

We are back at the beginning of our Torah, ready to read it with the insight we have gained from the experiences of the past year. It was another “exceptional” year, and the turbulence shows no sign of abating. Amid the health and political crises plaguing our world, the multifaceted topic of gender is gaining momentum. So let’s look at Adam and Eve from this perspective. As we know, there are two accounts of their creation: 1:27 and 2:5-25. Of course our sages had much to say about these stories, fleshing them out with great abandon. Rashi wonders about the apparent contradiction between these two versions, citing Babylonian Talmud Tractate Eruvin 18a, which offers an imaginative diversion based on a discussion of the prefix *deyo* (two) in a completely different context. “Rabbi Yirmeya ben Elazar also said: Adam was created with two (*deyo*) faces, one male and the other female. As it is stated: You have formed me (*tzartani*) from behind and before and laid your hand on me (Psalm 139:5). Similarly, it is written: And from the *tzela* (side, rib, edge) which the Lord God had taken from the man, He made a woman and brought her to the man. (Genesis 2:22). Rav and Shmuel disagree over the meaning of the word *tzela*. One said: It means a female face, from which God created Eve; and one said: Adam was created with a tail (*zanav*), which God removed from him and from which He created Eve. (The word *zanav* is used in the Talmud to mean an appendage that is unlike the object to which it is attached, or is a limb of secondary importance.) ... “ Now they discuss the Psalm verse. “The Gemara answers that this verse is to be understood as bearing a moral message in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Ami, as Rabbi Ami said: Behind means Adam was created at the end of the act of creation, and before means that he was first for punishment.” After more discussion involving some delightful wordplay, they begin to define characteristics and roles: “Rabbi Shimon ben Menasya interpreted homiletically the verse: And the Lord God built the *tzela* (Genesis 2:22). This verse teaches that the Holy One of Blessing braided for Eve her hair, and then brought her to Adam, as in the coastal towns, they call braiding hair building. ... this can be understood as a description of Eve’s basic shape ... He built Eve like the structure of a storehouse. Just as a storehouse is built wide on the bottom and narrow on top, in order to hold produce without collapsing, so too a woman is created wide on the bottom and narrow on top, in order to hold the fetus.” And then, alas, they arrive at the conclusion that has relegated women to second place. “And according to the one who says that Eve was a face or the side of Adam, which one of them walked in front? Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak said: It is reasonable to say that the male walked in front, as this is proper behavior ... A man should not walk behind a woman on a path, even if she is his wife. If she happens upon him on a bridge, he should walk quickly in order to catch up to her and move her to his side, so that she will not walk before him. And anyone who walks behind a woman in a river, where she has to lift up her skirt in order to cross, has no share in the World-to-Come.” They justify this with more citations, and here we are, thousands of years later, still fighting for equality! Midrash Bereshit Rabbah (written between 300 and 500 CE) offers its own ideas. “... Said Rabbi Yirmiyah ben Elazar: In the hour when the Holy One created the first human, He created him [as] an *androgynous/androgynos*, as it is said: male and female He created them. ... Said Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani: In the hour when the Holy One created the first human, He created for him a double face, and sawed him and made him back, a back here and a back there (citing Psalm 139:5) ...” (8:1) In other words, the first human was created nonbinary, as we would say today. As we know, the Talmud recognizes 8 different gender categories, of which *androgynos* is mentioned numerous times in discussions of how *halachah* (Jewish law) applies to a person having both male and female sexual characteristics. Once again, alas, regarding the three pilgrimage festivals, these people are relegated to the same second class category as some other nonbinary people, along with women, slaves, the disabled, the old, the infirm, and minors. And adding insult to injury, in a discussion (19:4) on Eve’s culpability concerning the fruit of the forbidden tree, the midrash sees her castigated for adding to HaShem’s prohibition “You shall not eat of it, for on the day you eat of it, you shall die.” (2:18) the words “and you shall not touch it” (3:3). “When the serpent saw her exaggerating in this manner, he grabbed her and pushed her against the tree. ‘So, have you died? Just as you were not stricken when you touched it, so will you not die when you eat from it.’ And so humankind was thrust from the bliss of eternal childhood headlong into the joys and sorrows of adulthood. Tractate Eruvin 100 expounds on this at length, citing all the negative ways a woman differs from and is subservient to a man, tracing them to the curses HaShem imposed on Eve after they had eaten from the forbidden tree. And the negative tropes defining women as evil temptresses and justifying the many injustices perpetrated upon them, still persist, even within our ostensibly enlightened cultures. But we Jews, who have so often been at the forefront of courageous rebellion (Remember Moses arguing with HaShem?), will continue to work toward gender equality, which must always begin with respect for, and awe of the One Who Creates All.

Shabbat shalom!