

DRASH FOR THE SHABBAT BEFORE THE TRANSGENDER DAY  
OF REMEMBRANCE, PARSHAT YA-YETZEI Genesis 28:10 – 32:3  
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To remind you of where we are in the torah, last week Jacob was involved in one case of mistaken identity, and this week he's involved in a second case.

Last week's parsha is the one where Jacob goes to his father Isaac to try to get the blessing that's meant for his brother Esau. Blind Isaac is expecting Esau, and he uses the facts that Jacob's clothes smell like Esau and the kidskin on the back of his hands feels like Esau to reassure himself that it is Esau, despite the fact that he clearly hears Jacob's voice.

In this week's parsha, Jacob has worked seven years for Laban to earn the right to marry his younger daughter Rachel. The long-awaited wedding feast finally arrives, and at the end of the evening, Laban brings his older daughter, Leah, to Jacob. The text doesn't tell us that Leah was disguised in any way, other than, we can surmise, by darkness and Jacob's possible drunkenness from excessive feasting. Yet in the morning Jacob is surprised to wake up with Leah. Jacob was waiting for Rachel, he presumed that the person who entered his tent was Rachel, and despite seven years of knowing both women, believed it was Rachel.

The text says Isaac was “seized with a violent trembling” when he found out he had judged the clothes for the owner and blessed the wrong son. Similarly, Jacob demanded of Laban “what is this you have done to me?” Both of these men were enraged by what they viewed as deceptions, but they were also angry at the part they played, that their assumptions blinded them to the flesh and blood family members standing right in front of them.

In our everyday lives, we convert cursory glances into quick and usually unconscious assumptions. When we first meet someone, we gauge background, class, gender, education, sexuality, nationality, and age, all from a momentary impression. The fact that what we have to work with is scanty and superficial doesn't stop the

unconscious evaluation levers from flipping in our heads. We categorize. It's how humans navigate social relations. And one of the first categorizations we make is gender.

We have a tremendous social fear of the faux pas of misidentifying gender. I see this daily when I take my 15-month old son for a walk. Strangers actually get angry if I haven't dressed him so they can tell for certain that he's a boy. It doesn't matter at all, but they're anxious if they can't tell which pronouns to use in the cute-baby conversation we're having in the checkout line.

These exchanges give me a small sense of how unpleasant everyday interactions must be for a transgender person transitioning between genders. If a stranger gets hostile because my son's oxford-cloth button-down shirt is pink, I can only imagine the reception that stranger gives an adult who's sending them conflicting signs about whether they are a boy or girl.

There is a deep need to believe that we can judge the book by the cover, that physical appearance tells us some truth about who someone is. This is despite the fact that we each have many personal experiences to the contrary - we've all been judged at one point or another as something we are not. I, for one, was a physical late bloomer: as a high-school freshman I was dismissed as a sexless egghead. Two years later, I acquired the reputation of a gullible slut, yet the only thing that had changed about me was my cup-size. As my body changed, so did the way the world treated me, and it was devastating to find that my appearance spoke more loudly than my actions.

If you, like Jacob, put on false hair to simulate a maleness that is not biologically yours, a person who feels deceived, like Isaac, may literally be shaking with anger. But what if, like Jacob, you assume this guise to reclaim your birthright? What if your inner self is a gender opposite to your physical appearance? What if when you look in the mirror you don't recognize the reflection to be you, and when you walk down the street you're treated in a way totally alien to whom you feel yourself to be? Is it more of a deception to walk around in an appearance that contradicts your chromosomes or that contradicts who you really are?

The chill of the person in the checkout line is nothing compared to the hostility of a guy who's told the woman he's hit on is biologically a man; or that the new work buddy he told a randy story to was once a woman. The Transgender Day of Remembrance was established to memorialize people who are killed because someone got pissed off by how they externally expressed their gender. According to one statistic, one person a month is killed for some kind of perceived gender transgression. These are violent, ugly, brutal murders -- the sorts of stabbings and beatings that come from deep, personal rage. The people who are killed are not all transgender, but they all represented their gender in some way that angered someone else. They were killed because of a judgment made of their physical appearance.

Through most of this week's parsha, Jacob tries to fit into Laban's clan by following Laban's constantly shifting rules. In the end, Jacob just has to sneak off with his family and flock because he's realized that Laban will never, ever give him a square deal.

We can try to contort ourselves to follow the rules and not piss anyone off, but we can't control people's perceptions, and what they are and aren't paying attention to. We each have to find a balance between external expectations and our own definition of honesty.

My dream for CBST is that we be the place that no one has to sneak away from, a place where no one has to worry about what they're wearing, or that they will be judged by how they appear rather than whom they are. A place where we each try to put aside our tendency to make assumptions and actually get to know each other, where we treat each person as valuable and unique, and look at what we can learn from each other. That we create a corner of the world where our true selves get a shake at being heard.

After Jacob snuck off, Laban went after him with murder in his heart. But G-d went to Laban and said, "Cool it, Jacob's with me." If every person had a personal guardian against the misplaced judgment of others, we wouldn't need a Transgender Day of Remembrance. Given that we do, maybe more of us can do a better job of being on the side of people whose identities cross

uncomfortable boundaries. Maybe we can stretch our comfort zones, loosen our assumptions, and speak up when we see bullies trying to intimidate people into categories with jokes or taunts or ignorance or just plain refusing to acknowledge the person before them. Maybe we can start here, at CBST, with how we treat each other, by truly celebrating the differences between us, and enjoying the excitement of being a community not based on the outside, but on the inside.

Shabbat shalom.