

WHY  
**FEMINISM**  
IS A MODEL FOR  
**JEWISH MEN NOW**

guest editor SARAH BLUSTAIN

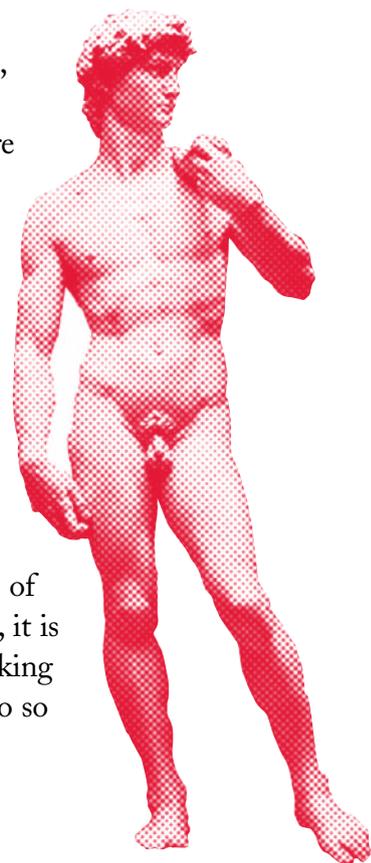
**W**hat you are about to read are the musings of four men on remarkable journeys—journeys to give back power. It’s the old kind of male power they are handing back—the kind of power that came from being inside the walls of the male-dominated synagogue, or, happily, outside the confining, distaff walls. They want to be free from Manhood in its old-fashioned form.

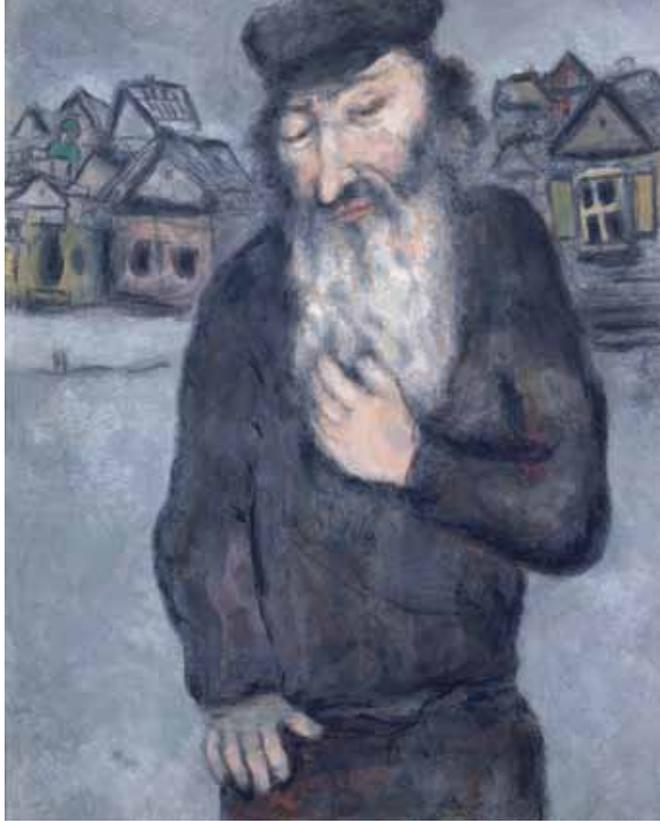
Their voices are powerful and compelling. Reading them, I wonder: Did the “free to be you and me” generation help mainly women, who were freed to live in a world of varied choices—to work or not work, to cook or not cook, to birth or not to birth—and, for Jewish women, to demand a female face on religious practice and faith? Did women’s lib, by some incredible, ironical, twist of fate, leave men confined? In their search for new ways to be men, these radical authors join others in the larger culture who are demanding change for men (and, gladly, not in reactionary ways). These authors, it turns out, are looking to Jewish tradition for models of a softer manhood; and they are looking to women, and to feminism, for models for their revolution.

I admit: In a certain slant of light I read these words with bitterness. Free, I say? *You*—lucky members of one of the world’s original patriarchies—want to be free? And you want help, you say, from Jewish *women*? Weren’t those centuries of help enough?

Still, these are questions of Passover’s wicked son, who sets himself apart from the effort at hand. And, when the light slants the other way, I know that they are the wrong questions. The future of men’s liberation is deeply entwined with women’s liberation, Jewish and not. If our empowerment—be it in the halls of Congress or the halls of yeshiva or the halls of our homes—has been incomplete, it is because *their* liberation has barely begun. It may be the ultimate feminist undertaking in the coming decades to help men free themselves—and to demand that they do so in ways that continue to free us as well.

*Sarah Blustain is a senior editor at The New Republic.*





## MISSING...

by MELANIE WEISS

**T**HERE HAS NEVER BEEN A BETTER TIME TO BE A JEWISH WOMAN IN AMERICA. But to be a Jewish *man* in America today, you can expect not much more than the same old, same old.

So what, you wonder? After all, the same old was pretty good for Jewish men for millennia. But today membership in the boys' club has fewer privileges, and, partly as a result, Jewish men are dropping out. Across America, in all denominations of non-Orthodox Judaism, men and boys seem to be disappearing from religious life. Reports of their shortage come from all corners: youth and adult educators, seminary professors, clergy and synagogue attendees. Women outnumber men at Hillel gatherings on campus, in applicants for rabbinical school, and at Jewish summer camp. "Jewish boys and men have fewer connections to Jews and Judaism than girls and women in almost every venue and in every age, from school-age children through the adult years," comments Sylvia Barack Fishman, professor of contemporary Jewish life at Brandeis University, who has been studying the trend.

