

BALANCING ON THE MECHITZA

Transgender in Jewish Community

EDITED BY NOACH DZMURA



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Opshernish and self-portrait as *pshat* Tobaron Waxman

Editor's Note

I found Tobaron Waxman's work online the first time I searched Google using the terms "transgender" and "Jewish." He's a Canadian artist living in New York who works with the embodiment of gender and time; often his work overtly employs Jewish themes. His striking image of a Chagall-esque crucifixion scene with a transgender man hanging on the cross and a leatherman in the role of Roman-centurion-with-javelin, illuminated for me everything it was possible to feel about embodiment as a gay transgender Jew.

*His series on the *Arnida'h* (Standing) prayer that is central to Jewish liturgy depicts men clothed as Hasidim in the act of davening (praying), while a figure of indeterminate gender davens naked, the stranger in their midst. Even clothed and "passing" for the gender of choice, the transgender Jew is naked. Some part of her-him-hir-zir is always hidden under Jewish obligations that pertain solely to men or solely to women. The hidden part, the elephant in the middle of the synagogue, fluctuates (sometimes male, sometimes female, sometimes a combination of the two or neither of them), and has the mass and gravitational force of a black hole bending the wavelengths of light. Passing is never the end of it. Stealth is never without consequence. Despite the best intentions and the best surgery, genders flicker across transgender faces like firelight. Stuffer it. Bask in it.*

*Waxman has a unique (and perhaps uniquely transgender) ability to capture and sanctify transgression. My favorite of his works is titled *Reverence*, and it takes place in that most favorite of transgender trouble spots, the public restroom. What public facility is made for people like us? Tobaron claims this closeted-in-public gay sex scene as the Holy of Holies: *Yedi'd Nefesh* is chanted in the background, the familiar trope accentuating the scene's age-play and homoerotic themes.*

*Beloved of the soul, Compassionate Father,
draw Your servant to Your Will;
then Your servant will hurry like a hart
to bow before Your majesty
to him Your friendship will be sweeter
than the dripping of the honeycomb and any taste.*

—YEDID NEFESH (BELOVED OF THE SOUL), TRADITIONAL

Opshernish and self-portrait as pshat are the two works included below. Opshernish is a transgender refiguring of an Orthodox ritual, a way to come of age as a transgender man in Jewish community. Self-portrait as pshat asks and answers the question, Is it possible to articulate a transgendered portrait without representing a body?

Opshernish



*Opshernish was first performed at Gallery 2 in Chicago in 2001. The installation and documentation footage were curated by Daniel Belasco for the Jewish Museum of New York in September 2009 as part of the group exhibition *Reinventing Ritual: Contemporary Art and Design for Jewish Life*. The exhibition traveled to the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco in April 2010.*

My installation began untitled with a two-day endurance-based tableau. I sat on a high stool, diagonally opposite the entrance. My waist-length

hair was separated into locks and connected to the ceiling with metal clamps and airplane cable. The performance consisted of three phases. If a visitor could come around to make eye contact with me, I would hand them the cutting implement. Visitors cut suspended locks of my hair with scissors, then shaved my head with clippers and finally with a razor, until I was bald. Once all the locks were severed, an attendant replaced my scissors with electric clippers for the second phase, and for the final phase wiped my head with a hot towel and applied shaving cream from a large chrome bowl with a brush, and relieving me of the clippers, finally placed in my hand a razor.

The epilogue, called *Opshernish* after the Orthodox Jewish ritual, occurred two months later at the closing of the installation. It revisited the second and third phases of shaving with clippers, wiping of my head with a hot towel, application of shaving cream, and shaving my scalp with razors. The performance was five hours in duration at the opening, and three hours at the epilogue.

The *opshernish* is an Orthodox boy's first haircut, which takes place on his third birthday. The community comes to the family home, and everyone participates by cutting a piece of his hair, until what remains is what will become his *payot*.^{*} He then recites a short text in Hebrew to commence his life of learning. The community collectively confirms the role of male child, collectively acknowledges its expectations of him, by cutting his infant hair, the hair he has grown since birth, and shaping it to mark his public appearance as a male citizen. My *opshernish* had to do with moving out of certain infancy of self-awareness and self-conception and releasing myself altogether from the magnetism of kinship-based models of identity formation. For me, this is not a linear progression.

The completed installation consisted of the stool, the chrome bowls, the white hand towels and cutting implements in a row on the floor by the wall, the cuttings where they landed, and an inverted forest of roughly twenty-five locks that hung from the ceiling. Combined with the shorn remains, this constituted a site of gendered expectation excised.

