every tribe drew on the power, the abundance, the holiness, and the purity of each of their unique ways of serving God — this is why each and every tribe's gift is listed separately in the Torah [...] The sages of the Talmud [Sanhedrin 106b] teach that it is the heart that God desires — a person's inner thoughts are first and foremost. Even though their outer actions and gifts were all the same, the Torah lists each gift separately because each of the heads of the tribes invested their own unique thoughts and intentionality of their own tribes into their gifts.

It was the very fact that each tribal chieftain was different that warranted the listing of each of their gifts. Sure, the external looked the same but the internals were categorically distinct. *Rachamana liba ba'ey*, all God wants from us is our heart. The heart that we each individually carry that propels us forward to lovingly exist in the world and the heart that lovingly reaches out to others, no matter how they walk in the world.

L'chol ish yesh shem, the Israeli song cries out, every person has a name and a gift to offer. You may look, sound, act, love, or identify differently and it is that very difference that reflects your divine holiness. When Beryl-Beyle walked through his shtetl, his differences were welcomed. When those campers at Indigo Point walk through the gates, they are accepted.

As we enter once more into Pride, may we all find the strength to live this out every day of our lives. The work is not yet over so may the Jewish community continue to trailblaze these sacred acts of welcoming.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Pride

Rabbi Adir