

**Rabbi Nikki DeBlosi, PhD**  
**It's a Drag: Purim, Gender Costumes, and Being Our True Selves**

On the topsy-turvy holiday of Purim, we don costumes, sometimes playing with gender stereotypes (think about the exaggerated femininity of Esther and Vashti, for example). Join Rabbi Nikki DeBlosi, PhD, for a serious look at the concept drag and gender. As the contemporary conversation around gender seems to multiply in volume and complexity every day, it is incumbent upon us all to consider the ways in which living “beyond the binary” of “man” and “woman” can liberate ourselves, and one another.

**source 1: “the rest is drag,” RuPaul, video**

Reflection Questions

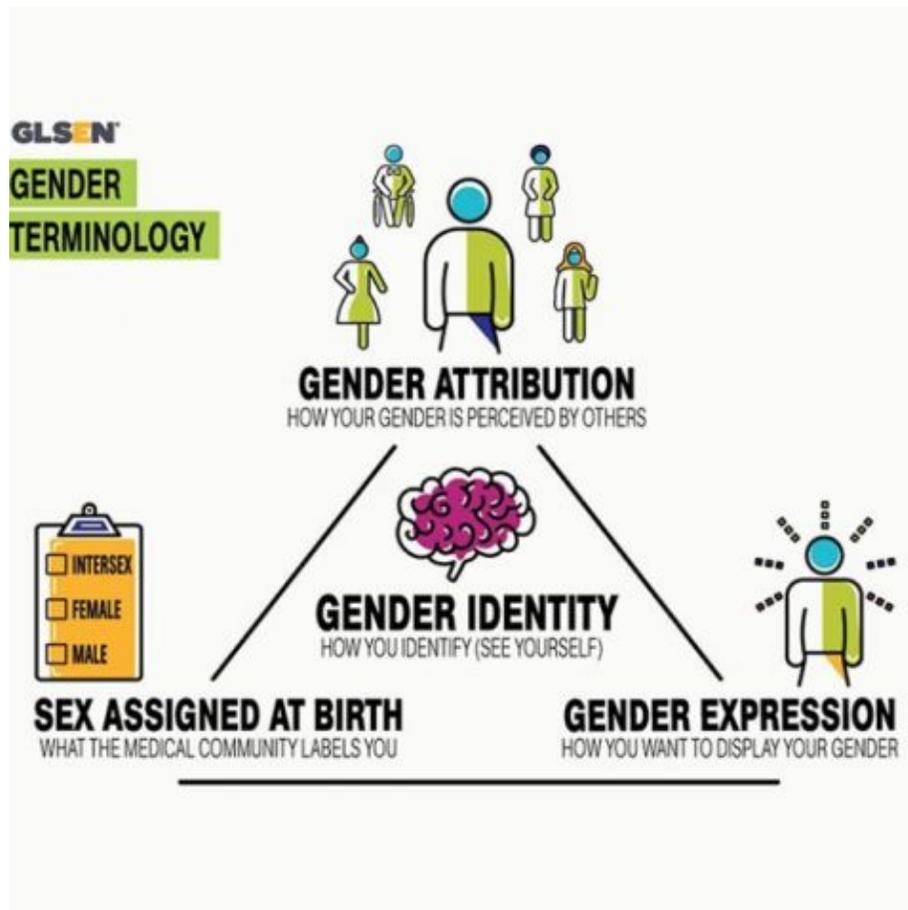
- What are your associations with the term “man”? “Woman”? “nonbinary”?
- Do your associations change if you modify each word with “Jewish”?
- What happens when you compare yourself to each category?
- Think of a time when embodying one category or the other, a combination, or all, felt natural to you. What would “drag” feel like for you?

**source 2: “range of gender identities,” video**

Discussion Questions

- “You don’t have to understand someone to respect them.” What were some of the ways suggested to show our respect for everyone, regardless of their gender identity?
- What different words for gender identity or presentation did you hear in the video? What others have you heard?

### source 3: "gender terminology," GLSEN



### source 4: midrash bereshit rabbah 8:1

Rabbi Jeremiah the son of Elazar said: When the Holy One, blessed be He,<sup>1</sup> created the first human [adam harishon], [God] created it as an androgynos, as it is written, "Male and female [God] created them." Rabbi Samuel the son of Nachman said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the first human being, [God] created it with two faces, then split it and made it two backs—a back here and a back there.

אמר רבי ירמיה בן אלעזר: בשעה שברא הקב"ה את אדם הראשון, אנדרוגינוס ברא-- הדא הוא דכתיב: זכר ונקבה בראם. אמר ר' שמואל בר נחמן: בשעה שברא הקב"ה את אדם הראשון, דיו פרצופים בראו, ונסרו ועשאו גביים--גב לכאן וגב לכאן.

<sup>1</sup> While Jewish tradition emphasizes that God has no body, the rabbis use the metaphor of a male-gendered God most regularly. For more on the topic of gender and God, Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai* and *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (among many other sources).