^{*}*Payot* are the unclipped curls on the side of a Hasid's head.

Over the course of the performance, the suspended locks when cut would swing slightly away from me and toward the entrance, as they had been connected to the ceiling at a slight angle. This gave a subtle effect of constant movement, both forward and vertical, a dynamic tension between the suspended locks of hair, the clippings that fell to the floor, and the live body anchoring it all on the stool. Curator Daniel Belasco of the Jewish Museum of New York has compared the image of the dark hair and black-clad body against the white space as akin to writing. Both *Opshernish* and *self-portrait as pshat* were assessed by philosopher and cultural theorist Dr. Sue “johnny de philo” Golding as an act of inscription.

The surfaces of the white cube installation space became a taboo circumstance. Rather than wander in, people entered gingerly, only after making a concerted decision to come in. Once inside the space, people whispered, if they spoke at all, some sitting on the floor, or reaching thru the locks to caress and even smell them. Otherwise a crowd watched at the threshold of the space, pressed up against the edge of the white painted floor as if against glass, like at airport arrivals.

Each cut was a uniquely different experience of human interaction. Some people were utterly brutal and treated me like I was not a person. One girl pulled the scissors from my hands without even looking at my face, to her boyfriend’s embarrassment. One man ordered the clippers like a side order of fries, as he stood next to me to have his wife shoot a souvenir photo with a disposable camera.

A curator, razor in hand, demanded that I speak and tell her exactly how the piece would end: “What if no one comes? What if no one comes to shave you? How long can you sit here? Will you shave it yourself?” Another woman, the artist Kim Stringfellow, stood in front of me for some time, and finally said: “I don’t think I can do this.” I smiled at her, silently pressing the scissors into her open hand. As the scissors closed around her chosen lock, she closed her eyes.

self-portrait as *pshat*¹ (2001)

Process art,² in collaboration with Rabbi Justin Jaron Lewis. Equipment requirements: CD player, overhead projector. Dimensions variable. Completed with assistance from Mari Rice as well as Sara Varon, Ronit Bezalel, Stacy Goldate, Camilla Ha, Antonia Randolph, Andrea, Shauna and Gallery 2 staff who volunteered their time. Thanks also to Tony Wight, Barbara de Genevieve, Rabbi Elyse Goldstein for their encouragement. Photos by Thea Minkowski.

Hypothesis: It is written in 1 Samuel 25:25 “*kish'mo kein hu*”³ (like one's name, so he/she is); that is to say, one's name both mirrors and shapes a person.⁴ In the Zohar⁵ it is explained that the individual is not named by one's parents, and that the parents are only a conduit for this predestined information. What, then, are the implications of a bi-gendered name?⁶ Given that gender is not necessarily located in the physical body, is it possible to articulate a transgendered portrait without representing a body?

Process: The Torah study for this project was ongoing under the tutelage of Rabbi Justin Jaron Lewis. In discussions over the telephone and by e-mail with Rabbi Lewis, and with the help of a Tanakh concordance, we created a text consisting of 251 verses of Torah. Included are 47 occurrences of *Tova* (טובה) as a feminine adjective, 27 as a noun; 175 direct references to *Aharon* (אהרן) (without an article). The collection of verses is projected onto the walls and windows of the gallery. The projected text is then traced onto the walls in pencil, and in Conté crayons onto the windows. This will take many hours, and constitutes the performance element of the installation. An overhead projector casts the text both on my body and on the wall, and the text is reiterated on the wall by my body. Recordings of the chanted text play continuously in the space, alternately phasing in and out of synchronicity. I focused on Torah as a source for the text, but wanted to do it in a literate way for the integrity of the work, and so I was guided by someone who uses this material professionally on a regular basis and who also empathized with my queer identity.

Results: The effect of this edit is comparable to that of a concrete poem, and access to the text varies in degrees depending on the literacies and empathies of the spectator. These are all separate verses of Torah that have been reassembled in the order that they appear in the original text. This means that the expected flow of chant and of narrative is interrupted at various times. There are elements of interruption and surprise. (For example, there are ten instances in a row of “and Aharon said.”) Such elements of interruption and surprise included alongside elements of the norm might be said to characterize a transgender poetics as well as transgender embodiment.

