

Activity Name: The Torah of Drag

Purpose: To explore the halakhic views on drag

Time: 1 hour

Materials: print-outs of the texts

Notes: This activity was created to be used shortly before Purim.

Activity: The leader begins by introducing the book of Deuteronomy, the concept of drag as part of Purim, the concept of drag in general, and the difference between drag and transfolk. S/he then asks the participants to form pairs and hands out the text study sheet (see below). 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 Torah of Drag Texts¹

לֹא־יִהְיֶה כָּל־גֵּבֶר עַל־אִשָּׁה וְלֹא־יִלְבַּשׁ גֵּבֶר שִׁמְלַת אִשָּׁה כִּי תוֹעֵבַת יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֶיךָ כָּל־עֲשֵׂה אֵלֶּהָ:

A woman should not put on the apparel of a man; nor should a man wear the clothing of a woman—for whoever does these things—it is a *to'evah* [completely off-limits behavior] to the Eternal your God.

—*Deuteronomy 22:5*

תלמוד בבלי מסכת נזיר דף נט עמוד א

רבי אליעזר בן יעקב אומר: מנין שלא תצא אשה בכלי זיין למלחמה? ת"ל: לא יהיה כלי גבר על אשה, ולא ילבש גבר שמלת אשה - שלא יתקן איש בתיקוני אשה.

"A woman should not put on the apparel of a man." (Deuteronomy 22:5) What does the Torah mean by this verse? You might think that it simply means that a man may not wear a woman's garment and a woman may not wear a man's garment. But behold, it has already been said [by previous commentators in reference to this verse] that it is completely off-limits! **But there is no to'evah here** [it is not a completely off-limits behavior]! [Therefore], the verse must mean that a man may not wear women's clothes in order to sit amongst women, and a woman must not wear men's clothes and sit amongst men.

—*Babylonian Talmud Nazir 59a (2nd - 4th C CE)*

1. According to this commentary, what does Deuteronomy 22:5 prohibit?
2. Does this interpretation make sense to you? Why or why not?
3. In this interpretation, what is the definition of cross-dressing?
4. As we embark on the celebration of Purim, what can we learn from this commentary?

רש"י דברים פרק כב פסוק ה

לא יהיה כלי גבר על אשה - שתהא דומה לאיש כדי שתלך בין האנשים, שאין זו אלא לשם ניאוף; ולא ילבש גבר שמלת אשה - לילך ולישב בין הנשים... כי תועבת - לא אסרה תורה אלא לבוש המביא לידי תועבה:

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

"A woman should not put on the apparel of a man. . ." that she will resemble a man and go out amongst men for the purpose of adultery. "**Nor should a man wear the clothing of a woman...**" [Deuteronomy 22:5] in order to sit amongst the women. As we learned [in the Babylonian Talmud *Nazir* 59a]. "It is completely off-limits behavior..." [Therefore] the Torah is forbidding garments that **lead** to such off-limits behavior.

—*Rashi on Deuteronomy 22:5 (c. 11th century)*

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לֹא תִלְבַּשׁ אִשָּׁה בְּגָדִים הַמְיֻחָדִין לְאִישׁ, לְפִי מִנְהַג הַמְּקוֹם. וְלֹא תִגְלַח
אִשָּׁה כְּאִישׁ. לֹא יִלְבַּשׁ אִישׁ בְּגָדֵי אִשָּׁה:

A woman should not wear garments that are especially for a man, according to *minhag hamakom* [the local fashion]; and a woman should not cut her hair as a man does. A man should not wear the garments of a woman.

—*Tur, Yoreh De'ah, Chapter 182 (14th century)*

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שולחן ערוך אורח חיים סימן תרצו סעיף ח

מותר לישא אשה בפורים. הגה: (.) ומה שנהגו ללבוש פרצופים בפורים, וגבר לובש שמלת
אשה ואשה כלי גבר, אין איסור בדבר מאחר שאין מכווין אלא לשמחה בעלמא; וכן
בלבישת כלאים דרבנן.

In the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayyim 696:8) we read:

"It is permitted [for a man] to dress as a woman on Purim."

Rabbi Isserles comments on this text:

". . .so too the practice of dressing up in masks on Purim, a man wearing the attire of a woman, and a woman wearing the accessories of a man—there is no prohibition of this, since what they are intending is merely joy, and furthermore the [prohibition of] wearing

adornments is *d'rabanan* (a rabbinic prohibition) [and is therefore of a lesser level of concern]."

—*Rabbi Moses Isserles' commentary to the Shulchan Aruch (16th century), Orach Chaim 696:8*

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. . . I want to draw our attention not only to this verse, but also to the seemingly unrelated verses that immediately precede it, four verses that contain commandments about returning things—animals and clothes—that your neighbor has lost and you have found; plus helping lift up any animal of your neighbor that has fallen in the road. The translation of these verses that we are most used to say: "If you see your fellow's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your fellow." A bit later it says about returning any lost thing to your fellow: "you must not remain indifferent." And finally it says "if you see your fellow's donkey or ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it; you must help him lift it up." [Deuteronomy 22:1-4]

Do not ignore it; you must not remain indifferent; do not ignore it, says our familiar translation, but both Everett Fox and Richard Friedman point out in their wonderful, more literal, translations that rather than saying "ignore" or "remain indifferent," the Hebrew actually says *hitalamtah* and *l'hitaleim*—not "ignore" or "be indifferent," but rather a literal translation is, "do not hide yourself."

"Ignore" and "be indifferent" are nice interpretations, but they are not translations. Hiding yourself is different from ignoring something or being indifferent to someone else's plight, don't you think? Hiding yourself is not only about shirking responsibility—it's about closeting yourself. It's about hoping no one will notice you, maybe it's about hoping you won't notice yourself—won't notice who you really are. . . Perhaps this verse [when read in its fullest context] is about: not hiding yourself behind clothes that do not belong to you that do not show who you are, that do not allow you to feel like yourself when you are wearing them.

—*Rabbi Lisa Edwards (21st century)*

1. According to this commentary, what does Deuteronomy 22:5 prohibit?
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Summary Questions

1. If we combine all of these interpretations, what do we learn about drag?
2. How does clothing help us celebrate holidays?
3. How does clothing affect how we feel in our everyday lives?
4. Do these texts provide any guidance to people for whom wearing clothes of the “wrong” gender feels “right”?