Larger surveys over the last decade confirm that this is true. The study "Being

a Jewish Teenager in America," published in 2000 by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, at Brandeis University, showed that, following bar mitzvah, Jewish boys drop out of formal Jewish education at a far faster rate than do girls. The 2001 National Jewish Population Survey showed that not only are Jewish men more likely than women to intermarry, but that that trend is tied to a weaker sense of Jewishness. And by 2005, the rabbinical school of the Reform movement's primary seminary, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, was reporting a two-to-one ratio of women to men in their incoming class; among Reform educators, nearly 90% are female.

Most recently, last year Barack Fishman published "Matrilineal Ascent/Patrilineal Descent: Gender Imbalance in American Jewish Life," in which she contended that Jewish men and boys are fast fading out of organized Jewish social and religious life. Girls outnumber boys in Reform movement youth activities, sometimes constituting 78 percent of all attendees, while in Reform families with two born-Jewish parents, mothers are twice a likely to go to weekly services as fathers. According to the report's inter-

view data, women in general, Jewish and non-Jewish, are more likely to identify as "religious" than men are.

"The majority of American Jews espouse equality as an important value, but Jewish life today is not gender equal," Barack Fishman explains in the monograph. "When it comes to gender equality or gender balance, contemporary American Jewish life is caught between a rock and a hard place"—between a patriarchal Orthodoxy and a liberal Judaism that is "visibly and substantially feminized."

For feminists who have fought for a place at the table, the development of an organization called "Men of Reform Judaism"—the new incarnation of the 80-year-old National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods—or the Conservative movement's "Beer and Bible" groups for men would be almost a parody: first came the Sisterhoods, then the feminist seders because, it was understood, the rest of Judaism was basically arranged for the benefit of men. But increasingly Jewish leaders are realizing that they just may need something resembling a Jewish feminism—for men.

Still, not all feminists are so comfortable with the attention on boys and men. Lori Lefkowitz, professor of Gender and Judaism at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and founding director of Kolot, the Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies, believes that much of the current discussion of boys and men may be "pushback" against women's gains. "Women's enfranchisement within Judaism has not yet been normalized," she explains, and although some people may be discomforted by an increased women's presence, she cautions against creating a "gender competition. When we envision the system as a competition rather than cooperation, we do a disservice to the entire Jewish enterprise," she says. "We're not in this as men and women. We are in this together as a mutually-dependent collectivity."

Barack Fishman acknowledged that people have avoided discussing the problem "because they are afraid that the topic itself can be used as a weapon against women." But she hopes that the problem of male disengagement from Judaism will be seen as a "problem for the entire Jewish people, just like the problem of women's exclusion was." ■



Mincha (from the *Amidah* triptych) (2004), performance for photo, ©Tobaron Waxman

## GENDER AFTER FEMINISM

by RABBI STEVE GREENBERG

**AM A GAY ORTHODOX FEMINIST AND, PERHAPS FOR THIS VERY REASON, I AM CONFUSED BY GENDER.**

Despite the role delineations of the Orthodox world, I have ingested enough popular feminism to be able to distinguish between sex and gender. I get it that, formally speaking, “sex” refers to biology and “gender” to the characteristics that a culture delineates as masculine or feminine. What I don’t get is how I continue to use the words “masculine” or “feminine” as if they mean something real.

Most of my feminist education began when I started doing the research for a book I wrote about Judaism and homosexuality. I began to understand not only that gender is socially constructed, but that

the masculine/feminine divide was more like a continuum. In the process of writing I came to see gender prior to feminism as a compulsory and unforgiving social order that marked women beneath men in terms of power and value, and that marked gay people as direct threats to the system. The notion that men and women as groups are or should be something, and that, by definition, whatever one group is the other isn’t, has proven to be both false and destructive.

And yet, (this is the confusing part) I admit that I succumb to the feeling, be it based on science, ideology or bad faith, that men and women are wired differently, that we are not only different sexually, but that there are differences in the way we think, behave, feel and relate. And because there are differences, there are unique

accomplishments, experiences and sensibilities in single-sex communities that cannot be achieved in mixed environments.

Which leads me to the paradox of my *shul* life.

I live in New York City and attend a number of different Orthodox synagogues, from the hip to the hasidic. Two in particular are my regular haunts, and they are polar opposites regarding women. One makes a point of women’s presence and participation; in the other, women are literally invisible. I love them both.

Darkhei Noam is the New York version of Shira Hadasha, the first “partnership *minyan*,” created in Jerusalem by Tova Hartman and Elie Holzer. It offers an enlivened *davening* experience and the fuller participation of women with-

in an Orthodox framework. The prayer space is divided by a *mehitza*, a sheer white curtain that separates the men and women. The small *shtender* (the lectern from which prayer is led), is moved from one side of the veil to the other while the *bima* is situated on the boundary, at perfect center, breaking the curtain for a short space. From these movable and liminal spaces, men lead *maariv*, *shaharit* and *musaf* (the three traditional daily prayer services), women lead *kabbalat Shabbat* (the Friday evening service) and *pesukei de-zimra* (opening morning psalms), and both run a fully egalitarian Torah service.

My first experience of this sort of prayer experience was in 1996. I had just arrived in Israel for a two-year fellowship and, in a fog of jet lag, listened for the first time as a female voice led *Lecha Dodi* from the other side of the *mehitza*. I was blown away. It was as if the *shekhinah* had suddenly shown up at the prayer service that mystically is all about her. At that moment, the Zohar's notions of exile and reunion within the godhead were no longer ideas. The experience was transformative. The feminine face of God had returned to take us with her in her weekly Sabbath re-union with the Holy One. I was in tearful ecstasy.

