

# "Trans" Biblical characters in Jewish tradition?

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

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## Narratives

- Abby Stein's shiurim, including that at [Limmud Festival 2019](#)
  - Cites Sha'ar HaGilgulim "a man may reincarnate into the body of a woman"
  - Cites Maggid Meisharim: A woman with a male soul cannot have children.
  - Discusses: Isaac was born with the soul of a female
  - Cites [Jay Michaelson](#)
  - [November 2019 interview](#) notes that Sha'ar HaGilgulim 9.2 played a formative part in Stein's journey to become a transwoman.  
Interviewer quotes this to say: "At times a male will reincarnate in the body of a female, and a female would be in a male"
- [Gender Fluidity in the Jewish Tradition](#) (Keshet)
  - Isaac was born with a female soul.
  - Moses likens himself to a nursing mother.
  - Cites embryo swap between Joseph and Dinah.
  - Cites Abby Stein
- [An Orthodox Rabbi Discusses Transgender Issues in Jewish Texts](#)  
by [Rabbi Jack Abramowitz](#) (of the OU)
  - mentions idea that Dina, Joseph and Michal had souls of the opposite sex in context of being menschlich to trans people
- Article by [NEFESH](#) (The International Network of Orthodox Mental Health Professionals)
  - Kaf HaChayim: Michal had the "soul of a man". Viewed as helpful.
  - "Thus, at least insofar as Michal wearing tefilin, Kaf Hachayyim allowed "her" self-definition to determine "her" gender."
  - "the implication is that one who has the body of a female but the soul of a man would not be violating lo libbash!"

## Kabbalistic sources on a Gender Soul

Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Chapter 9. [Gate of Reincarnations](#) by Isaac Luria (Arizal) 1534-1572 / Chaim Vital 1542-1620) Translations with aid of [Chabad](#)

שער הגלגולים ט':א

... דע, כי מדת הגלגול נוהגת באנשים הזכרים, ולא בנשים הנקבות...  
... כי האנשים לפי שמקיימים מצות עסק התורה, אינם יכולים ליכנס בגיהנם, כי אין אור של גיהנם שולטת בהם.... אבל הנשים שאינם עוסקות בתורה, יכולים ליכנס בגיהנם למרק עונותיהם ואינם צריכים להתגלגל.

Understand, that reincarnation occurs for men who are male but not for women who are female... This is because men, who are commanded with the mitzvah of studying Torah, cannot enter Gehinom, as the fire of Gehinom does not affect them... But women, who do not study Torah, they are able to enter Gehinom, and to be cleansed from their sins there, so they do not need to reincarnate.

האמנם אע"פ שאינם מתגלגלות, הנה הם באות לפעמים בסוד העבור, עם נצוצי נשמות חדשות נקבות כנשים. גם דע, כי אפשר שאחר שבאה בסוד העבור באיזו אשה, אם האשה ההיא תתעבר ותהר ותלד בת נקבה, אפשר שאותה שבאה בה בסוד העבור, תתגלגל עתה בבחי' גלגול גמור, בבתה הנולדת לה עתה:

However, even though they are not able to reincarnate, they [female souls] may occasionally perform the secret of ibur (impregnation), with the spark of new female souls for women. Also know that it is possible that after entering a certain women performing the secret of ibur, if that woman becomes pregnant and bears a female daughter, it is possible that this woman who performed the secret of ibur, that she will now be reincarnated completely in this daughter who is now born.

שער הגלגולים ט':ב

גם דע, כי לפעמים יתגלגל האיש בגוף נקבה, לסבת איזה עון, כמו משכב זכור וכיוצא בו. והנה הנקבה הזאת שהיא גלגול נשמת זכר, אינה יכולה לקבל הריון ולהתעבר, לפי שאין לה בחי' מיין נוקבין להעלות ולקבל טפת מיין דוכרין,

Sometimes a man may reincarnate into the body of a woman because of a sin, such as **homosexuality** or something similar. This woman who has received the soul of a man will not be able to conceive and become pregnant. This is because she lacks [the ability] to raise female waters, and she therefore cannot receive male waters.

והנה האשה הזאת צריכה זכות גדול לשתוכל להתעבר ולהוליד, ואין לה מציאות אחר, זולתי שתתעבר בה איזו נשמת אשה נקבה אחרת בסוד העבור, ובכך בכח שתופה עמה, תוכל לעלות מיין נוקבין, ולקבל הריון ותלד.

This woman will need great merit to enable her to become pregnant and give birth. The only way it can be done is that some other feminine soul must enter her as an *ibur*. By the strength of this partnership, she will be able to raise up female waters, get pregnant and give birth.

אמנם אי אפשר לה ללדת בנים זכרים לשתיהן, האחת היא, לפי שהכתוב אומר, אשה כי תזריע וילדה זכר, אבל כאן האשה היא זכר כבעלה, ואינה יכולה ללדת זכרים אלא נקבות.

Nevertheless, she will be unable to give birth to male children, for two reasons. First, it says in the Torah “When a woman gives forth seed and gives birth to a male”

[Thus is reference to *Berachot* 60a, also *Nidda*: "If a woman 'puts forth seed' first, then a boy will be born. If the man puts forth seed first, then a girl will be born." Whichever one biologically "puts forth seed" first, in the spiritual realm both partners are masculine souls, and it will always be the male who puts forth seed first. Therefore, the child must be female.]

