

Rosh Hashanah Drash - 1st Day (9.11.18) 5779
Gwynn Kessler (Dorshei Derekh, Germantown Jewish Center)

Shanah Tovah.

So this is what its like. Here. On this side of the bima, alone. In a sanctuary not running after kids or running away from organized religion, Judaism, tradition, authority, Jewish prayer, Jews and perhaps non-Jews praying. Whatever it is I try to escape on a regular basis: ceremony, sanctimony, community, patriarchy. This is a partial list of that which I find myself, by habit, or character, really both, running from.

Hineni. Here. I. Am.

I get that the problem is me, and not like “the problem is me” that you say when you break up with someone because the problem really is them but you’re trying to be kind. The answers, or reasons, for why I run *away from* and not *toward* organized, institutional, Judaism, are my problems. As sure as my sins are *my* sins. And yet, as we are in the custom to atone for *our* sins collectively, and not our sins individually during this season, maybe my problems, my reasons, and my answers, are also already ours, collectively. Or perhaps, at least, my problems might bring voice to others’ similar struggles, those with us and not with us today. (Deut. 29:14)

I am, one could say, a sermon virgin; this is the first drash I have given, well at least since my bat mitzvah 35 years ago this year—but my mom, who became a bat mitzvah with me probably wrote that one. (I’m not actually sure when she stopped writing my papers for me but I think when I was in grad school.) At the same time, I am no *foreigner* or *stranger* to editing sermons, drashot, divrei torah. I have served as a *handmaid*, even *midwife*, to many such endeavors.

The saying always the bridesmaid never the *bride*...groom seems apt.

Obviously I have read drafts of my partner’s sermons, for twenty years now, perhaps helping to refine them but more often just trying not to be a stumbling block to her own brilliance. But even before that, in my ten years of graduate school, where some of my closest friends were rabbinical students and facing their own senior, or other sermons — suffice it to say I have read my share of drashot drafts, listened to more than a few practice rounds and rehearsals. Been asked for my two cents. And thus perhaps I’ve just been years working toward, or gestating, my own drash.

So, again, Here I Am, with some new understanding of how one might be both a virgin and pregnant. But that’s another religion...

I have asked myself over the past month and then weeks, as I have been watching the waning of the moon with renewed interest, the clock ticking toward this moment, why this year? Why agree to give a drash, and not just any drash, but one on Rosh Hashanah? Most simply, because I was asked. But why consider it seriously? Seriously. There are a few reasons.

I think this is about, on a profoundly deep level, this year being the year that my oldest child is to become a bar mitzvah. As we try to guide Toby through finding his own ways, and his own words, his divrei torah and otherwise, how do I also model a path for him? How do I teach him what I want to teach him about Torah, its meanings, its interpretations, its challenges—and more importantly how I want to teach him how to challenge and talk back to Torah. And to use Torah, when possible, to challenge and talk back to organized, establishment, patriarchal Judaism—and *society*. Maybe this is why I tear up if not utterly weep, for my child, and now my children, at the thought of their becoming b’nei mitzvah. It is no small thing to watch the children I have loved, and dandled on my own knees, grow up, instigate their own rebellions—against me—as they find their own words and ways.

Last year at the end of the summer, I rode a roller coaster that goes upside down for the first time in my life. I did this for Toby. He really wanted me to go on this ride with him. I conquered my life-long fear of

riding a roller coaster that goes upside down for him, thinking, if there is ever a reason to do this—or anything really—it is to make my child happy, to rejoice with him, to laugh with him. The sacrifices we make *for* our children. So for Toby, perhaps wandering around this building somewhere not where he is supposed to be, perhaps in his own way running away from certain things, I take up the challenge of being present, participating, engaging—indeed to some extent at least turning my strong secular Jewish identity upside down no less than any roller coaster ever could. (What life-long fears my toddler, Kliel, will encourage me to meet I do not know.)

Now, to be clear, I don't have much fear of speaking about Torah or Judaism—even God; for the past 18 years I've made my living teaching college students about the Bible and rabbinic interpretations and theology—feminist, womanist, queer and trans* theologies, among other things Jewish and non.