To be honest, over time the intensity of this Jerusalem experience has worn off. Still, there is a quality of spiritual expansion that permeates the davening. At Darkhei Noam women always lead those services that (halakhically speaking) they are permitted to lead. This means that women regularly run the service that opens the ark, uncover the Torah and return it to the ark. This may seem like a minor affair, but this shift in ritual practice, the physical movement of the scrolls in the arms of women, affects the very meaning of Torah, its revelation and reception. As women's voices are added to the male voices during the reading, scripture blossoms into something fresh and new. This more whole ritual frame fits my longing for a community that erases no one; my partner and I are beneficiaries of the minyan because it is one of the few places where we feel totally part of a living shul community.

However, on plenty of *Shabbos* mornings, instead of heading off to Darkhei Noam, I roll out of bed and end up at the Vorhand *shtiebel*. Vorhand is not egalitarian in any way. It is a virtual men's club.

Women, when they come, are in a room connected to the main *shul* by a tiny curtained window; few show up on regular Shabbat mornings. Vorhand is very small prayer space with tables and bookshelves and a wooden ark. The feel is much more like a *beis midrash* (a yeshiva study hall) than a synagogue. The aesthetic, if one could call it that, is like the one-room schoolhouse from which the Yiddish word "shul" is derived. No attention is paid to beauty or style or even color. Nothing adorns the walls but shelves of sacred tomes. For any-

*The absence of wives in this shtiebel setting makes the differences between married and single men, or between gay or straight men, much less apparent.*

one in Orthodox culture, such a place reads as male because only men have the duty to learn Torah day and night.

At Vorhand, I have my *makom kavuab*, my seat that, if I come on time, is always there for me. I open my *siddur* and find myself in another world of intentional prayer. It is a place where I can wander in and out of psalms, rock to my own rhythm, sing out when I feel it, dwell on a word when it stops me. It offers a very sweet private encounter with the Divine, and yet it is a very intense communal engagement too. Men of different ages, in very different religious modes, rub shoulders, shmooze, make jokes, share interpretive glosses of the Torah reading, and hang out over the davening experience. It is also a very sparse service. It starts at 9:50 A.M. and is usually over before noon, roughly two hours, plus or minus. There is a macho feel to this clip that might seem to work against feeling. Sometimes it does, but most often it creates instead a sense of sleek religious competence.

A huge part of the experience at Vorhand is the kiddush. Cake and *schnapps* arrive on the tables (delivered by a group of designated men) moments before the end of the service, followed by kiddush and a *geshmak* potato kugel and a cholent. Typically there is some jockeying between the bourbon and the Scotch lovers—to the disdain of a hardened few hasidim who cannot imagine anything better than vodka.

Vorhand and other minyanim like it are a mix between a sports team and a

priestly brotherhood. The prayer space has qualities of a locker room, a ball field and the Temple court in Jerusalem. Skills in execution are rarely taught formally; one learns by listening and watching those who know what to do. It is a brotherhood that mentors the young and that honors commitment, grit and competence. The culture of this sort of *shtiebel* mentality grows out of a sense of personal duty that is a sort of *noblesse oblige*: Men pay the price of showing up unfailingly to serve God for the benefit of the whole commu-

nity; by doing so, they lay claim to their various male privileges. A number of the hasidim use the mikvah in the basement (a locker room of sorts) not after but before the game, coming into the prayer space with wet hair like ancient priests ready for the daily sacrifice. In the mix of elements, the Vorhand shul is its own, quite athletic male-centered spiritual world.

As a gay man I am only a bit askew in this guy's haven. From my early days at yeshiva I discovered a community of men who in my secular upbringing did not exist. In this environment, the competition is intellectual and the desired female is the holy Torah. The common absence of wives in this *shtiebel* setting (I've only once met the rabbi's wife) makes the differences between married and single men, or between gay and straight men, much less apparent. I am not quite "out" in Vorhand. (My partner doesn't find the service satisfying so he doesn't come along.) Some members of the congregation are aware, but most are completely oblivious. In my conversations with the regulars around my table it has come up obliquely without any obvious shock or horror. However, I heard through the grapevine that a key member of the shul challenged the rabbi about my presence and he stilled the complaint with "if we demanded *tzidkus* [perfect righteousness] here, then who would make the *minyan*?"

When I daven at Vorhand I often do feel like I have left my principles at the door. If



Vorhand would admit that the shul does not represent the whole community in prayer but just the men, it would make a huge difference. Were that the case, a separate woman's *shtiebel* might be conceivable. Then the women I discourage from joining me at the Vorhand *shul* would have their own rich, gendered prayer world to belong to.

Is it possible that there could be a female Vorhand? There are now many Orthodox women, trained in day schools, who are unbearably frustrated with audience status and are fully competent to take on the challenges of elite duty. But many of the original Orthodox women's prayer groups that began some 20 years ago could not sustain themselves. Could it be that this particular form of community is tied to the needs of men? Perhaps I am deluding myself, blithely enjoying the fruits grown in what can only be described as patriarchal soil and innocently attempting to claim to be a feminist nonetheless.

So here are my two prayer worlds in all their incongruence. When it comes to gender after feminism, I am ambivalent. I want it both ways, equality and difference.

I admit that I may well be stuck in the transition between two social worlds as a casualty of my biography. My friends

## *I am ambivalent. I want it both ways, equality and difference.*

who have created Hadar, a fully egalitarian alternative prayer service in New York City, gently chide me in just this way. For them, being egalitarian is like being pregnant: there are no half measures.