Since this woman is male like her husband, she cannot give birth to males, only to females.

הסבה הב' היא, ... ואז בעת שיולדת נכנס בה הנשמה ההיא של סוד העבור, ואז הולד ההוא יוצא נקבה ולא זכר, ואז היא שם בבחי' גלגול ממש, ולא עבור כבתחלה.

Second, [because she became pregnant as a result of an *ibur*]. Once she gives birth, the soul that entered as a *ibur* will enter as a complete reincarnation, not just as an *ibur* like it was at first. Therefore, the child will be female and not male. [Chabad explains that since this feminine soul is not tainted by any sexual sin, it must enter a female body.]

### Did Chayim Vital write Sha'ar HaGilgulim to rationalise leaving his first wife?

Chabad notes: In Chapter 38, the Ari will actually relate that **the first wife of Rabbi Chaim Vital was the *gilgul* of a soul of the type discussed here in this section**. That is why she could not give birth to a son. Rabbi Shmuel Vital, the son of Rabbi Chaim, through whom the Lurianic tradition was transmitted, was the son of Rabbi Chaim's second wife, who was actually his soul mate.

Wikipedia: **Vital apparently married at a young age. It was an unhappy marriage, and when he left his wife**, the prophet Elijah appeared to him in a dream and led him to a beautiful garden...

Convinced by this vision that he was destined to become a kabbalist, Vital devoted the following two and a half years to the study of alchemy. Upon completing his studies, Elijah appeared to him again in a vision and told him that he would succeed in his efforts and write a commentary on the *Zohar*.

Vital believed his first wife performed witchcraft on him.

See [Rav Chaim Vital's Freudian Dream](#)

### Maggid Meisharim 8:3 (Yosef Kaaro – author of Shulchan Aruch)

I have come to reveal to you the secret of your third wife. You should know that **this woman was in the past, a proper Torah scholar**. However, he was stingy with his money and would not give charity. He was also stingy with his wisdom and would not teach others. **He was therefore punished that his soul migrated into a woman**, measure for measure. ... It is because she has the soul of a male that you have not had children from her, because a male and another male cannot produce offspring. If you shall point out that she has children from her first husband, this is because the first husband has the spark of a female soul within him.

# Dinah

## Biblical Story

Dinah and Joseph are the last two children of Joseph, and their births are mentioned in consecutive verses. [Genesis 30:21-25](#)

## Dina's Rape ([Genesis 34](#))

**Genesis 34:1** וּמֵצָא דִינָה בַת־לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לְרָאוּת בְּכָנֹת הָאָרֶץ:

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

Dinah is then raped and held captive by Shechem, prince of the town of Shechem. Shechem claims to love Dina and asks to marry her. The men of Shechem agree to be circumcised as a condition of the two clans merging and marrying each other. Then Dinah's brothers kill all the males of Shechem while they are weakened, and rescue Dinah. Jacob is not happy at all about their deceit, as he only wanted Dinah rescued.

## Commentaries

### **Berachot 60a:**

לאחר שדינה לאה דין בעצמה ואמרה: שנים עשר שבטים עתידין לצאת מי'עקב, ששה יצאו ממני וארבעה מן השפחות, הרי עשרה. אם זה זכר, לא תהא אחותי רחל כאחת השפחות, מיד נהפכה לבת, שנאמר: "ותקרא את שמה דינה". אין מזכירין מעשה נסים.

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 foetus is male, my sister Rachel will not even be the equivalent of one the maidservants; immediately **the foetus was transformed into a daughter**, as it is stated: And she called her name Dina (judgment).

Similar story in [Targum Jonathan](#)

[Bereishit Rabbah 72:6](#) tells the inverse story: the prayer was from Rachel with the same result.

Chayim Vital 1542-1620 writes in [Sha'ar HaPesukim](#):

(טו) ותצא דינה בת לאה: (טז) (מזולתו) כבר ידעת מ"ש חז"ל, על פסוק ואחר ילדה בת, שהיה בן, וע"י תפלת לאה, חזרה והיתה בת. נמצא, כי לאה גרמה לדינה שתהיה בת, ולכן נקראת בת לאה, ולא בת יעקב. גם ז"ס, היות כתוב בדינה נער זכר, וקרינן נערה, כי תחלה היתה נער זכר, ואח"כ נהיתה נערה נקבה...

Regarding the verse "after that she gave birth to a daughter," we already know that Chazal say that she was a male child, and after Leah's prayer, she changed / returned to be a daughter. It follows that Leah caused Dina to be a female child, and that is why she is called "daughter of Dina" and not "daughter of Jacob."

