

Activity Name: The Binary of Good and Evil

Purpose: To take a queer eye to the story of the Garden of Eden through the words of gender theorist Kate Bornstein

Time: 1 hour

Materials: copies of the texts, the Kate Bornstein sound recording (if using), a computer or other audio device (if using the recording)

Notes: This program is based on and around a speech that Kate Bornstein gave at the 2009 NUJLS Conference.

Activity: Read Genesis 2-3 and then discuss it using the “Post-Genesis Text” discussion questions. Afterwards, introduce Kate Bornstein and the concept of queer theory (see background texts). Either listen to the recording from Kate Bornstein’s speech or have people read it. Discuss using the rest of the questions below.

Changes/expansions: Add a final question to the sheet: “Kate Bornstein’s interpretation can be seen as a modern midrash. Can you think of any other texts that lend themselves to this?” Have participants come up with their own modern midrashim based on these texts. This expansion will require access to bibles for the participants.

Discussion Questions

Post-Genesis Text

What do you think the “knowledge of good and evil” is?

Why do you think G-d warned Adam and Eve away from this knowledge?

Why do you think Adam and Eve were punished?

Post-Kate Bornstein

How does Kate understand the knowledge of good and evil?

Why does she think G-d warned us away?

Does this make sense to you?

What parts of our lives revolve around binaries?

What parts of Jewish life revolve around binaries?

Kate Bornstein says that in the Garden of Eden, the “downfall of humanity was humanity’s desire for morality.” What do you think she means by this statement? What do you think of this idea?

When is morality helpful in our lives? When does it cease to be helpful?

How does society’s concept of morality effect the lives of people in the queer community? Does the queer community have its own sense of morality?

What do we as queer Jews gain from reading the text in this way?

Does this reading help us affirm our own identities as queer Jews? If so, how?

What impacts do affirming texts have on our morality?

The Binary of Good and Evil
Biblical Text
Genesis Chapters 2-3

Chapter 2

¹ The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array. ² On the seventh day God finished the work that He had been doing, and He ceased on the seventh day from all the work that He had done. ³ And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that He had done. ⁴ Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created.

When the Lord God made earth and heaven — ⁵ when no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil, ⁶ but a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the earth — ⁷ the Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.

⁸ The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed. ⁹ And from the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad.

¹⁰ A river issues from Eden to water the garden, and it then divides and becomes four branches. ¹¹ The name of the first is Pishon, the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where the gold is. (¹² The gold of that land is good; bdellium is there, and lapis lazuli.) ¹³ The name of the second river is Gihon, the one that winds through the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴ The name of the third river is Tigris, the one that flows east of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; ¹⁷ but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die."

¹⁸ The Lord God said, "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him." ¹⁹ And the Lord God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name. ²⁰ And the man gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts; but for Adam no fitting helper was found. ²¹ So the Lord God cast a deep sleep upon the man; and, while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. ²² And the Lord God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman; and He brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said,

"This one at last
Is bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh.
This one shall be called Woman,
For from man was she taken."

²⁴ Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh.

²⁵ The two of them were naked, the man and his wife, yet they felt no shame.

Chapter 3

¹ Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say: You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?" ² The woman replied to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden. ³ It is only about fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: 'You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.'" ⁴ And the serpent said to the woman, "You are not going to die, ⁵ but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad." ⁶ When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.

⁸ They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ The Lord God called out to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" ¹⁰ He replied, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." ¹¹ Then He asked, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?" ¹² The man said, "The woman You put at my side — she gave me of the tree, and I ate." ¹³ And the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done!" The woman replied, "The serpent duped me, and I ate." ¹⁴ Then the Lord God said to the serpent,

"Because you did this,
More cursed shall you be
Than all cattle
And all the wild beasts:
On your belly shall you crawl
And dirt shall you eat
All the days of your life.
¹⁵ I will put enmity
Between you and the woman,
And between your offspring and hers;
They shall strike at your head,
And you shall strike at their heel."

¹⁶ And to the woman He said,

"I will make most severe
Your pangs in childbearing;
In pain shall you bear children.
Yet your urge shall be for your husband,
And he shall rule over you."

¹⁷ To Adam He said, "Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I
commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,'
Cursed be the ground because of you;
By toil shall you eat of it
All the days of your life:

¹⁸ Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you.
But your food shall be the grasses of the field;

¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow
Shall you get bread to eat,
Until you return to the ground —
For from it you were taken.
For dust you are,
And to dust you shall return."

²⁰ The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all the living. ²¹ And the
Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.

²² And the Lord God said, "Now that the man has become like one of us, knowing good
and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat,
and live forever!" ²³ So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the
soil from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove the man out, and stationed east of the garden
of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life.

