

Activity Name: The Creation of Gender: Text Study

Purpose: To explore the origins of the gender binary as seen in the Torah

Time: 1 hour

Materials: print-outs of the texts

Notes: This activity was created to be part of an all-night Shavuot study session, but it can also stand alone as an individual text study.

Activity: The leader begins by introducing the two stories of the creation of humanity in Genesis and the concept of the gender binary. S/he then asks the participants to form pairs and hands out the text study sheet (see next pages). The participants discuss the texts in pairs using the questions on the sheet. When it seems like the discussion is dying down, the leader brings everyone back together to debrief as a group.

The Creation of Gender Texts¹

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ
זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

God created the *adam* in God's image; in the image of God [God] created **him** — male and female [God] created **them**.

—Genesis 1:27

1. Are you familiar with this version of creation?
2. Does anything in this verse surprise you?
3. How do you interpret this verse?

אָמַר ר' יִרְמְיָה בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר: בְּשַׁעַת שֶׁבָרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן,
אֲנָדְרוֹגִינוֹס בָּרָאוּ, זֶהוּ שְׂכָתוֹב: "זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָאם" (ה,ב).

Said Rabbi Yirmiyah ben Elazar: "When the The Holy Blessed One, created the first adam, [God] created him [an] *androginos*². That is [what it means] when [the following] is written: 'male and female [God] created them'..."

—*Genesis Rabbah 8:1 (c. 400 CE)*

1. According to this commentary, what does the Torah mean by “male and female [God] created them”?
2. Do you agree with this interpretation? Why or why not?
3. According to this interpretation, what was the system of gender at creation?
4. What can we learn about gender from this interpretation?

¹ All texts and explanations come from Jewish Mosaic's Transtexts <http://www.jewishmosaic.org/verses>

² The *androginos* is a figure that appears frequently in rabbinic literature. We learn in Mishna Bikkurim 4 that the *androginos* is in some ways male, in some ways seen as female, in some ways both male and female and in some ways neither male nor female. In the Gemara the *andrginos* is seen as similar to Hellenistic notions of the bi-gendered "hermaphrodite." In a contemporary context a comparison can be made between the *androginos* and intersex identity.

אמר ר' שמואל בר נחמן: בשעה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא את אדם הראשון, דו-פרצופים בראו, ונסרו ועשאו גבים, גב לכאן וגב לכאן. השיבוהו: והלא כתוב: "ויקח אחת מצלעותיו" (ב, כא) אמר להם: אחד משני צדדיו, כמו שאתה אומר: "ולצלע המשכן" וגו', ואנו מתרגמים: "ולסטר משכנא" (שמות כו, כ).

Said Rabbi Shmuel Bar Nachman: "When the Holy Blessed One, created the first adam, [God] created him double-faced; and split him, and [God] made him [into] two backs—a back [facing] one direction, and a back [facing] the other direction."³ They asked him: "But isn't it written: "and He took one of his ribs?" He said to them: "one of his two sides [tzalotav]. . . as it says [in the Torah] 'and one of the sides [tzelah] of the tabernacle,' etc." (Exodus 26:20)

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זכר ונקבה ברא אתם. ולהלן הוא אומר: "ויקח אחת מצלעותיו" וגו' (ב, כא)? מדרש אגדה: שבראו שני פרצופים בכריאה ראשונה, ואחר כך חלקו. ופשוטו של מקרא: כאן הודיעך שנבראו שניהם בששי ולא פי' לה כיצד ברייתו, ופירש לה במקום אחר.

"Male and female [God] created them" And later on, it says [in Genesis Chapter 2] "and God took one of his ribs" etc. Midrash [says] that [God] created him, in the first creation, double-faced, and after that split them. But the plain meaning of the verse is: that [God] created both of them on the sixth [day]—but [the verse in Genesis Chapter One] doesn't explain to you *how* their creation happened. [The Torah] explains *that* to you in another place [Genesis Chapter Two]."

—*Rashi's commentary on Genesis 1:27 (c. 11th century)*

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³ This idea is also seen in Plato's *Symposium*. In the course of a speech on the nature of Love, Plato states that there were initially three kinds of human beings: female, male, and *androgunes*. Each person had two faces and the fronts of two bodies, each pointing in opposite directions. When they began to threaten the gods, Zeus split each kind of person into two halves. . . It is clear that many Greek ideas influenced Jewish society; Greek words and concepts appear regularly in rabbinic literature. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that many of the rabbis of the first few centuries CE knew Plato's work.

This verse is a *merim*... Men, women, and every possibility in between were created simultaneously.

—*Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig, 21st century*

A merism is a literary figure of speech, used frequently in the Bible, by which a large single concept is referred to by a phrase that enumerates only two of its many parts, to indicate the breadth of the whole. For example, in Genesis 1:1 we read that God “creates the heavens and the earth.” These two parts combine to indicate that God created the whole universe. Similarly, in Psalm 139, the psalmist declares that God knows “my down-sitting and mine uprising,” indicating that God knows all that he does.

According to Rabbi Wenig's interpretation... “male and female” are also two small parts, within a larger whole of the gender spectrum. Thus this verse indicates not just that God created male and female bodies, but all of humanity and every gender that lies between men and women.

—*Jewish Mosaic, 21st century*

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Summery Questions

1. Which commentary do you identify with the most?
2. Which commentary most closely resembles the way we think of gender as Jews today? Should this be changed? If so, how and to what?
3. If we combine all these interpretations, what do we learn about gender?