Also, the narrative refers to Dina as *na'ar* (masculine / boy), but we read *na'arah* (girl). This is **because she was originally a *na'ar* (male), and afterwards became a *na'arah* (female).**

### Rabbi Eliyahu Munk (approx. 1611-1631) “Dinah went out”

ותצא דינה בת לאה (בראשית לד, א). מאוד מאוד צריכה אשה להיות צנועה כל כבודה פנימה, לא מבעיא אשת איש, אפילו פנויה שלא היתה לאיש. צא ולמד מה קרה לדינה שהיתה זרע יעקב אבינו וזרע לאה אמנו, על כל זאת אירע לה מה שאירע לה, א"כ צריכין שמירה יתירה בנות דעלמא:

ותצא דינה בת לאה. The lesson we learn from this incident is how careful women have to be to conduct their affairs as far as possible within the privacy of the home. This rule does not only apply to married women but also to unmarried girls. 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.

ומכל מקום אין להרהר אחר יעקב ולאחרי יצא זה המכשול של דינה. דע כי טבע דינה היה טבע זכר שהוא יוצא השדה, על כן היתה יצאנית, והענין כמו שאמרו רז"ל (ב"ר עב, ו) שדינה היתה זכר בבטן אמה ויוסף היה נקבה בבטן אמו, והתפללה לאה על זה ונתהפכו שניהם, מכל מקום היה בה טבע הזכר. וזהו שאמר בת לאה, כי מה שנעשית בת ולא בן זה היה מכח תפלת לאה:

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.

Our sages have explained that as a fetus Dinah was [originally] male in her mother's womb, and Joseph was [originally] male in his mother's womb; but Leah prayed, and they were both changed. From the start, she had a male nature. Thus, the text says “daughter of Leah”, since what made her a daughter and not a son was the force of Leah's prayer.

### Jericho Vincent: Trans Torah: Moshiach ben Yosef v'Dinah

Dina's change from male to female is called a “transition”.

Joseph and Dinah are “trancestors”.

## Joseph

Birth is linked to Dinah's. See [above](#).

### Only man in the bible to be described as beautiful (Genesis 39:6):

Now Joseph was shapely and beautiful. וְיֹסֵף יֹסֵף יִפְהַתָּאֵר וַיְהִי מְרֻאָה.

[Immediately after this is the story of Joseph's sexual harassment by Potifar's wife. Joseph escapes physically unharmed, but is thrown in prison.]

### Joseph's laddishness – feminine? Bereishit Rabbah 84:7

יֹסֵף בֶּן שִׁבְעָה עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה וְגו' (בראשית לד, א), (וְאֵת אִמֶּר וְהוּא נֶעַר, אֲלֵא שְׁהִיָּה עוֹשֶׂה מַעֲשֵׂה נְעוּתִים, מִמְּשִׁמֵּשׁ בְּעֵינָיו, מִתְּלָה בְּעֵקְבוֹ, מִתְּקַן בְּשַׁעֲרוֹ).

“Joseph, seventeen years old...” – and you say he was a lad? It is because he would perform the actions of a lad – he would groom his eyes, lift his heels, and curl his hair.

## Coat of many colours sign of femininity / connected with sexual vulnerability

### Genesis 37:3

Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons—he was his “child of old age”; and he had made them a (princess') **ornamented tunic**. וְיִשְׂרָאֵל אָהַב אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִכָּל־בָּנָיו כִּי־בֶן־זִקְנִים הוּא

לֹא וְעָשָׂה לוֹ כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים:

### Genesis 37: 31-33

וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת־כְּתֹנֶת יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁחָטוּ שְׂעִיר עִזִּים וַיִּטְבְּלוּ אֶת־הַכְּתֹנֶת בַּדָּם: וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֶת־כְּתֹנֶת הַפָּסִים וַיְבִיאוּ אֶל־אָבִיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ זֹאת מָצְאנוּ הַכֶּרֶן־נָא הַכְּתֹנֶת בְּנֶךְ הוּא אִם־לֹא: וַיִּכְיֶרָה וַיֹּאמֶר כְּתֹנֶת בְּנִי תִּיהֶ רְעָה אֲכַלְתֶּהוּ טָרֵף טָרֵף יוֹסֵף:

Then they took Joseph's tunic, slaughtered a kid, and dipped the tunic in the blood. They had the ornamented tunic taken to their father, and they said, “We found this. Please examine it; is it your son's tunic or not?” He recognized it, and said, “My son's tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!”

### II Samuel 13:18-19 about Tamar (after her rape by her half brother Amnon)

(יח) וְעָלְיָהּ כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים כִּי כֵן תִּלְבָּשׁן בְּנוֹת־הַמֶּלֶךְ הַבְּתוּלוֹת מֵעִילִים וַיֵּצֵא אוֹתָהּ מִשְׂרָתוֹ הַחוּץ וַנְעַל הַדָּלֶת אַחֲרֶיהָ: (יט) וַתִּקַּח תָּמָר אֶפֶר עַל־רֹאשָׁהּ וַכְּתֹנֶת הַפָּסִים אֲשֶׁר עָלְיָהּ קָרְעָה וַתִּשֶׂם יָדָהּ עַל־רֹאשָׁהּ וַתִּלָּךְ הַלוֹךְ וַזְעָקָה: ...

She was wearing an **ornamented tunic**, for maiden princesses were customarily dressed in such garments.<sup>c</sup>—His attendant took her outside and barred the door after her. Tamar put dust on her head and **rent the ornamented tunic** she was wearing; she put her hands on her head, and walked away, screaming loudly as she went.