**P**erhaps they are right, and yet I have a nagging sense that my ambivalence is much more troublesome than either neurosis or simple bad faith. Studies keep discovering that sexual difference is not only in the morphology of our genitalia, but everywhere in our bodies and most profoundly in our brains. Nature has not made us equal in capacities, and consequently justice can often seem to be at odds with the body.

Of course, even if some of the putative differences between men and women are

grounded in biology, it still does not follow that we ought to organize society around such distinctions: Doing so limits even the most normative males and females and brutally oppresses the outliers. But while our obedience to the gender code is much more costly to us and our children than we ordinarily admit, I come back to the sense that the world would be decidedly less nuanced, less beautiful, less gloriously passionate and also less painful without gender. Esther Perel, author of *Mating in Captivity*, suggests that our belief in "democracy, equality, consensus-building, compromise, fairness, mutual tolerance result[s] in very boring sex." If she is right, if sexual excitement is politically incorrect, if it thrives on power plays and unfair advantage, then despite the fact that egalitarianism is one of the greatest advances of modern society, maybe we ought to reign in our moral compunctions a bit and live with the irony of it all.

So what is masculinity after feminism? Could the Vorhand minyan survive under the clear skies of full-fledged gender equality? Probably not. And this small question about a small shul gets, in a way, to a much more central question: Is a tribal life of men—and for that matter, of women—worth sustaining, even after we

have also found out how sweet wholeness is? Despite the moral dangers, I believe gender difference

can demand a place in the life of the spirit and even play a role of some significance in the shaping of a sacred community.

A few weeks before I arrived in Jerusalem and had that 1996 epiphany, I saw the off-Broadway production of "The Vagina Monologues," Eve Ensler's one-woman performance of monologues by women about their vaginas. Toward the middle of this sexy, painful, moving and funny work, Ensler describes a 50-year-old woman who had never in her life seen her own vagina. I was frozen in my seat. Numerous times a day a man fiddles with his penis, takes it out to pee, and sees it in its various states. Ensler described this woman, sitting naked in a bath tub with a mirror, looking for the first time. I began to weep. It was a touching and stark picture of a long-delayed experience of female self-

discovery, but in my mind it was a sign of a much larger movement in the world.

The male face of God has become a pedestrian encounter. It is the way we all have been taught to think and speak about God. Many times a day we invoke the King. The female face of God is much harder to get at. We are blessed to be living at a moment when finally, the *Shehinah* is coming out of hiding. She still cannot be seen directly, but only with mirrors. And if you want to see her well, you might just have to get naked.

In zoharic tradition the higher you rise in the emanations, the more integrated the opposites are; the lower, the more there is conflict and tension between poles. So, perhaps I should make this admission: My retreat into the *shtiebel* and its male-centered world must ultimately be the lower choice, while the integrated community, where men and women and their different spiritual competences are fully present, must be the higher. This seems right to me. And nonetheless, what makes the whole feel electrically charged and orchestrated rather than homogenized is the mehitza running down the center of the shul. That is what the mehitza means: Men and women are different.

This way of seeing the feminist revolution is then less about equality and not at all about leveling the genders to achieve equality. It is about welcoming the long awaited Feminine Face of God to the spiritual stage to join the King. Women's voices and power must be raised, not to end gender but to restore balance. Such a feminist revolution might be able to nourish two gendered communities, support men in their various *shtieblach*, spearhead the recovery or invention of female communities, and celebrate the joining together of everyone into a single community of worship that is by definition, greater than the sum of its parts. ■

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# BOTTOMING FOR GOD

by JAY MICHAELSON

**A**ND YOU KNEW WHO YOU WERE THEN/GIRLS WERE GIRLS AND MEN WERE MEN." So sang Archie Bunker—and for all we're taught in Hebrew school, "then" might as well mean in biblical times as in 1950s America.

But Archie's ideal does not reflect biblical reality. Deborah, Yael, Miriam, and Sarah are hardly demure "girls." And,

doubtless reflecting Israel's self-perception as a weak nation surrounded by stronger ones, biblical texts frequently favor younger, wimpier, "effeminate" men over older, more traditionally "masculine" ones—Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, and so on. Indeed, in biblical text, "manly men" are fundamentally incomplete: To fulfill one's Divine mission as a male hero, one must become, in a sense, female—or more specifically, to use a