The Binary of Good and Evil Some Background

A quick summary of queer theory from from Dr. Mary Klages, UC Boulder:

Queer theory emerges from gay/lesbian studies' attention to the social construction of categories of normative and deviant sexual behavior. But while gay/lesbian studies, as the name implies, focused largely on questions of homosexuality, queer theory expands its realm of investigation. Queer theory looks at, and studies, and has a political critique of, anything that falls into normative and deviant categories, particularly sexual activities and identities. The word "queer", as it appears in the dictionary, has a primary meaning of "odd," "peculiar," "out of the ordinary." Queer theory concerns itself with any and all forms of sexuality that are "queer" in this sense--and then, by extension, with the normative behaviors and identities which define what is "queer" (by being their binary opposites). Thus queer theory expands the scope of its analysis to all kinds of behaviors, including those which are gender-bending as well as those which involve "queer" non-normative forms of sexuality. Queer theory insists that all sexual behaviors, all concepts linking sexual behaviors to sexual identities, and all categories of normative and deviant sexualities, are social constructs, sets of signifiers which create certain types of social meaning. Queer theory follows feminist theory and gay/lesbian studies in rejecting the idea that sexuality is an essentialist category, something determined by biology or judged by eternal standards of morality and truth. For queer theorists, sexuality is a complex array of social codes and forces, forms of individual activity and institutional power, which interact to shape the ideas of what is normative and what is deviant at any particular moment, and which then operate under the rubric of what is "natural," "essential," "biological," or "god-given."

A quick biography of Kate Bornstein from Amazon.com:

Kate Bornstein is a performance artist and playwright whose latest book was released May 1, 2012--a memoir, *A QUEER AND PLEASANT DANGER*, with the subtitle, "The true story of a nice Jewish boy who joins the Church of Scientology and leaves twelve years later to become the lovely lady she is today."

bKate has authored several award-winning books in the field of Women and Gender Studies, including *GENDER OUTLAW: ON MEN, WOMEN, AND THE REST OF US*, and *MY GENDER WORKBOOK* which she [recently updated] for a second edition after 15 years.

Her 2006 book, *HELLO, CRUEL WORLD: 101 ALTERNATIVES TO SUICIDE FOR TEENS, FREAKS, AND OTHER OUTLAWS* propelled Kate into an international position of anti-bully advocacy for marginalized youth which has earned her two citations of honor from the New York City Council and garnered praise from civil rights groups around the globe. Kate's books are taught in five languages in over 200 colleges and universities around the world.

Kate lives in New York City with her girlfriend, three cats, two dogs, and one turtle.

The Binary of Good and Evil Kate Bornstein's Speech

In the history of humanity we have governed ourselves using the politics of power and the politics of identity, but there has never been a politic of desire. How about that? Never. Never. So what do we Jews know about desire? What do we queers know about desire? As Jews we were taught this: It was the desire for a system, a binary system, that led to the downfall of humanity. We're taught that in the very first book [of the Bible]. Maybe Genesis makes sense when read through the lens of post-modern queer theory because it was humanity's desire for the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil that got us into trouble. G-d tried to warn us about the binary but we weren't listening. We wanted a world that was a simple either or – good or evil. As students of queer theory, as Jews who question everything, what does that mean? The knowledge of good and evil. What is that? Why is that so important? What motive did we have for that desire? We were seduced into it. Why does our culture desire the knowledge of good and evil? Do you still desire the knowledge of good and evil? And do you still desire to be on one side or the other of that equation?

I'm not saying that all binaries are bad. Far from it! I'm saying that binaries are bad for us when we are not conscious of binaries as simplistic statements of complex systems. For example, age. Young or old. Most people think of age as young or old. That's a simplistic statement of a complex system. Age is much more complex. There's infants, there's children, there's adolescence, there's young adults, there's youth – G-d knows what youth is. Youth is nothing more than a category designed to keep power away from you. So as soon as they keep raising up the age of youth, they're taking power away. Youth is to age sort of as middle class is to class. It's not really definable.

Binaries become unconscious when they are imbedded within moral values. What more is morality than the knowledge of good and evil? That's what morals are. Morals are systems of right and wrong, good and evil, behavior. So what is the Book of Genesis really telling us when it gives us a parable of world creation in which the downfall of humanity was humanity's desire for morality? I don't think it was ever G-d's plan for sex to be part of any good and evil binary. He warned us away from that kind of thinking. I don't think it was ever G-d's plan for gender to be part of any good and evil binary. Gender shouldn't be part of any good and evil binary. And I'm not speaking against morality. Morals – they're okay. It's a good thing to know in a crisis situation "thou shalt not murder." Okay good! That restrains a lot of people. My guess is that many of us in this room are alive because of that particular moral.

Morality has great value to people who don't trust themselves to decide for themselves what's right and what's wrong. Morality can teach us how to do good deeds. Training wheels. Training wheels for learning how to do good deeds.