Note that [Jericho Vincent](#) ignores the rape of Tamar. The link with violence.

## “There was no man”

### Genesis 39:7-12

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַתִּשָּׂא אִשְׁת־אֲדֹנָיו אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ אֶל־יוֹסֵף וַתֹּאמֶר שְׁכַבָּה עִמִּי: וַיִּמְאַן... וַיְהִי כַּדְבָּרָה אֶל־יוֹסֵף יוֹם וַיֹּם וְלֹא־שָׁמַע אֲלֶיהָ לְשֹׁכֵב אֶצְלָהּ לְהִיּוֹת עִמָּה: וַיְהִי כִּהְיוֹם הַזֶּה וַיָּבֹא הַבַּיִתָּה לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלֹאכְתּוֹ וְאִין אִישׁ מֵאֲנָשֵׁי הַבַּיִת שָׁם בְּבַיִת: וַתִּתְפָּשֶׂהוּ בְּבִגְדוֹ לֵאמֹר שְׁכַבָּה עִמִּי וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ וַיָּנֶס וַיֵּצֵא הַחוּצָה:

After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, “Lie with me.” But he refused..... And much as she coaxed Joseph day after day, he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her. One such day, he came into the house to do his work. And **there was no man** from the household there in the house. Then she caught hold of him by his garment and said, “Lie with me!” But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside.

### Bereshit Rabbah 87:7

וְיֵהִי כִּהְיוֹם הַזֶּה וַיָּבֵא וְגו' וְאִין אִישׁ מֵאַנְשֵׁי הַבַּיִת (בראשית לט, יא), אֶפְשָׁר בֵּיתוֹ שֶׁל אוֹתוֹ  
הָאִישׁ מִשְׁתַּיֵּר בְּלֹא אִישׁ... רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחֲמָן אָמַר לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלֹאכְתּוֹ וּדְאִי, אֶלֶּא וְאִין אִישׁ, בְּדַק  
אֶת עַצְמוֹ וְלֹא מֵצָא עַצְמוֹ אִישׁ. דְּבַר אַחֵר, רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל אָמַר נִמְתַּחֲהּ הַקֶּשֶׁת וְחִזְרָהּ, הֲדָא הוּא  
דְּכָתִיב (בראשית מט, כד): וַתִּשָּׁב בְּאֵיתָן קִשְׁתּוֹ, קִשְׁיוֹתוֹ. רַבִּי יִצְחָק אָמַר נִתְפַזֵּר זָרְעוֹ וַיֵּצֵא  
דְּרַךְ צִפְרִנְיָו, שְׁנֵאמַר (בראשית מט, כד): וַיִּפְזוּ זָרְעֵי יַדְיוֹ. רַב הוּנָא בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי מֵתְנָא אָמַר  
אִיקוּנִין שֶׁל אָבִיו רָאָה וְצִנֵּן דָּמוֹ...

“It was on a certain day, he came... and there was no one of the people of the household” – is it possible that this man’s house remained without anyone [inside]? ... Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman said: “to perform his labor” indeed. However, “there was no one [ish]” – **he examined himself and did not find himself to be a man [ish].**

Another matter, **the bow was drawn and was restored.** That is what is written: “His bow sat firm [vateshev be’eitan kashto]” (Genesis 49:24) – his firmness [kashyuto]. Rabbi Yitzhak said: **His semen dispersed and emerged through his fingernails**, as it is stated: “And the arms of his hand were gilded [vayafozu]” (Genesis 49:24). Rav Huna said in the name of Rabbi Matna: He saw the image of his father and his blood cooled ...

### Misc Perspectives

#### Jericho Vincent

- interprets “he did not find himself to be a man” as a sign that Joseph had a female soul.
- **Jacob** prays that God gives Joseph “blessings of the breast and womb” – sign of Joseph’s femaleness
- Midrash that Joseph married the daughter of Dinah, so that *mashiach ben Yosef* is descended from our “trancestors”
- symbolism of Menashe and Ephraim being born “on Joseph’s knees” as a sign of his femaleness.
- Coat of many colours is a “princess” dress – link with Tamar but no mention of the rape.

#### Joseph's Womb: Gender Complexity in the Story of Joseph

- Femininity and possible homosexuality explored
- switching of embryos between Joseph and Dinah
- idea that gender-transgressive women are inhabited by a male soul or dybbuk
- symbolism of Menashe and Ephraim being born “on Joseph’s knees” as a sign of his femaleness.
- Coat of many colours is a “princess garment”. Does mention the rape of Tamar and draws parallel with Joseph’s abuse by Potifar’s wife.

#### MyJewishLearning article on “LGBTQ Interpretations of Jewish Texts”

- Joseph acts like a teenage girl.
- Joseph’s beauty is gendered female.
- Switch of embryos between Joseph and Dinah
- “princess dress” noted, but no mention of the rape

# Isaac

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

**לזקוניו**. In his old age. The Torah adds this word and does not content itself with the more appropriate לזקנתו, because, as I wrote earlier, there was an element of the divine soul missing in Isaac at the time he was born. **Isaac had only been equipped 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 דזכורא, לא  
תועיל לו העקידה. וזה הוא שדקדק  
לומר ותלד וגוי הודיע שילדה לבי  
זמני זקנתו. הא' הוא עת לידתו,  
והב' היא הכנה לעת זקנה אחרת  
של אברהם שהוא זמן העקידה.