Which brings me to another reason for why this year? Why give a drash now? I spent the summer writing an article on feminism and Judaism. Remember those assignments you used to have when you came back to school — How I spent my summer vacation? Well I spent my summer “vacation” re-reading and trying to narrate, or tell a story, of the past fifty years of feminist critiques, challenges, and contributions to Judaism, Jewish interpretation, and Jewish transformation. As I relived this history, or herstory, enlivened by the passionate voices of religious and secular, straight and queer, African-American and white, Sephardi, Mizrahi, Ashkenazy, Jews— of different ages and socio-economic backgrounds, I was inspired by their own divrei, their wisdom, their struggles, their challenges and their critiques. How they called out Judaism for its androcentrism, its sexism, for many most obviously crystallized in God's exclusive maleness, God's dominance, God's kingness. Where is the God, or goddess, who opens her eyes, conceives, carries in her trembling womb, and then gasps as she births or delivers a nation and then nurses them (Gen. 21:19; Jer. 31:20; Num. 11:12, Deut. 32:18, Is. 42:14)? Where is she here, today, in this room, building, community, in Judaism—and indeed in the world?

And, where is the non-binary, queer or trans* God—the one who opens *their* eyes, feels *their* womb tremble with compassion and mercy, dandles *their* child in their arms, places *their* hand on the heads of those suffering and in need (Job 13:21), stretches *their* arm out to deliver Israel—most broadly defined—from narrow places, the confines of binary gender, racism, heteronormativity, etc.?

That is my preamble, proem, or petihta—which means opening. Borne out of the feminist practice of coming to speech, to question, to challenge—I began with myself, by locating, or situating myself. When the rabbis of late antiquity composed *their* drashot, their questions and critiques of Torah, God, Jewishness, society, the cosmos, and foreign kings, were often embedded, implicit in the mere citation of a biblical verse. They felt no need to situate themselves in the same way, to explicitly call out Here I Am, but there they are. Lest I be misunderstood, they situated and proclaimed themselves often if not everywhere. They just did it differently, less explicitly. Which is a good thing, because, again, I make my living trying to render manifest that which they have merely embedded.

Anyway, the rabbis of late antiquity often started with a biblical verse, outside of and far away from the *parashah* on which they were expounding. And then they would wind their way, presumably with tension and suspense borne out of the juxtaposition of seemingly disparate and often apparently arbitrary biblical verses, back to the *parashah* that was their focus. While here today for my drash, I began with a feminist practice, starting with myself, for my feminist “this is how I spent my summer vacation” article I used the rabbinic practice—I started with a biblical verse.

The verse I started with just happened to be Jeremiah 31:22, *for God has created a new thing in the land, female shall encompass man.* גִּי-בְרָא אֱלֹהִים דָּלִידָשָׁה בְּאֶרֶץ, וְיִקְבְּהָ תְּסֻבֶּב גִּבֹּר.
a verse rather adjacent to where the haftarah for the second day of Rosh Hashanah ends at Jer. 31:20, separated by only one verse.

Now, just how far off Jeremiah 31:22 is to the end of the *haftarah* portion in Jer. 31:20 will be a point to which I return. Is it, in fact, worlds apart, or is it adjacent not only in literary proximity but also in message?

Before starting to wind my way toward some of what that verse means, I should point out that while the rabbis are no feminists, and as should be clear by now I am no rabbi, the dichotomy between my beginning with myself and the rabbinic beginning of their drashot with biblical verses is not so pronounced as I have heretofore suggested. I, too, have alluded to multiple biblical verses and stories throughout my opening, even citing some explicitly. Some of those verses and allusions are based in various *parashiyot* read during the two days of Rosh Hashanah and others from beyond them, but connected as I wind my own way through selected verses for this *drash*—ultimately ending at Jer. 31:22, and its “new creation” in the land.

—I have called myself a handmaid, and both Hagar, in today’s *parashah* (Gen. 21:9) and Hannah in today’s *haftarah* (1:11) are referred to as handmaids.

—I have mentioned my own weeping for my children, as an allusion to Jer. 31:15 in tomorrow’s *haftarah*, *A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted*. So many tears in fact, of the women central to these Rosh Hashanah Torah readings. Rachel weeps, Hannah weeps in First Sam 1:7, Hagar weeps in Gen. 21:16.