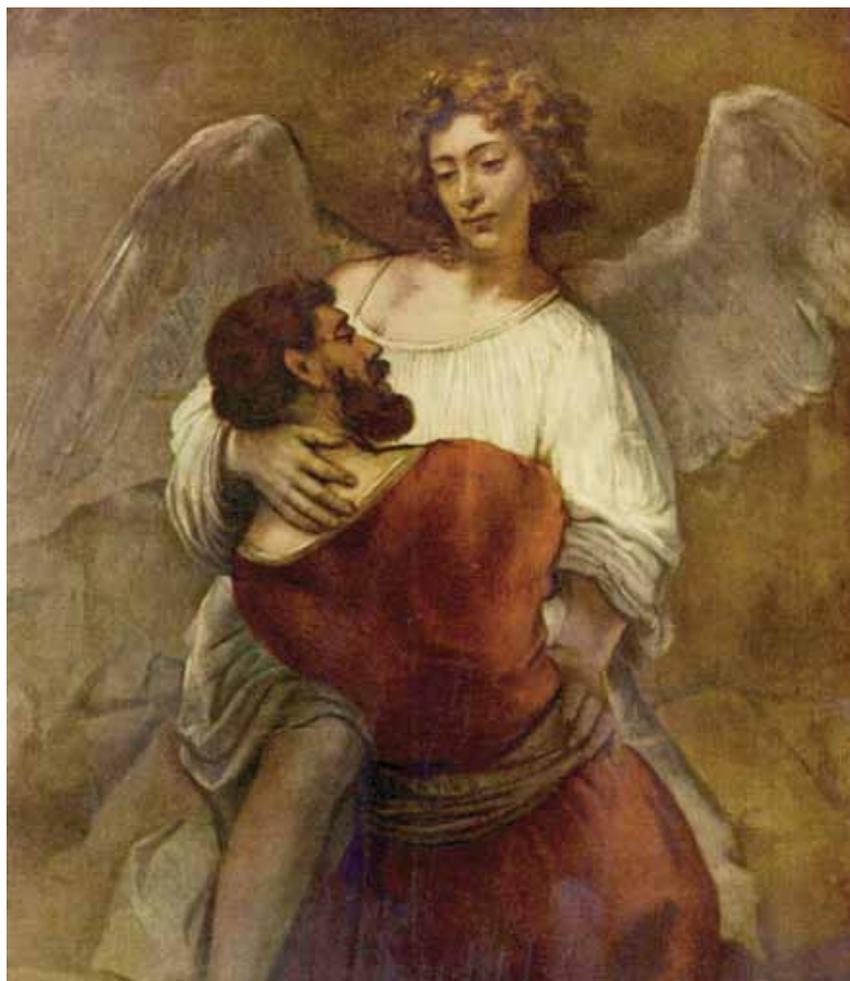
somewhat explicit term from queer theory and experience, by learning to bottom for God. Here, I will explore two examples, the person who gives Israel its name, and the one who is its most famous king: Jacob and David.

The patriarch Jacob begins his life as the quintessential femme. He stays home and cooks, he's his momma's favorite, he's smooth, he's a twink. Esau is a hunter, hairy and manly. He is direct where Jacob is cunning, strong where Jacob is crafty. And yet, as we all know, Jacob, not Esau, is destined to father the 12 tribes; the femme-boy becomes the ultimate daddy.

Obviously, to do so Jacob must be transformed—an event that takes place the night he wrestles with the "man" late at night ("angel" is a later emendation). In many readings of Genesis 32, this is when Jacob "becomes a man." Like Henry V or Luke Skywalker, the boyish hero becomes everything he wasn't before: strong, violent, a man, manly.

Lurianic Kabbalah, however, reads Jacob's coming of age very differently: not as a rejection of his role as a "womanly" man, but an acceptance of it. (I am grateful to Rabbi Ohad Ezrachi for introducing these texts to me.) Following the Zohar, it understands Jacob's relationship with his two wives, Leah and Rachel, as a *tikkun*, a cosmic repair or completion, of Adam's relationship with his two wives, Lilith and Eve.

Both Jacob and Adam initially reject their hyper-sexualized and strong first wives: Jacob at first desires the "girly girl" Rachel, rather than the sexually assertive



Rembrandt van Rijn, Jacob Wrestling with the Angel



Leah, just as Adam desired Eve the Bottom, not Lilith the Top.

Until that night of wrestling. There are many readings of what went on that night. In some, Jacob's wound

rior love convention. Saul knows this too, castigating Jonathan for choosing "the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness?" (1 Sam 20:31) and teasing David for having

## *What the Bible—and the Jewish people—need is a femme man, like Jacob and David both.*

is understood to be on the sexual organ, "leg" being merely a euphemism for the genitals (as in *mei raglayim*, "leg water," i.e., urine). In others, the wound to his sciatic nerve is understood as the result of a sexual assault on the buttocks. But whatever went on, Jacob is indeed transformed by a sexualized encounter with a mysterious "man." His new name, Yisra-El, means not only "Wrestles with God" but "God is victorious." God wins, I submit. God is on top, I am on the bottom. And after this episode, everything shifts. Rachel drops out of the story (she dies shortly thereafter), we hear no more about Leah being undesired, and Jacob is able to embrace, literally, his butch brother Esau.

In short, a femme man is exactly who Jacob is supposed to be in order to repair what Adam had broken, and engender the people Israel. He need no longer fear the sexually assertive Leah; he can bottom for her, and fulfill his destiny as progenitor of Israel. He can be the agent of God's action in the world because he has learned to bottom.

**T**he story of David develops this theme more fully. David, like Jacob, is a femme: a beautiful youth who plays the harp and carries Jonathan's armor. As brilliantly analyzed in Theodore Jennings' *Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel*, David's brief but passionate love affair with Jonathan prepares him for his destiny as God's lover. In both cases, David's role is that of the "armor-bearer"—universally understood in Mediterranean and Near Eastern literature as the younger, more beautiful, *eromenos*, or bottom—first to Jonathan's *erastes*, and second to YHVH's.

That David and Jonathan's relationship was, in part, sexual is beyond serious doubt; that is part and parcel of the war-

married two of his children, i.e. Michal and Jonathan. (1 Sam 18:21) And of course the young men cry, embrace, and kiss (1 Sam 20:41), and David famously laments that Jonathan's "love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." (2 Sam 1:26).

Yet the story is ultimately about neither lust nor court intrigue. Ultimately, it is David's destiny to be God's *eromenos* even as he is Israel's *erastes*, and he must train for both roles. David stands between two lovers, God above and Israel beneath. (Invoking theosophical Kabbalah, David is *malchut*, the receptive-feminine-bottom for all of the Godhead, who in turn transmits the Divine influx below.) As king of Israel, David must play such a dual role in order to at once rule (over Israel) and be ruled (by God). And in order to do that, he must learn how to "carry the armor" of another man.