Context: [Genesis 21:2](#)

וַתְּהַר וַתֵּלֶד שָׂרָה לְאַבְרָהָם בֶּן לְזִקְנָיו לְמוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר אֱתוֹ 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.

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

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

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 וי'תרעש 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:

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.

Context: [Genesis 25:21](#)

וַיִּעֲמֵר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה לְנִכְחַ אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הִוא וַיִּעֲמֵר לֵוִי יְהוָה וַתֵּהָר וַתֵּהָר רֵבֶקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:

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

### Zohar

Kabbalistic texts indicate that he received a male soul that allowed him to have children only after the akeidah. This idea may trace to the Zohar (see for example *Pikudei* 257a in light of 227b, מסטרא דשמאלא מסטרא דנוקבא, *מ"ע מפאנו*). The *רמ"ע* also describes Yitzchak as having a soul "from the side of femininity" (*Gilgulei N'shamos* 90:2), and the *Seder HaDoros (Elef HaRishon)* writes that Yitzchak was a *gilgul* of Chava. -- [Source](#)

Explained here by [Chabad](#)

### Kabbalah and Queer Theory (published paper by Jay Michaelson, Emory University)

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

Related to the idea that Isaac embodies the feminine quality of גְבוּרָה (restraint), which allowed him to submit to the *akeidah*.

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

# Michal

## Her story

### Biblical Text

[1 Samuel 18:20](#) Only woman in the bible to fall in love (aside from Shir Hashirim).

Michal bat Sha'ul had fallen in love with David; וַתֶּאֱהָב מִיכָל בֵּת-שָׁאוּל אֶת-דָּוִד

She saved David's life [1 Samuel 19:11-13](#)

Saul then married her off to [Paltiel](#). She was later [reclaimed by David](#).

[David then rejected her](#) after [she was incensed by his risqué dancing](#) in the street.

Michal had no child until the day she died. [2 Samuel 6:23](#)

וְלִמִּיכָל בֵּת-שָׁאוּל לֹא-הָיָה לָהּ יֶלֶד, עַד יוֹם מוֹתָהּ:

So to her dying day Michal bat Sha'ul had no children.

## Michal and Tefillin

### Summary

Tefillin are a positive timebound commandment.

There is a general principle that [women are exempt](#) from many such mitzvot but can perform them voluntarily – a *reshut*. Ashkenazi women will even say the bracha.

Tefillin are a complicated special case as there is a concern for (1) inappropriate thoughts ([heshe'ach ha-da'at](#)), and (2) a [clean body \(guf naki\)](#). This leads many halachic authorities to protest against women wearing tefillin, as those who are not obligated may not take the mitzvah seriously enough to maintain (1) and (2) at all times.

### *Clean bodies and clean minds*

[Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 38:3](#) (1563 CE)

שולחן ערוך, אורח חיים ל"ח:ג' נשים ועבדים פטורים מתפילין מפני שהוא מצות עשה שהזמן גרמא: הגה  
ואם הנשים רוצים להחמיר על עצמן מוחין בידם [כל בו]:

Women and slaves are exempt from Tefillin because it is a positive commandment which is caused by time. Rema: And if the women want to be stringent for themselves, **we protest against it** (Kol Bo).

The Rema (above) cites the Kol Bo, by the Maharam (Lublin 1558 – 1616). His [Laws of Tefillin \(21\)](#) forbade women from wearing tefillin, as he was concerned they would not be careful to keep clean (guf naki)

Note that the Rema (Rabbi Moshe Isserles) is contemporary with the Shulchan Aruch (by Joseph Karo), providing an Ashkenazi perspective within S"A. He also ruled that men should not lay if they are prone to sexual thoughts.

## Cross-dressing

A third less quoted reason to restrict tefillin is (3) the possibility that this is **cross-dressing**, due to the verse in [Deuteronomy 22:5](#) (Parshat Ki Tetzeh):

לֹא-יְהִיָּה כְּלִי-גִבּוֹר עַל-אִשָּׁה וְלֹא-יִלְבֹּשׁ גִּבּוֹר שְׂמֹלֶת אִשָּׁה כִּי תוֹעֵבֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ כָּל-עֲשֵׂה אֵלֶּה:

A man's article shall not be on a woman, neither shall a man wear a woman's garment; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God.

Aside from kabbalists, this is not the usual reason given to prohibit tefillin for women. However, [Targum Jonathan](#) (date unknown) interprets Deut 22:5 to include tefillin.

Targum Jonathan and kabbalists utilise an essentialist approach to Deut 22:5, in contrast to the more common *functionalist* approach of Sifri and Rashi, who viewed this verse as a guard-rail to prevent sexual immorality or idolatry. See [Ronit Irshai](#)

## The Michal Problem

The Talmud (below) tells a story that Michal wore tefillin. This is a problem as tefillin are a male practice. Various texts grapple with this problem, and how to reconcile Michal's actions with gender expectations on other women. Some texts object to Michal. Some do not, but then must ask why should other women not copy Michal?

