

"Trans" Biblical characters in Jewish tradition?

The disturbing origin of oft-quoted religious narratives of "gendered souls"

Shira Batya Lewin Solomons

Jewish Community of Berkshire JCoB.org

Shira@JCoB.org

shirabatya.substack.com



CONTENT WARNING:

This shiur contains material that may be homophobic, misogynist, sexually-explicit or otherwise offensive.

Much of the content offends the presenter.

Biblical characters with opposite-sex souls

- Isaac יִצְחָק
- Michal מִיכַל
- Joseph יוֹסֵף
- Dinah דִּינָה

Minor mentions (not explored today)

- Moses
- Benot Tzlafchad
- Yael and Chever HaKeni

Gender Essentialism

Gender dysphoria: A term used to describe the discomfort or distress that a person experiences when there is a mismatch between their sex assigned at birth and their **gender identity**.

Gender identity: A person's **innate sense of their own gender**, whether male, female or something else (see non-binary below), which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth.

Trans: A term to describe people whose **gender is not the same as**, or does not sit comfortably with, the **sex** they were assigned at birth.

Transitioning: The steps a trans person takes to live in their **gender**.

(bold type added)

<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/resources/list-lgbtq-terms>

Jewish Gender-Soul narratives

- Seeking support from midrash and kabbalah for the idea that one can be “born with the soul of the opposite sex”
- Keshet website
- Abby Chava Stein
 - author of *Becoming Eve, Sources of Pride*
 - [Limmud 2019](#)
 - November 2019 [interview](#) notes that Sha’ar HaGilgulim played a formative part in Stein’s journey to become a transwoman: “At times a male will reincarnate in the body of a female, and a female would be in a male”
- OU Rabbi Jack Abramowitz
- International Network of Orthodox Mental Health Professionals

Rabbi Jack Abramowitz

Torah Content Editor of the Orthodox Union

- <https://jewinthecity.com/2017/01/an-orthodox-rabbi-discusses-transgender-issues-in-jewish-texts/>
- Dinah and Joseph (embryo switch)
- Michal

If we wouldn't judge Dina or Michal for having a "male soul," we shouldn't judge our contemporaries who face similar challenges.

Questions

1. Do these narratives really fit the idea of “born trans” or gender different from sex?
2. Should we be inspired by these narratives?
(Are they progressive? Are they feminist?)
3. Are we sufficiently critical of scholars who find inspiration in these narratives?

Biblical personalities with “opposite-sex souls”

Our focus will be on Isaac יִצְחָק and Michal מִיכָל

- Joseph יוֹסֵף and Dinah דִּינָה – will cover very briefly
- Source sheet also contains links for study of minor cases: Moses, Benot Tzlafchad, Yael / Chever
- Sourcesheet contains links to A LOT of texts for study.

Dinah and Joseph: the sex swap (Keshet)

- <https://www.keshetonline.org/resources/gender-fluidity-in-the-jewish-tradition/>
(search for “gender fluid” on Keshet.org)

Afterwards? Rav said: After Leah passed judgment on herself and said: Twelve tribes are destined to descend from Jacob, six came from me and four from the maidservants, that is ten, and if this fetus is male, my sister Rachel will not even be the equivalent of one the maidservants; immediately the fetus was transformed into a daughter, as it is stated: And she called her name Dina; meaning she named her after her judgment [*din*]. The Gemara rejects this concerning prayer: One does not mention miraculous acts to teach general conduct.

Dina דינה / Joseph יוסף

- Brother and sister conceived at about the same time.
- Dinah: only daughter of Leah and Jacob
- Joseph: son of Rachel and Jacob
- [Talmud Berachot 60a](#): Leah's child was originally male but Leah prayed that her sister Rachel should have a son so the sexes were switched
- Of Dinah: "immediately the foetus was transformed into a daughter"
- [Beresishit Rabbah 72:6](#) sex switch because Rachel prayed for two sons
- Both Dinah and Joseph experience sexual abuse
- Both are gender nonconforming
- [Jericho Vincent](#) describes them as our "transcestors"

Dinah דינה

Genesis 34:1

וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה בֵּת-לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לְרֵאוֹת בְּבָנוֹת הָאָרֶץ:

Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land.

She is then raped, held captive, rescued. Much violence by her brothers.

[Rabbi Eliyahu Munk \(1611-1631\)](#) cites Bereishit Rabbah 72:6 and adds:

If Dinah, a daughter of such illustrious parents as Jacob and Leah, was not safe from an attack on her virginity, daughters of less illustrious parents certainly need to be guarded carefully.