Jacob and David are surely the Bible's two greatest heroes: one the father of a nation, the other the outstanding king of it. Yet in stark contrast to what we today might expect of our male heroic figures, both become heroes when they learn, in sexual or sexualized encounters with other men, how to fulfill their destiny as bottoms. This is not to say that David and Jacob were "gay," a contemporary term that has no echo in biblical text. Rather, our Jewish heroes are, to use a loathsome but apt phrase, "pussy-boys," because only in this gender-fluid space can they be at once the tops of a nation and the ultimate bottoms for God. ■

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## BOYS? WHY

*Moving Traditions launched with programs for Jewish girls—for Rosh Hodesh groups and Bat Mitzvah celebrations. The organization's newest program is called "Campaign for Jewish Boys." Lilith editor in chief Susan Weidman Schneider asked MT's founder and chair, Sally Gottesman, "Why?"*

**SG:** We know that boys and young men participate in Jewish activities less than girls do. One Hillel director told us that 80% of people participating in his campus's non-Orthodox programs are women.

**SWS:** Of course, there wasn't the same worry about participation when the numbers were overwhelmingly male! But what do you think is the reason now for this skewing?

**SG:** Men are dropping out, but not because women have come in—that's a canard! Women enter a field when the men are leaving. Take the rabbinate. Is it that women start to play in the game and then men leave? No. Men used to become rabbis because anti-Semitism kept them out of politics and CEO jobs. As that changed, being a rabbi wasn't as appealing. I think first a field becomes devalued and then women can come in. Judaism had already become devalued.

It becomes cyclical: fewer men participate, so it becomes less popular for other men, and then the next generation of boys has fewer role models of men participating.

**SWS:** What will help boys and men see Judaism as valuable? Your

# BOYS?

research has found that Judaism provides some boys with resilience, and with an “alternative” masculinity.

**SG:** We need to provide space for boys to meet separately from girls, the way we make it available to girls and women to explore what Judaism has to offer. We want to find activities that draw on Judaism and give boys the opportunity to explore issues they care about—friendship, sex, power, money, work. ...

One of our ideas for Moving Traditions was to do something with fathers and sons. We found that, for fathers who were not comfortable with their own Jewish identity, even though they wanted to spend time with their sons they did *not* want to do it in a Jewish context. A place where you're not comfortable is the last place you want to spend time with your son.

**SWS:** I'd bet that some of these dads fear they'll be less adept at Jewish activities than they are at work, or at play. There's an unfamiliar language, strange rhythms. Why put yourself at the bottom of the class? It's easier, it seems to me, for women to admit to ignorance. You can blame it on sexism or the lack of opportunity. The *system* is at fault. What's more, there's so much offered for women—adult bat mitzvah classes, challah-baking demonstrations, lectures on Bible women, the works—so remediation is readily available. Will Moving Traditions offer some of this to men and boys? For women there's the excitement of making discoveries, inventing new rituals. What can you imagine will elicit this kind of enthusiasm for men?

**SG:** A couple of examples: Right now, Brit Milah [*bris*] has changed because of Simchat Bat, the naming ceremony for a newborn daughter. Families are doing a bit more, not just having the mohel come in. Introducing the foremothers—Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca and Leah—into the liturgy has suddenly got men thinking about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in *relation* to these women—not just as isolated male figures.

**SWS:** The classic question used to be “What do women want?” Is there some danger—now that the focus is on what men and boys want—that progress on women's issues will be halted?

**SG:** I think that feminism is about helping women *and* men become full human beings, and we are inching slowly towards this. ■

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Video still from "Dancing with Men," by Oreet Ashery, courtesy of the artist

## DAVID THE FATHER

by RABBI JEREMY KALMANOVSKY

**T**HE BIBLE'S MOST VIVID CHARACTER IS KING DAVID, WHOM IT IS EASY TO SEE AS THE PARADIGM OF MASCULINITY. We think of him as a ferocious fighter, a sweet musician, a loyal friend—and mighty popular with the ladies.

King David is also an extravagantly emotional father—belying the contemporary cliché that fathers are tough, unforgiving disciplinarians, while mothers are gentle, clement protectors. (Indeed, parental roles in the Bible can be seen as remarkably flexible, less defined than you

might expect. Both parents are to be honored, as in the Ten Commandments, and revered.) No one loves his children more than King David, and only God is so boundlessly forgiving. The Bible's favorite hero embodies masculinity partly because of his great capacity for parental love.

Just think of the Absalom story (2 Samuel, chapters 13–20) to understand:

David's son Amnon had raped his half-sister Tamar. Either ignorant of the rape or overly clement, David fails to punish Amnon. Instead, Tamar's full brother Absalom, who is furious, kills Amnon and flees to another king for protection.

David mourns for Amnon, but even more he is heartsick at Absalom's absence, and ultimately (borrowing a Christian image) brings this prodigal son home. Even when the child is a murderer, David embraces his son with love.

But even that is not the limit of David's love. Absalom, returned home, has too much charisma and ambition for his own good, and before long he has fomented a rebellion against his father. The once-great king now is driven into the desert, weeping and barefoot, his enemies pelting him with rocks and calling him names. David fights back, of course, but

instructs his generals to “treat this young boy Absalom gently... for me.” When the battle rages, David seeks reports: “Is my boy Absalom safe?”

Young boy? Treat him gently? Is he safe? Absalom has driven David from the throne and is trying to kill him; he has drafted David’s top adviser, Ahitofel, to the rebel side, not to mention that he has already slept with David’s concubines. Why should David cut him any slack? Warlords don’t cut slack!