From this discussion, there emerge 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century halachic sources suggesting that Michal had a "male soul".

## Talmudic Narratives

*Babylonian Talmud: Michal wore tefillin and the Sages did not protest.*

The Talmud Bavli in Eruvin debates whether tefillin are a timebound commandment or not in the context of wearing them on Shabbat. In this discussion, the story is given that **Michal wore tefillin** and the Sages did not protest. They posit initially that this means tefillin are *not* a timebound commandment, and women are obligated. However, the discussion concludes with the position that tefillin are timebound, but that **Michal's action was a reshut, and therefore acceptable.**

[Eruvin 96a-96b \(450-550 CE\)](#)

עִרּוּבֵינן צו א-ב: אֵלֶּה הָאֵי תִנָּא הוּא דְתִנָּא: מִיכַל בֵּית כּוּשִׁי הֵיִתָּה מִנְחַת תְּפִילִין וְלֹא מִיחוּ בָּהּ חֲכָמִים, וְאִשְׁתּוֹ שֶׁל יוֹנָה הֵיִתָּה עוֹלָה לְרַגְלָהּ וְלֹא מִיחוּ בָּהּ חֲכָמִים. מִדְּלֹא מִיחוּ בָּהּ חֲכָמִים — אֵלֶּמָּא קִסְבְּרִי מִצּוֹת עֲשֵׂה שְׁלֹא הִזְמִן גְּרָמָא הִיא.

... וְדִילְמָא סָבַר לֵה כְּרַבִּי יוֹסִי, דְאָמַר: נְשִׁים סוּמְכוֹת רְשׁוֹת... מִי אִיכָּא לְמַאן דְאָמַר רַגְלָהּ לֹא מִצּוֹת עֲשֵׂה שְׁהִזְמִן גְּרָמָא הוּא? אֵלֶּא קִסְבְּרִי רְשׁוֹת, הִכָּא נִמְי רְשׁוֹת.

...it was taught in a *baraita*: **Michal, daughter of Kushi, King Sha'ul, would don tefillin, and the Sages did not protest against her** behaviour. And similarly, Jonah's wife would undertake the Festival pilgrimage and the Sages did not protest against her practice. From the fact that the Sages did not protest against Michal's donning phylacteries, it is apparent that these Sages hold that phylacteries is a positive mitzva not bound by time

... But perhaps [on the contrary] the *tanna* holds that, as in the case of women who lay their hands on an animal for sacrifice, **this is a reshut**... After all, who can deny that the pilgrimage is a timebound commandment? **As that practice is optional, so is this one optional.**

[Jerusalem Talmud Berachot 2:3:9: The sages did protest. \(375-425 CE\)](#)

תלמוד ירושלמי ברכות ב'ג'ט'... את שהוא חייב בתלמוד תורה חייב בתפילין. נשים שאינן חייבות בתלמוד תורה אינן חייבין בתפילין. התיבון הרי מיכל בת כושי היתה לובשת תפילין. ואשתו של יונה היתה עולה לרגלים ולא מיחו בידיה חכמים. רבי חזקיה בשם רבי אבהו אשתו של יונה הושבה. מיכל בת כושי מיחו בידיה חכמים.

...Anyone who is obliged to study Torah is obliged for *tefillin*, women who are not obliged to study Torah are not obliged for *tefillin*. They objected, but did not Michal, the daughter of the Kushi, wear *tefillin*, and did not the wife of Jonah make the pilgrimage to the Temple, and the sages did not object? Rabbi Hisqiah in the name of Rabbi Abbahu: Jonah's wife was turned back; **The sages forbade it to Michal the daughter of Kushi.**

Note that the Jerusalem Talmud is normally viewed as less authoritative than the Bavli.

### Michal as a precedent for women to wear tefillin

[Rabbeinu Tam \(1100-1171\) explains away the Yerushalmi](#)

Rashi's grandson [explained](#) that the Jerusalem Talmud objects only because Michal wore tefillin on Shabbat, which is prohibited for women as tefillin are not an adornment for them. This is really about carrying on Shabbat, so the Jerusalem Talmud does not actually mean that women should not wear tefillin at all.

[Sefer Hachinuch \(1255-1285\) 421:9](#)

Argues that women may wear tefillin if they wish, and obtain a reward, citing Eruvin 31a.

... ומכל מקום אם רצו להניח אין ממחין בידן, ושכר יש להן, ... ובמסכת ערובין בריש פרק המוציא תפילין (צו, א) אמרו זכרונם לברכה, שמיכל בת שאול היתה מנחת תפילין ולא מחו בידה חכמים ... אשתו של יונה...

... And nonetheless, if they want to lay tefillin, **we do not protest** [against them] and there is reward for them... And in Tractate Eruvin 31a in the chapter entitled *Hamotseh Tefillin*, they, may their memory be blessed, said that Michal bat Sha'ul would lay tefillin and **the Sages did not protest against her**. [similarly, Jonah's wife]

[Rashba \(1235 – 1310 CE\)](#) agrees and says that Michal presumably said the brachah.

### Michal was an [exception](#)

[Ritva: Only special women can lay tefillin](#)

The Ritva (1260 – 1320) [explains](#) that the rabbis neither protested nor condoned women wearing tefillin. Most women are incapable of being careful with clean minds and bodies, but some special women can.