## Discussion Questions

- ❑ Paraphrase your understanding of these rabbis' image of the first human.
- ❑ How does this midrash confirm or challenge your previous views on how Judaism sees our gender or sex?

### source 5: devarim (deuteronomy) 22:5

A man's clothes should not be upon a woman, and a man should not wear the apparel of a woman, for anyone who does these things, it is an abomination before the Eternal your God.

לֹא יִהְיֶה כְּלֵי גִבּוֹר עַל אִשָּׁה וְלֹא יִלְבַּשׁ גִּבּוֹר שְׂמֹלֶת אִשָּׁה כִּי תוֹעֵבֶת יִּי אֱלֹהֶיךָ כָּל עֲשֵׂה אֵלֶּה  
(דברים פרשת כי תצא פרק כב)

### source 6: babylonian talmud, nazir 59a

Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob says: From [which Biblical verse do we learn] that a woman should not go out to war bearing arms? Scripture says, "A man's instruments should not be upon a woman." "And a man should not wear the apparel of a woman" [teaches] that a man is not to use cosmetics as women do.

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

## Discussion Questions

- ❑ How do these traditional texts define "men's clothing" and "women's clothing"?
- ❑ How might you define these items?

### **source 7: rashi, (12th c. France) commentary to devarim 22:5**

“A man’s clothes should not be upon a woman”: [that is,] she would resemble a man in order to walk among the men, which is only for the sake of adultery. “And a man should not wear the apparel of a woman”: [that is,] so that he might go and sit among the women. [...] “For it is an abomination”: The Torah only prohibited the [cross-]dressing of one who intends to do abomination.

לא יהיה כלי גבר על אשה. שתהא דומה לאיש, כדי שתילך בין האנשים, שאין זו אלא לשם נאוף (עי' ספרי): ולא ילבש גבר שמלת אשה. לילך לישב בין הנשים. ד"א — שלא ישיר שער הערוה ושער של בית השחי (חזיר נ"ט): כי תועבת. לא אסרה תורה אלא לבוש המביא לידי תועבה (עי' ספרי):

#### Discussion Questions

- ❑ According to Rashi, what does the Torah prohibit when it specifies what type of apparel or accessories can be worn, according to sex or gender?

### **source 8: moses isserles (16th c. Poland) on shulhan arukh, orah hayyim, hilchot megilah v'purim**

And what of the custom[, on Purim, ...] for a man to wear the apparel of a woman; and a woman, a man’s clothes? There is no prohibition in this matter because of the fact that they intend nothing other than to gladden the world.

### **source 9: rabbis elliot kukla & reuben zellman, “to wear is human, to live—divine: parashat ki tetse (devarim 21:10-25:19),” torah que(e)ries**

If we follow Isserles’ thinking, then choosing to wear clothing that is traditionally designated for a different gender from the one in which we were raised is acceptable if we are doing it because it makes us happy. [...] All the more so is it appropriate to wear the clothes that express our authentic selves. For some of us, the truth of who we are is better revealed when we wear the clothes of another gender than the one we were assigned at birth. When we allow others to see our honest identities, it increases our comfort, helps to bring internal reconciliation, and promotes real fulfillment. Nothing promotes joy as much as the freedom to be who we are meant to be.

## Reflection Questions

- ❑ Have your fashion, hairstyle, or other “gender presentation” habits or choices ever been called into question? Can you share a time when someone chastised you for not being “feminine enough,” “masculine enough,” “androgynous enough”?
- ❑ Given the texts we have encountered today, what purposes might be served by wearing clothing of the so-called opposite gender?

### **source 10: even bohan, kalonymus ben kalonymus (13th c. France) (translated by R. Steven Greenberg)**

[[...] Oh, but had the artisan who made me created me instead - a fair woman. [...] And when I was ready and the time was right an excellent young man would be my fortune. He would love me, place me on a pedestal, dress me in jewels of gold , earrings, bracelets, necklaces. And on the appointed day, in the season of joy when brides are wed, for seven days would the youth increase my delight and gladness. [...] He would not chastise nor harshly treat me, and my [sexual] pleasure he would not diminish. Every Shabbath and each new moon, his head would rest upon my breast. The three husbandly duties he would fulfill: rations, raiment, and regular intimacy. And three wifely duties would I also fulfill: [watching for menstrual] blood, [Sabbath candle] lights, and challah [...]

Father in heaven who did miracles for our ancestors with fire and water, [...] You changed the sea to dry land. In the desert you turned rock to water; hard flint, to a fountain. Who would then turn me from a man to woman? [...] What shall I say? Why cry or be bitter? If my father in heaven has decreed upon me, and has maimed me with an immutable deformity, then I do not wish to remove it. The sorrow of the impossible is a human pain that nothing will cure and for which no comfort can be found. So, I will bear and suffer until I die and wither in the ground. Since I have learned from our tradition that we bless both, the good and the bitter, I will bless in a voice hushed and weak: Blessed are you God who has not made me a woman.