We must not spend time wondering how such a misfortune could have happened and what errors if any her parents had committed. We must remember that **Dinah's nature was like that of a male who is in the habit of going out into the field; this is how she conducted herself.**

Joseph יוסף

- Only man in the bible to be described as beautiful (Genesis 39:6):
Now Joseph was shapely and beautiful. וַיְהִי יוֹסֵף יָפֵה־תָאֵר וַיִּיפֶה מְרֻאָה:
- Stripped of his coat of many colours and sold into slavery by his brothers.
- Midrash ([Bereishit Rabbah](#)) describes him as being laddish (וְהוּא נֶעֶר)
“he would groom his eyes, lift his heels, and curl his hair”
- Ornamented tunic (coat of many colours כְּתֹנֶת פְּסִיִּים) stripped from him
- Sexual harassment by Potifar’s wife. He resists sexual desire and escapes.
- Unlike Dinah, no classical texts suggest Joseph was essentially female.
Rather, he is criticised for being immature, narcissistic.

Joseph יוֹסֵף: Why view him as trans?

Modern Queer commentators such as Jericho Vincent and Lara Haft Yom-Tov attribute a trans identity to Joseph for two primary reasons:

1. Ornamented tunic (כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים)
 - Tamar (daughter of David) had such a tunic (only other case)
 - [Jericho Vincent](#) calls the tunic a “princess dress” but neglects to mention that Tamar tore up her ornamented tunic after being raped by her brother Amnon.
2. [Genesis 39:11](#) וְאֵין אִישׁ / and there was no man (when Potifar’s wife approached)
 - [Bereishit Rabbah 87:7](#): בְּדַק אֶת עֵצְמוֹ וְלֹא מָצָא עֵצְמוֹ אִישׁ
He examined himself and did not find himself to be a man [*ish*].
 - Traditional meaning: There was a miracle and Joseph lost his sexual ardour
 - Jericho Vincent: Joseph realised he was not a man.

Isaac – soul of a female (Keshet)

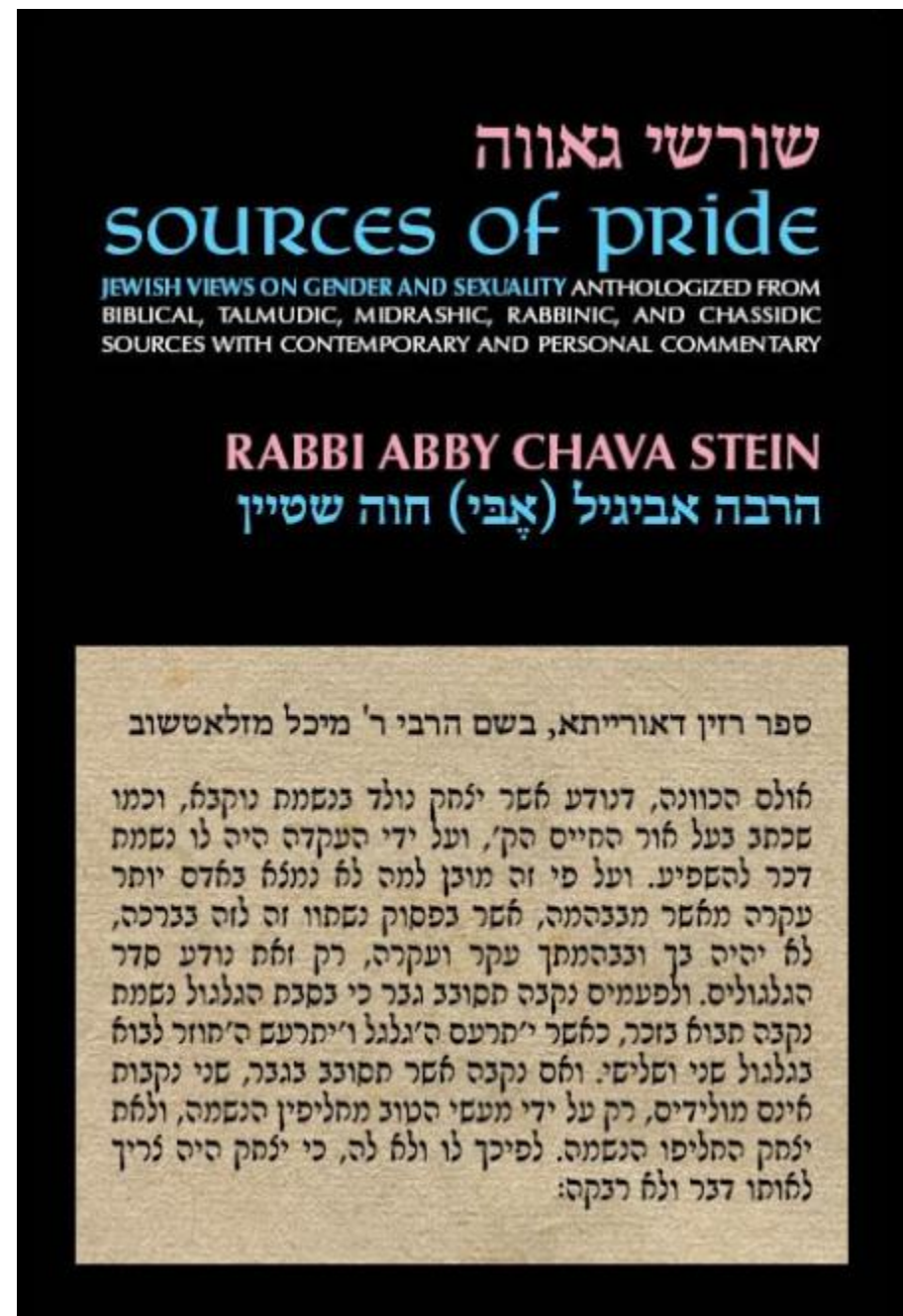
<https://www.keshetonline.org/resources/gender-fluidity-in-the-jewish-tradition>