[Olat Tamid:](#)

Menopausal women will be able to observe *guf naki*. Michal's childlessness implies she was menopausal and explains why she was not rebuked.

[Aruch HaShulchan Orach Chayim 38:](#)

נשים ועבדים פטורים מתפילין, ... ואם רוצין להחמיר על עצמן – מוחין בידן. ולא דמי לסוכה ולולב שפטורות ועם כל זה מברכות עליהן. דכיון דתפילין צריך זהירות יתירה מגוף נקי, ... לפיכך אין מניחין אותן להניח תפילין. ואף על גב דתניא בעירובין (צו א) דמיכל בת שאול היתה מנחת תפילין, ולא מיחו בה חכמים – אין למידין מזה, דמסתמא ידעו שהיא צדקת גמורה וידעה להזהר...

Women and slaves are exempted from tefillin... and if they wish to be stringent on themselves, we protest against them. This is not like succah and lulav for which they are exempt and yet say the blessing upon them. Because tefillin requires careful attention, exceptional care with *guf naki*... [Men do not wear tefillin all day as they cannot maintain their care all day, but women at a time of prayer are like men at other times of day, since women are not obligated.]

...Even though it was taught in a *baraita* in *Eirubin* 96a that **Michal bat Sha'ul would lay tefillin and the sages did not protest her, we do not learn from that, because presumably they knew that she was a totally righteous woman and she knew to take care [about *guf naki*].**

[Yam Shel Shlomo \(Shlomo Luria / Maharshal 16<sup>th</sup> century\)](#)

ים של שלמה קיד פרק א ס סד דלא מיחו במיכל, לפי שהיתה צדקת גמורה, והיתה אשת מלך, גם לא היה לה וולד, והיתה יכולה לשמור עצמה בנקיות, מה שאין כן בשאר נשים

[Yam Shel Shelomo, Kiddushin, 1:64](#)

They did not protest Michal because she was a totally righteous woman, and the wife of a king, **also she had no offspring**, and **she was able to keep herself in cleanliness**, which is not so for other women.

What if women copy Michal?

[Seridei Eish by Rav Yechei'el Ya'akov Weinberg \(1884-1966\)](#)

He asks why the Sages did not protest and answers that Michal's wearing of tefillin did not violate the [cross-dressing prohibition](#) because she was performing a mitzvah.

וע"כ [=ועל כן] שמכיון שמתכוונת לשם מצוה אין כאן איסור לא ילבש.

It must be that, since her intention is for the sake of the mitzva, there is no prohibition here of not wearing [a man's garb]. --- This clearly sets a precedent for other women.

[Yohora?](#)

Some halachists were concerned that Michal's story might serve as a precedent, leading to other women laying tefillin. Maharam Schick (1807-1879) [argued](#) that for women, laying tefilling constituted *yohora* יוהרא (arrogance) – acting like you are better than other women, for whom tefillin is forbidden.

## Did Michal have the soul of a man?

### Kaf Hahayyim Part 1 38:9:1 (Chatam Sofer 1900-1940)

As stated by the Rem" a: And if women want to be stringent for themselves, we protest against it. *Birkat Yosef* agrees and also the Rabbi of *Beit Hillel*.

The Targum quotes from *Parshat Ki Tetzeh*: "A woman must not don a man's apparel". **Tzitzit and tefillin are men's apparel and should therefore not be upon a woman.**

We learn from this that **women are not just exempt from [the mitzot of] tzitzit and tefillin, but they actually cross a line by performing these...**

Also see *Shomer Emunim* on *Parshat Ki Tetzeh*, regarding "A woman must not don man's apparel." By "a man's apparel" he means tefillin...that **this is a secret from the male realm. Therefore, there is no proof [that women may do so] from Michal bat Sha'ul -- that she donned tefillin.**

Bring now *Yafeh Lalev*, who wrote: While it is true that there is no proof from Michal Bat Sha'ul, it is possible to say that **Michal bat Sha'ul was a wise woman, who knew that she herself had a soul from the realm of the masculine, and thus it is said "And Michal bat Sha'ul had no child."**

And see also *Sha'ar Hagilgulim*, chapter 9. He wrote that that **a woman who is a reincarnation of a male soul is not able to get pregnant** unless she possesses great merit and thus conceives through receiving an *ibur* from another woman who is fully female.

Note: Cross-dressing is not the usual reason to prohibit women from wearing tefillin. The idea that tefillin are a secret of the male realm comes from the Arizal as quoted by the Ben Ish Chai in *Sod Yesharim* 12. Discussed in Deracheha

כף החיים על שולחן ערוך אורח חיים ל"ח:ט"א:

ט) שם הגהה. ואם הנשים רוצים להחמיר על עצמן מוחין בידם, וכן הסכים הברכ"י אות א' יעו"ש ועיין להרב בית הילל ז"ל ביו"ד סי קפ"ב סק"ב

שהביא משם תרגום יב"ע סדר תצא בפ' לא יהיה כלי גבר על אשה דמתרגם לא יהא גולין דציצית ותפילין דהינון תיקוני גבר על איתתא ע"כ,

דש"מ דלא לבד שהיא פטורה מציצית ותפילין אלא דגם עוברת בלאו, והביאו פתח הדביר אות ב' יעו"ש.