In the end, Absalom dies dramatically: His hair is caught in a tree branch, and he hangs there “between heaven and earth,” until he is stabbed and beaten to death by David’s troops. When the king hears this awful news, he is disconsolate, moaning along his heart-breaking speech: “My son, my son, Absalom. If only I died instead of you... Absalom, Absalom, my son, my son!”

David’s generals, who have just risked their own lives to defend him, are astonished: “You are humiliating us!” they say. “You would have been happier if your own side lost, and we were all killed! You love your enemies and you hate your friends!”

King David’s reply is absent from the text. I imagine he said nothing. Perhaps he thought: “You are my friends, but you cannot be my children.” For the sake of the kingdom, he congratulated his soldiers, but I imagine his heart was not in it. At this moment, he did not care much for being David HaMelekh. He wanted his boy. ■

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## EXILE FROM GUYVILLE: A REFLECTION

by PAUL ZAKRZEWSKI

**S**OMETIME IN THE MIDDLE OF HIGH SCHOOL I WAS CONFRONTED WITH RATHER IRREFUTABLE EVIDENCE THAT I WASN’T MUCH OF A MAN.

Given this was the early 1980s—an era best remembered (and not without irony) for its androgynous male rock stars—you’d think that some gender latitude might have been in order. But latitude is typically not the case in the suburbs; especially not so in wealthy, overwhelmingly white ones like the southern Ontario town where I grew

up. I recall as far back as sixth grade, when one new boy managed to win over our class by mounting the monkey bars outside and, ropey muscles bulging, completed several chin-ups in quick succession. Then there was me: the chubby 12-year old who hated gym and anx-

ious bucket of popcorn and extracted a handful. It was an impulsive move, even an aggressive one, or maybe it suggested to Syd a level of intimacy we hadn’t achieved. The normally mild-mannered Syd frowned and threw me a hard look.

“If you weren’t such a wimp, I’d punch you in the face right now,” he said. I stared at him with what must’ve been a stupid expression, but it was less the threat and more the truth of what he’d said that stung. A wave of dismay gripped my bowels. Syd was right. I was a wimp.

It’s not like this had escaped my notice,

*I felt singled out for special torment by the mean girls of seventh grade, the ones who wedged their tiny hips into Jordache jeans.*

up. For reasons I’ve never understood, the wealthier and better educated the suburb, the less appetite there is for difference.

On this particular evening, my friend Syd (not his real name) and I had gone to the movies. Sitting in the theater, I had, without asking, reached into his enor-

ously large, overflowing bucket of popcorn and extracted a handful. It was an impulsive move, even an aggressive one, or maybe it suggested to Syd a level of intimacy we hadn’t achieved. The normally mild-mannered Syd frowned and threw me a hard look.

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iously counted the days to the dreaded “10 Minute Walk/Run,” a government-mandated health test administered each spring and fall during middle school. I felt singled out for special torment by the mean girls of seventh grade, the ones who wedged their tiny hips into Jordache jeans and whose Farrah Fawcett curls flipped across the their foreheads as they mocked my oily hair and bargain-basement velour tops. Deep down I wondered if I was unlovable, and my cherubic features—the ones that Syd, among others, loved to point out—seemed the nexus of my failure to be hard and lean.

As my mother saw it, being pudgy was compounded by the sin of over-sensitivity, and she did her best to cure me of both. Around the time of my bar mitzvah she put me on a variety of diets, each one of

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which focused my attention ever increasingly on the very body I longed to ignore. Even to this day, she likes to tell my wife that I was a fearful boy who never did like climbing trees. “I just felt like I had to push you a bit,” is my mother’s response whenever we talk about my teenage years.

Beginning around adolescence, I began to form a secret life that included a fascination with archeology and detective stories and vampires. At the end of the particularly awkward years of early adolescence, as I entered high school, I discovered a talent for analyzing movies and books. These interests put me in touch with a culture and history beyond the narrow confines of my hometown. At the same time, my friendships with one or two boys—unconventional, smart, sensitive, rebellious boys—filled me with a sense that I wasn’t entirely alone. By the end of high school I was itching to leave my home and hometown, certain the wider world had more understanding for the kind of man I was becoming.

**N**ot surprisingly, my temperament and inclinations provoked a number of bullies along the way. From ages three to nine I lived in Mexico City, and it was there, in an abandoned lot across the street from my house, that an older boy once tried to push my face into a pile of dog shit. Trouble followed me to the British private school I attended, in the form of the only overtly anti-Semitic incidents of my life: name-calling (“Christ killer!”), shoving matches, and so on. And though Canada was very different in this respect, I still encountered bullying there too.

My father eventually learned about some, though not all, of these incidents. His face would turn very grave at moments like these,

as if he’d encountered a particularly knotty passage of philosophy. He’d explain the psychological makeup of bullies, their self-hatred and so on, as if by understanding the problem I might make it go away. Once, early on, he told me to punch back “if you have to.” Not surprisingly, I didn’t find his advice about bullies of much help.