—Sarah laughs. In today’s *parashah* (Gen. 21:6)—her world finally being simultaneously righted and turned upside down upon the birth of her son, Yitzhak.

—I recalled dandling my own sons on my knees, an admittedly odd word choice but one following the JPS translation of Jer. 31:20, *Truly Ephraim is a dear son to Me, a child that is dandled, delighted in*. Which is part of the *musaf* we will hear shortly and the *haftarah* we will hear tomorrow.

—Even mention of my own virginity—at least regarding giving *drashot*, recalls another verse from Jer. 31: *Return, Virgin Israel — shuvi betulat Yisrael* (Jer. 31:21, cf. 31:12).

—And pregnant- Today’s *parashah* begins with God remembering Sarah, v ‘*Adonai pakad et Sarah* and in the *haftarah* today we read, *And God remembered Hannah, va’yizk’rayhah Adonai* (1:19). God remembering, kind of like knowing in the biblical sense, seems to result in pregnancy.

—I have quoted Abraham from today’s *parashah*. Twice he says *hineni- here I am*. (Twice in response to God/angel and once in response to Isaac.) At the same time, I have tried to differentiate and distance myself from Abraham, by recalling the sacrifices we make *for* our children, not *of* our beloveds. May all children in the land not be sacrificed, all parents in the land be able to delight in their children — as God delighted in Ephraim and as Sarah laughed with\in Isaac.

—Finally, I have alluded to Gen 21:19 from today’s torah portion, which reads, *And God opened her eyes*. Although the context and the Hebrew make clear that the verse is to be understood as God opened Hagar’s eyes, I once had a student who excitedly proclaimed, God is female—it says right here, She opened her eyes. I have carried that *misreading* with me ever since, and I recall it today to help open our own eyes to additional female, and other gender-bending images of God in the Bible.

So, that’s an accounting of what I have set forth so far, and now I begin to make some further connections between today’s torah portion and tomorrow’s *haftarah*—ultimately concluding, again, with Jer. 31:22’s “new creation.”

In our *parashah* today, Sarah, who does not utter *hineni*, it being a proclamation of full presence only afforded to male biblical heroes, nevertheless asks a question. She asks, *Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah should suckle children?* (Gen. 21:7). Remember, Sarah is 90 years old at the time of her rather miraculous conception and birth of Isaac. Abraham is 99. The rabbis, in the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Yev.* 64a-b), add another element of surprise and the miraculous—for they assert that Abraham and Sarah were both *tumtumim*—which for our purposes here I will define as non-normatively gendered—or sexed. They were unable to have procreative sex—not only because they were infertile, but because their genitalia were, according to this tradition, undeveloped—until they were in their 90s.

The rabbis arrive at this rather fanciful, yet delightful depiction of their ancestors as genderqueer by way of a midrashic reading of Isaiah 51:1-2, which states, *Look to the rock from where you have been cut and the hole from which you have been dug. Look to Abraham your father, and Sarah who writhed in labor with you.* It's a good midrashic reading, for the rabbis interpret Isaiah 51:1 and 2 in light of each other, so Abraham becomes the rock, and Sarah becomes the hole.

And while I want us to hold on to the image of Abraham and Sarah, not so much as rock and hole, but as non-normatively gendered, serving as models not of blind faith and obedience but as symbols of the full diversity of genders and sexes so far known and those yet to be named, I also have a larger bone to pick, fish to fry, point of contention, in other words, I have a different midrashic reading of Isaiah 51:1 *Look to the Rock from where you have been cut and the hole from which you have been dug.*

Who is the rock of which scripture speaks? In the language of the rabbis, *aizehu tzur*? It is not Abraham and Sarah, and no it isn't Dwayne Johnson. **THE** Rock is God. God is the rock from where Israel has been cut and the hole from which Israel has been dug.