ועוד עיין בס' שומר אמונים פ' כי תצא בפ' לא יהיה כלי גבר על אשה שכתב וז"ל כלי גבר בא"ת ב"ש גי' זו תפילין שהן סוד עלמא דדכורא וכו' ואין ראיה ממיכל בת שאול שהיתה מנחת תפילין ע"כ.

והביאו יפה ללב ז"ל אות ב' וכתב דמ"ש ואין ראיה ממיכל בת שאול וכו' אפש"ל דמיכל בת שאול היתה אשה חכמה וידעה בעצמה שהיתה לה נשמה מעלמא דדכורא ולכך ולמיכל בת שאול לא היה לה ולד עכ"ל.

ועיין שער הגלגולים הקדמה ט' שכתב שאשה שמגולגל בה נשמת זכר א"א לה להתעבר אם לא ע"י זכות גדול שתתעבר בה איזה נשמת אשה נקבה אחרת בסוד עיבור וכו' יעו"ש ועיין מש"ל סי' טו"ב אות ה'.

Yafeh [La-lev 38:2](#) (Rav Rachamim Falaji פלגי 1814-1907)

This is the source cited by the [Chatam Sofer](#) (above). It is curious that Rachamim Falaji's brother Yosef had a fascination with sex transformations ([see below](#))

יפה ללב - חלק א - פלגי, רחמים נסים יצחק בן חיים

ב ס"ג הגה' ואם הנשים רוצין להחמיר ע"ע מוחין  
בירם והטעם נראה דכאב כס' שומר אמונים  
פ' כי תלף כפסוק לא יהיה כלי גבר על השם וז"ל  
כלי גבר כא"ח כ"ש גימ' זו תפילין שהן סוד עלמה  
דכורא ומ"ש ואין ראיה ממיוכל כה שאל שהיתה  
מנחת תפילין ע"כ אפשר דמיוכל כ"ש היתה אשה  
חכמה וירעה בעלמה שהיתה לה נשמה מעלמא  
דרטרא ולקך ולמיוכל כה שאל לא היה לה ולד ועיין  
כס' כרכ"ו אות א' וכס' פתח הדרכי נר"ו אות ב' :

As stated by the Rem"a: And if women want to be stringent for themselves, we protest against it. As written in *Shomer Emunim, Parshat Ki Tetzeh*: "A woman must not don a man's apparel". By "man's apparel", he means tefillin, since this is a secret from the male realm. While it is true that there is no proof from Michael bat Sha'ul, it is possible to say that Michal was a wise woman, who knew that she herself had a soul from the realm of the masculine. And thus it is said "And Michal bat Sha'ul had no child." See *Birkei Yosef* and *Pesach HaDevir*.

Note: *Birkei Yosef* by Chaim Yosef David Azulai (1724 – 1806) and *Pesach HaDevir* are both a mixture of halacha and kabbalah rooted in the work of the Arizal.

*Rav Yosef Palaji (Palache) פלגי, Izmir (1815 - 1896): Yosef Et Ehhav*

Brother of Rachamim Falaji / Palache. Concerning what HaRav Shlomo Miranda wrote in the *Yad Ne'man* about a woman who miraculously transforms into a man:

"... **A woman needs a Get from a man, and not a man.** For in the Get, a man gives a Get to his wife and says, You, my wife, and he (the husband in this case) does not have before him a woman, but a man! He also writes to her that she is permitted and authorised marry any other man in the world – and lo! **She is not a woman who is fit and therefore permitted (through the Get) to (any other man) the whole world...** "

Source: Rabbi Moshe Ariel Abel. Sources available [here](#)

Yosef Palaji is important because the Tzitz Eliezer (Rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Waldenberg) cites him in famous 1967 [teshuvah](#) often misunderstood as implying that one can medically change sex.

*Could some of the kabbalistic ideas of "women with the soul of a man" or "males born with female souls" really be inspired by genuine stories of males with DSDs who are born looking like girls and may or may not fully become men as adults? Who knows? Does it matter?*

## Misc gender-soul narratives

- page 193 from Sefer Yamei Chabad. Alter Rebbe's daughter had a male soul. Because her intellect was masculine. Cannot find source. [Discussed here](#)
- [Haichal Habracha - Bamidbar 27:7](#) says that the Bnos Tzela'fchad had male Neshamos.
- Arizal taught that Rachav (רחב) reincarnated in Hever (חבר), who was the husband of Yael! (See *Sha'ar HaGilgulim*, ch. 36) Hever had a female soul, which is probably why Yael had to be the stronger, more "masculine" one and execute Sisera herself. And for her tremendous deed, the Arizal says Yael (יעל) reincarnated in Eli (עלי) the High Priest! Perhaps Yael had a male soul all along. [Source](#)
- Ysoscher Katz notes that Sefer Tziyoni (14<sup>th</sup> century) seems to say that Moses was born with the appearance of a woman (בצלם דמות אשה). The phrase probably has to do with the fire of God, or the hidden light of creation. Or at most a miracle that helped him to be hidden. Not a female soul. [Discussion here](#).