18th Century Hasidut

It is known that when **Issac was born, he was born with the soul of a female**, as it is written in *Or Hachaim*, and through the *akeidah* (binding of Issac) he got a male soul that can impregnate... But, this is known according to the *Sod* (Secret/Mysticism) of the cycling of souls – that **at times, a female would be in a male body, because in the reasons of *gilgal* (the cycling of souls) the soul of a female would come to be in a male.** ... that is why it says by Issac that the Eternal answered to him and not to her (Rebecca), because he needed divine help to be able to have children.

Translation by Abby Stein, edited by Joseph Meszler

Text on cover of Abby Stein's new book [Sources of Pride](#)



Isaac יִצְחָק

Rabbi Yechiel Michael from Zloczow (1731-1786) – quoted by [Abby Stein](#)

(English text in italics is omitted by Stein in the link above.)

It is known that when **Issac was born, he was born with the soul of a female**, as it is written in *Or Hachaim*, and through the *akeidah* (binding of Issac) he got a male soul that can influence (meaning, can impregnate. [This is why humans experience more infertility than animals.]

But, this is known according to the *Sod* (Secret/Mysticism) of reincarnation - that **at** times, a female would be in a male body, because in the reasons of *gilgal* (reincarnation) **the soul of a female would come to be in a male.**

*... If a female comes to be in a male, **two females are then unable to procreate.** Only by good deeds can the person change their soul [to become male].*

But Isaac did change his soul [to male].

.. that is why it says that [God answered] “him” [Isaac] and not to “her” [Rebecca], because Yitzchak needed help and not Rivka.

אולם הכוונה, דנודע אשר יצחק נולד **בנשמת נוקבא**, וכמו שכתב בעל אור החיים הק', ועל ידי העקדה היה לו נשמת דכר להשפיע. . .

רק זאת נודע סדר הגלגולים. ולפעמים נקבה תסובב גבר כי בסבת הגלגול נשמת נקבה תבוא בזכר, כאשר י'תרעם ה'גלגל ו'יתרעש ה'חוזר לבוא בגלגול שני ושלישי.

ואם נקבה אשר תסובב בגבר, שני נקבות אינם מולידים, רק על ידי מעשי הטוב מחליפין הנשמה, **וליצחק החליפו הנשמה.**

לפיכך לו ולא לה, כי יצחק היה צריך לאותו דבר ולא רבקה:

Context: Infertility of Rifka רבקה

[Genesis 25:21](#)

וַיַּעֲתָר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה לְנִכְח אִשְׁתּוֹ
כִּי עֲקָרָה הִוא
וַיַּעֲתָר לוֹ יְהוָה
וַתַּהַר רַבֶּקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:

Isaac pleaded with יהוה on behalf of his wife,
because she was barren;
and יהוה responded to his plea,
and his wife Rebekah conceived.