We know this from our *haftarah* portion today (I Sam 2:2), Hannah states, *There is no Rock like our God.*
וַאֲיֵן צוּר, כִּאֲלֵהֶינוּ

And in *parashat Ha'azinu*, which we will read in two weeks, we begin to learn some more about this Rock. Deuteronomy 32:18 states: *The Rock who gave birth to you, you neglected, and you forgot the God who writhed in labor with you.*

צוּר יִלְדָה תִּשְׁכַּח וְתִשְׁכַּח אֶל מְחַלְלָהּ

Allow me to repeat: *The Rock who gave birth to you, you neglected, and you forgot the God who writhed in labor with you.*

What we begin to see in this verse from Deut. 32, as well as the one from Isaiah 51:1, are images of a God who exceeds typically gender normative expectations. God, male or female, male and female, births Israel. These are not isolated images, exceptional as they may be they appear in various guises in other biblical verses. For example, in Numbers 11:12, Moses asks God, rhetorically, *Is it I who has conceived this people? Was it I who birthed them that you should say to me, carry them in your bosom as a nursing father carries the suckling child?* By implication, Moses asserts: God is the one who conceived and birthed Israel, carried them as a nursing parent.

In Isaiah 42:14, God states, *"I have kept silent far too long, Kept silent and restrained Myself: Now, as a travailing woman I will groan, I will pant, I will gasp at the same time."* This verse directly follows a verse that described God with these words: *The Lord goes forth as a warrior, As a fighter he whips up his rage. He yells, he roars aloud, he charges upon his enemies.*

And for one more example, before finally arriving to the last verse in tomorrow's *haftarah* reading, Isaiah 66:15 states, *Look down from heaven and see, From Your holy and glorious height! Where is Your zeal Your power? The trembling of Your womb and Your wombly- compassion are withheld from us.* And the next verse begins, *Surely You are our Father.*

What strikes me about these verses and these images is not only the repeated birth imagery, often bound to femaleness, but also the mixing of gendered images. This mix is always retained insofar as God is always *grammatically* male. Even when God conceives, births, and suckles. But the blending of gendered images also appears in Isaiah 42's quick turnaround, where the narrator describes God as a warrior but God Godself is quoted as a travailing woman. And it appears again in Isaiah 66, where God's trembling womb and compassion are followed by the assertion "Surely you are our Father." It also appears throughout Deut. 32:18, in the larger context of the passage *You have forgotten the God who birthed you...*

So it is with this blending of images that I come to Jeremiah 31:20, the last verse of tomorrow's *haftarah*. I have already alluded to and cited the first part of the verse, *Is Ephraim a dear son to Me, a child that is dandled!* The verse continues, *Whenever I spoke against him, remember I remember him still. That is why my womb trembles for him; compassion I will have wombly-compassion for him.*

Here, at first glance, it appears that the mixture of gendered images is confined more or less to God being grammatically gendered male but with a womb that trembles for Their dear child, Ephraim. On closer look, however, the melding of gendered images might also appear in the verse's juxtaposition of "remembering" and "compassion." The root of the word for remembering, *zikaron*, shares the root for the Hebrew word for male: *zakhar*. And the root for the word compassion, *rahamim*, shares the root for the Hebrew word for womb: *rehem*. Thus I have translated "wombly compassion." Its parallel for drawing out the possible connection between memory and maleness would be something like "manly remembering," (or perhaps "'member'-remembering"). I have held off from this for a number of reasons, in part because if you ask most non-feminist biblical scholars, they will deny any import to such linguistic congruity. They will, however, do the same for my rendering of wombly-compassion. If you ask some feminist biblical scholars, however, they will hesitate at such quick dismissal for both cases. I have no solution, but I can share that when I see the phrase I have translated "remember, I remember" *zakhor ezk'renu* — minimally it conjures some relationship, even if happenstance, between maleness or masculinity and memory. And even an arbitrary, presumably coincidental similarity is worthy of pursuit—in another context.

