

## **Psalms: Transformation as a Jewish Spiritual Path**

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Trans Jews often feel estranged from traditional Jewish texts, which don't reflect or acknowledge us or our experiences. However, many Biblical Psalms describe the search for and presence of God in terms of radical transformation of fundamental categories. Mountains leap like rams, rocks flow like water, triumph tumbles into despair and despair somersaults into triumph. Those of us who live between or beyond traditional gender identities are familiar with such transformations from the inside out; for many of us, and for many of those around us, our transformation of gender identity seems to shake the foundations of existence. In this workshop, we will use such trans experiences to read the Psalms' poetry of transformation in a new light – and use the Psalms' insistence that the slipping and sliding of fundamental categories is a sign of God's presence to illuminate our own experiences of transformation.

At least since the cross-pollination of Greek philosophy and rabbinic thought, Jews have had a tendency to think of God in terms of absolutes – all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, and so on. Such a God, by definition, never changes. God's nature, and thus God's presence in the world, is static. Such a conception of God represents a radical change from the Torah's representations, in which God tends to seem unpredictable, inexplicable, intruding in intimate family affairs like reproduction in one passage and absent through four centuries of slavery in another. For trans Jews, the "Absolute God" idea can be particularly problematic, enforcing our sense of distance from Jewish communities and liturgy built around that conception. Our identities and presence in the world are defined by transformation rather than continuity. Sometimes we define and express ourselves in terms of one gender, sometimes in terms of another, sometimes through opposition to one or any gender. Indeed, many of us can only define and express ourselves by bending, melting, fusing or otherwise confounding the very gender categories that, like the Absolute God's omni's, underwrite the continuity of non-trans identities.

But when we read the Psalms through trans Jewish eyes, we find a God who is defined at least as much by transformation as by continuity. For example, in psalm 114, "When Israel went forth from Egypt," God's intimate relationship with the people of Israel and presence in human history is marked by radical transformation: "the Jordan ran backward, / mountains skipped like rams." God's presence unmakes the very characteristics that define rivers and mountains, that makes them what they are. God's nature is so bound up with transformation and destabilization of the basic categories that normally define existence that the psalm ends by warning the Earth to "tremble at the presence of Hashem ... who turned the rock into a pool of water."

Psalm 113 makes it clear that God's transformative quality is not limited to the natural world: "Who is like Hashem our God, / who ... raises the poor from the dust ... / to set them with the great." Whereas human social order tends to enforce static identities, labeling some people as "the poor" and others as "the great," God's uniqueness is defined by the opposite tendency, the upending of the "natural" social order. This is not just a matter of shifting seating arrangements; if "the poor" are "set with the great," their presence undermines the exclusiveness that defines the identities of "the great." God's presence not only changes who we think we and others are; like trans people's presence, God destabilizes the very categories on which human identities are based.

As trans Jews know, transformation and destabilizing identities and categories can be exhilarating, but it can also be painful and terrifying, particularly in intimate relationships. The “Absolute God” idea underplays the pain and terror that relationship with God can entail, but read through trans eyes, those qualities are evident in many psalms. For example, in psalm 27, read throughout Elul as part of our renewal of our relationships with God during the High Holidays, the speaker begins by affirming God as “my light and my help ... the stronghold of my life.” But after the speaker details God’s saving power and the speaker’s intimacy with God (“I sacrifice in God’s tent”), the relationship becomes terrifyingly uncertain: “Do not hide Your face from me; / do not thrust aside your servant in anger ... / Do not forsake me, do not abandon me.” No explanation is given for this radical shift from absolute confidence in God’s presence and protection to terror that God might at any moment abandon the speaker; the speaker, it seems, hasn’t changed, but God, or the relationship through which the speaker knows God, has, and it is only by living the truth of this terrifying uncertainty that the speaker can affirm, at the end, “O look to Hashem!”

As psalm 27 suggests, and as trans people know, relationship partly defines identity: who we are can change radically, depending on our situation and relationship. In crucial ways, we can’t fully define ourselves; we are partly defined by others. Even though my best friend once knew me as a man, she relates to me as a woman, and when I stand in relation to her, my female identity is strengthened. For my children, though, I am still “Daddy,” and when I am with them my female gender identity feels less like an identity than a distortion, an obstacle, an open wound in our relationship. In some ways, God is defined by our relationship with God – a fact acknowledged in many psalms. For example, the God defined by the beginning of psalm 27 as an unshakeable “stronghold” (“Should an army besiege me, / my heart would have no fear”), has, in psalm 116, allowed the speaker to come to the very brink of death: “The bonds of death encompassed me; / the torments of Sheol overtook me.” According to the “Absolute God” idea, which defines God as all-powerful and thus all-responsible, such a story should present a disturbing portrait of God as indifferent at best and malevolent at worst. But the speaker transforms God’s identity by crying out on the verge of death, “O Hashem, save my life”; because the speaker insists on relating to God as a deliverer even in the midst of disaster, when things get better, the speaker is able to say, “I love Hashem / for God hears my voice, my plea; / for God turns an ear to me / whenever I call.” By telling the story this way rather than blaming God for standing by when things became dire, the speaker in effect creates God’s identity as a benevolent, delivering presence.

We tend to think of identity as constant, and constancy as good – ideas which have subjected trans people to a great deal of recrimination and guilt. But as these psalms suggest, we lose a lot of insight into God and our relationships to God if we insist on seeing God’s identity as absolute and constant. But the psalms go further, suggesting that the very inconstancy of God gives us an undying source of hope. If identity were constant, we would be doomed by our habits; we would always be what we have been. God’s transformative presence is what makes *teshuvah*, deep spiritual transformation and renewal, possible, and it means, as psalm 126 reminds us, that no matter how hopeless our circumstances seem, “Those who sow in tears / shall reap with songs of joy.”