יצחק Isaac

Or HaChayim by Rabbi Hayyim ben Moshe ibn Attar (1696-1743)

לזקוניו. In his old ages. The Torah adds this word and does not content itself with the more appropriate לזקנתו (in his old age – singular), because, as I wrote earlier, when he was born, [Isaac] lacked an element of the divine soul, as he was **equipped only with a soul from the female realm...**

If Isaac had possessed only a soul from the female realm, but had lacked the preparation [in his body] to **receive a soul from the male realm**, then the akeidah would not have helped him [to receive a soul from the male realm].

The Torah wrote here ותלד...זקוניו (she gave birth in his old ages), to indicate **she gave birth twice in his old age**. The first [זקנה of Avraham] was [Isaac's] birth. The second [birth of Isaac] was prepared for at another זקנה of Avraham – this is the akeidah.

לזקניו טעם ההודעה גם אומרו לזקוניו ולא אמר לזקנתו, למה שכתבנו
כי היה חסר בעת הלידה נפש מעולם העליון להוליד, ולא היתה לו אלא מעלמא דנוקבא...
ואם לא היתה ליצחק אלא הנפש שמעלמא דנוקבא, והיה חסר הכנת הקבלת נפש מעלמא דדכורא, לא תועיל לו העקידה.

וזה הוא שדקדק לומר ותלד וגו' הודיע שילדה לב' זמני זקנתו. הא' הוא עת לידתו, והב' היא הכנה לעת זקנה אחרת של אברהם שהוא זמן העקידה.

Context: Plural term לְזִקְנָיו

[Genesis 21:2](#)

וַתְּהַרְוֶהָ וַתֵּלֶד שָׂרָה לְאַבְרָהָם בֶּן לְזִקְנָיו
לְמוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים:

Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham
in his old age [lit: **in his old ages**],
at the set time of which God had spoken.

“Queer” interpretation of Isaac

- “Isaac’s feminine strength... lies in his ability to submit and to exist within the power dynamics dictated by the *akeidah* role-play.”

-- Jay Michaelson in a paper cited by Abby Stein in 2019

Kabbalah and Queer Theology: Resources and Reservations (July 22, 2012).

Available at

<https://ssrn.com/abstract=2150725> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2150725>

Related to the idea that Isaac embodies the feminine quality of גְבוּרָה (restraint), which allowed him to submit to the *akeidah*. So grounded in kabbalah but disturbing.

Abraham	Kindness	Male	חֶסֶד	Chesed
Isaac	Restraint	Female	גְבוּרָה	Gevurah
Jacob	Beauty	synthesis	תְּפִאֶרֶת	Tif'eret

Isaac יִצְחָק - What have we learned?

1. His “female soul” is not affirmed.
2. Femaleness is a lack of maleness – a defect.
3. Isaac transforms.

An inadequate boy with a female soul becomes a proper man who can procreate through the merit of the *akeidah*.

נְפֹשׁ (Nefesh) = soul / breath / living thing

גוף (Guf) = body

Is the soul נְפֹשׁ separate from the body גוף, or the life force of the body?

Gender / sex dualism – does it fit the Jewish idea of the soul?

TO BE CONTINUED

Michal מיכל

Rabbi Simcha Feuerman, DHL, LCSW-R wrote for [NEFESH](#), The International Network of Orthodox Mental Health Professionals

There is a Talmudic tradition that **Michal, daughter of King Saul, and wife of King David wore tefilin.**

However, Kaf Hachayyim raises a question as to why her wearing tefilin, a man's vestment, was not a violation of lo tilbash? [cross-dressing]

Kaf Hachayyim provides a novel answer: (based on kabbalistic sources) **Michal knew through divine inspiration that she had the soul of a man.**

This is remarkable. ...The Torah allows for unfolding of old perspectives onto genuinely new situations.

... the implication is that one who has the body of a female but the soul of a man would not be violating lo liltbash! How is this possible? ... [since] halakhic rulings are based on observable phenomena ...

One answer, though unlikely, is to consider the **prohibition as referring to the soul gender and not the body gender** for those who divinely ascertain this information.

Or, we might propose that a prohibition **when transgressed in the spirit of the correct gender is not considered a violation.** In other words, since the person subjectively believes him or herself to be of a particular gender, then it is acceptable.

This second approach, while quite novel, does manage to avoid the problem of a ruling based on non-observable phenomena. How so? When it comes to matters that pertain to self-intention, there is halakhic precedent for basing a decision based on internal subjectivity such as we find by oaths...