In this context, what I want to raise, is a voice against the reification of God's gender especially related to the use of *melekh*—on the day when we in fact, emphasize even more than usual Malkhuyot — kingness. I believe the verses I have just mentioned, remind us to act against it. More personally, the consistent, continual use of *melekh*, its ubiquity far beyond this holiday, is part of my profound discomfort with organized, institutional, Judaism. I did, however, mention that I get that the problem is me—not everyone reacts so strongly to the ubiquity of *melekh*—some of us having moved "beyond" this, satisfied with some changes, primarily in English, and alternative offerings in Hebrew—but left to our discretion. And yet, we live in the time of a mad king—and this brings me to another reason for why now? why do a *drash this new year?*—we live in the time of a mad king who has been called Shakespearean but not yet biblical. And I cannot help but wonder, and even strongly believe, that even our slightest complacency, however symbolic, however nostalgic, however comforting and familiar, however seemingly authentic, "melekh" in Hebrew remains, it is co-implicated with "this new normal"—which before our very eyes manifests itself in the sacrificing of the rights and lives of so many people. The continued, perhaps renewed relevance of using all images for God, and especially those gendered images that work against reifying God's maleness, lies in what I consider to be the clear connections between accepting maleness as the norm, the supreme, the divine, and the exercise of *this* will over and against female, queer, and trans bodies. I cannot imagine a world that truly acknowledged and embraced female and queer images of God would systematically work to strip us of our rights and sacrifice us. Yet here we are. Here. We. Are.

As we look to the New Year, and we continue to march, protest, and act, I ask us to *remember, yes remember*, the real, tangible, and I think palpable, vital, connections between king worship of any degree and white, male, cisgender privilege. I ask that we not only pray with our feet to stem the tide against and stamp out such privilege, such injustices, but also when we are sitting, standing, *davening*, in *shul* as well. We need our voices, our words, as well as our feet.

We also need vision. And so I end with the verse that has captivated me for its potential openness, its complexity, its challenge and its call for a *new thing*—*hadashah*—in the land. Again, Jer. 31:22, which you *will not* read in the *haftarah* tomorrow, but perhaps you will search out on your own as it comes just two verses after the end, states, *for God has created a new thing in the land, female shall encompass man.*
 בְּיָמֵינוּ יִהְיֶה לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים הַדָּשִׁים, וְלֹא יִהְיֶה לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים תְּכֵלֶם וְלֹא יִהְיֶה לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים מִלְּפָנֶיךָ.

I have left myself scant time to parse what I see as the full potential of this verse—and in truth I am still working on it, working with it. I do find it, well, pregnant with meaning. Not because it seems to imply a

female takeover or female supremacy. Indeed, I am not really sure how best to understand *t'sovev*, the word I have rendered as encompass. But in some way, I want to, like the rabbis who read Isaiah 51:1 and 51:2 together, read this verse about female encompassing man along with God's remembrance and compassion, with God's trembling womb for Ephraim, and think about how the melding of God's genders helps us imagine a new thing, how it reflects how all genders are created in our images of God's image(s).

One of the strongest potentialities of this verse that I see is its re-writing, its re-conceiving, its *righting*, as in correcting the creation of binary gender in Genesis 1. One particularly queer aspect of the verse is its juxtaposition of female — *n'kevah* — and *gaver*, not *zakhar*. That the verse uses *bara adonai* - God created, which is quite uncommon in the Bible, encourages us to read it along with Gen. 1:26-27, where God creates *ha-adam*, *zakhar u-n'kevah*. Now it is true that *gaver* means man and so where is the queerness? I think for me, it is that it challenges the expectation that *zakhar* and *n'kevah* are the only imaginable, or kosher, matches. If we can add *gaver*, what else can we add? Certainly we would add *tumtumim*. And of course we would add the *androgynos*, another rabbinic non-binary gendered person, who often appears along with the *tumtum* in a variety of texts — and according to rabbinic tradition *adam harishon* was created as an *androgynos*, as much as it seems Abraham and Sarah were created as *tumtumim*. And to be sure we would add a pregnant male body writhing in labor. Because I don't think this verse *is* worlds apart from the verse about God's womb trembling for Ephraim. Both verses in Jeremiah, the image of a presumptively but perhaps questionably male God with trembling womb and the vision of a “new thing,” a new creation, wherein female encompasses man, encourage us to rethink the creation of *adam* in Genesis 1, and both verses ask of us that we rethink binary—male/female only—constructions of gender.

As we celebrate this *New Year*, let us consider, as individuals and a community, how to work to bring about this “new thing,” *hadashah*, in *this* land—in *every* land—for *all* people.

Shanah Tovah.