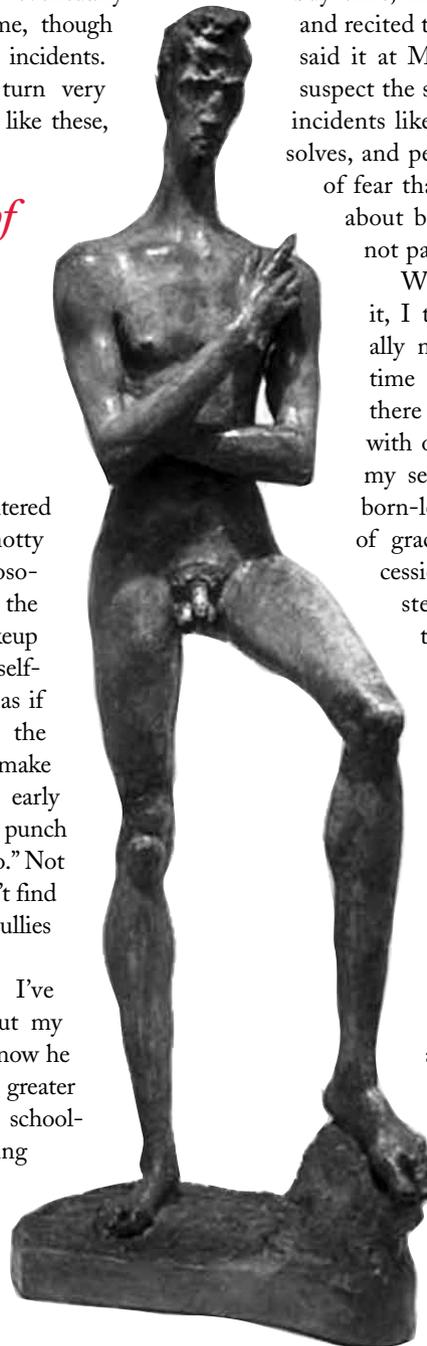
Now that I’ve learned more about my dad’s early life, I know he had navigated far greater dangers than the schoolyard bully. During World War II, my father had been saved by his nanny, a

righteous Catholic Pole named Genia, who gave him a false identity as her out-of-wedlock son. My father spent part of his time in a ghetto workshop, along with the other underage children of Jewish workers, and was occasionally forced to hide in the rafters, among bolts of cloths, whenever a Nazi inspection or *aktion* loomed.

In a number of instances my father was called upon to fake his Catholic identity—something he did with shrewdness that belied his age. The most memorable of these featured a pair of Polish blackmailers entering Genia’s apartment and demanding to inspect my father. As she pleaded and cajoled the men in order to buy time, my father got on his knee and recited the Lord’s Prayer as if he’d said it at Mass the Sunday before. I suspect the sort of fear you’d feel after incidents like these never entirely dissolves, and perhaps it was the memory of fear that kept my father’s advice about bullies vague, abstract and not particularly helpful.

Without entirely realizing it, I turned to more traditionally masculine mentors by the time I got to college. It was there I became close friends with one guy, six or seven years my senior, who had a natural-born-leader’s charisma and sense of grace; he slept with a succession of women, despite a steady girlfriend—something that struck me not only as dishonest but desperate, when I got to see the repercussions up close. Another older college buddy rode a Harley, snorted cocaine, and wasn’t above the occasional violent confrontation to settle scores; among our mutual friends, he was sometimes—and not always jokingly—called the “Marlboro Man.”

Sometimes I’d catch myself studying these guys, like a stranger in a new land, hoping to pick up the local customs



to better blend in. What I didn't expect was that the observation went both ways. "I find it easy to talk to you," Marlboro Man once said to me as we drove up to his father's cabin in upstate New York. With me he could talk about his interest in abstract painting or his mixed feelings about his absent, hard-charging father. At moments like these I learned to enjoy my particular brand of masculinity, one that encouraged other men to lower their guard around me and be themselves. It was a masculinity of a different sort, and yet I felt, as I still sometimes do, like an outsider in the world of men.

**O**ne thing I have learned, however, is that I'm far from being the only man who feels as I do. Nearly two decades ago, Robert Bly's book *Iron John* brought to national consciousness a small network of retreats and self-help workshops. It was easy to skewer the Mythopoetic Men's Movement's hokier, New Age trappings: Images of well-fed weekend warrior types running semi-nude through forests played especially well in places like *Time* magazine. But when I encountered Bly's book I discovered that his arguments resonated with my own experience. Men need the approval and respect of other men—especially older men—whose presence at rites of initiation can help repair old wounds.

What Bly left out—and what rightly troubled some critics, including feminists like Betty Friedan—were the political implications of male consciousness-raising. Bly didn't see that the explorations he encouraged were intimately connected to changes brought on by the feminist movement, and was a reaction to women's liberation in all its senses.

Twenty years down the line, men of my generation are wrestling with even greater shifts in gender roles than ever before. Even as the tradition of male as sole breadwinner dwindles into memory, American men have assumed a greater variety of roles than perhaps at any other time. Today we are metrosexuals, smoothies, mannies (i.e. male nannies), SAHD (stay-at-home dads), and more. Some of these words signal simply the resurgence of age-old tropes—what is the metrosexual if not today's dandy?—while others,

like SAHDs or the "gay vague" style of men's fashion, suggest a wholesale reinvention of traditional gender roles.

I don't know when and if men will come together to really talk through the enormous changes in masculine roles cur-

## *What are the political implications of male consciousness-raising?*

rently underway. Most striking to me, as a relatively new father, is gender "convergence," as new parents seek to more equitably split childcare and household chores. In the 1970s, sociologists found the average fathers spent a third as much time with children as mothers did; by 2000, the number had shot up to three-quarters. The men I know are still very much making it up as they go along, and this creates a whole new set of tensions that we're just beginning to explore. We're in the middle of a quiet revolution for men. ■

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Moving Traditions, [MovingTraditions.org](http://MovingTraditions.org)

Men of Reform Judaism, [nftb.org](http://nftb.org)

Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs (of the Conservative Movement), [fjmc.org](http://fjmc.org)

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