I cannot offer my name, though it is a queer locution, as a proof text for transgender. I respect that the only proof text for Torah is Torah. *Self-portrait as pshat* is one step in my endeavor to create a body of work that is informed and supported by an ongoing study of Torah. With this project, I created a balance in my life, albeit a temporary one—staying vital in a contemporary art context in which one rarely has interaction with Torah-literate people. The piece began as a way to have a relevant study of Torah within my art practice, as opposed to two separate activities. This is an act of resistance against the life-split that is otherwise encouraged by the dominant culture. *Self-portrait as pshat* was a significant step in realizing a transgender body of work, within my art practice, as well as a way to come out to my father, who named me after his parents.

Afterword: Spectators could read the poem (or not) depending on their level of Hebrew literacy. *Self-portrait as pshat* was the first time I used explicitly Jewish content without incorporating some method of subtitling in the composition (that is, some manner of asking for permission from the dominant culture to use content specific to my own culture). Hebrew and Judaism are visual code systems typically not encountered in a contemporary art setting, which had the effect of incorporating into the performance the spectators’ attempts to make meaning out of the project in the face of cultural unintelligibility. This was met with some frustration by some white gentiles, who mentioned feeling excluded from something secret, and asked, “If it’s not in Japanese or Spanish, why *isn’t* it in English?” I am not aware of any transperson

visiting the show or encountering this piece. I have no community in the normative sense, so I managed to sew together various pieces of information and cull together tutelage without mentors—this might read as a pun when considered alongside other conditions of transsexual embodiment.

During the entire process of projection and tracing of the text onto the walls and windows, recordings of the chanted text were played continuously in the space, alternately phasing in and out of synchronicity. The source for the audio was bar mitzvah training tapes for boys. The voices are not of vocalists per se, but of American male rabbis with a distinctly *yeshivish* accent. Many trans allies assisted me in tracing the letters, including filmmaker Stacy Goldate, who at one point joined me in the performance dressed as an Orthodox boy (figure 1), reflecting a doppelgänger of my body, as a parallel to the multiple audio tracks playing simultaneously in the space.

The font we traced onto the walls and windows was not solid, but rather an outline of the letters, as a gesture of humility and gratitude to the original *sofrut* and primary text. But for the sound of the two asynchronous voices chanting Torah verses, the space at first glance appeared empty during the day. The installation is visible during daylight hours only if one enters the space and closely examines its perimeter. In this case “perimeter” alludes to *pshat*, not only as a reflection of the physical exterior of the body being the first site of meaning, but also as an invitation to the viewer to experience meaning from a place of internality. The work is observable at night from the street, via the text inscribed on the window; however, the text is seen in reverse, and spectators from the street cannot hear the cantillation. In other words, while *pshat* is discernable from outside, entering and stepping into the *pshat* offers an immersive four-dimensional diversity of experiences of limitless relationship.

Postscript: In November 2001, the Centre for Gender and Religions Research (GRR) Centre at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, held its first conference in gender and religions research on the theme “Damaged Bodies: Gendered Identity in Religious Discourse,” at which I was the invited artist. I presented a body of work



Figure 1. self-portrait as *psbat* (2001). Performance installation, detail. Gallery 2, Chicago.

which included photo documentation of *self-portrait as pshat*. Respondents to my presentation were Dr. Mira Amiras, Rabbi Sarra Lev, and Dr. Cosimo Zene, as well as Rabbi David Brodsky.

Pshat, in entering text, is the most literal, non-interpretive reading. The first level before you begin the transformation of consciousness. You move up to *pardes* in a model of paradise. As you rise levels, you enter into different levels of consciousness. *Pshat* is the beginning portion, before the transformation.

This image is evocative of the *yad* (figure 2). The hand outstretched, the body on the ladder is forming a *yad*... you never touch the Torah with the hand, but with a phallic extension of the hand, the male authority/gaze into the text. The image is inside the *yad*, inside the act of Torah reading, all these layers make it [the image] already on the road past *pshat*.

—DR. MIRA AMIRAS



Figure 2. *self-portrait as pshat* (2001). Performance installation. View through lobby vitrine, inscribed, with overhead projector in foreground. Gallery 2, Chicago.



Figure 3. self-portrait as *pshat* (2001). Performance installation. Street level window, detail. Gallery 2, Chicago.

In the Zohar there is a discussion of ultimately, what is the literal meaning of a Torah text? What is *pshat*? The *pshat* is ultimately the interpretation ... If you think that *Animal Farm* is about a bunch of animals living on a farm, you are missing the whole point.

—RABBI DAVID BRODSKY

You are creating yourself, on a midrash level, on a text. It parallels the creation story in the biblical story—G-d creates the primordial creature Adam (from *Adama*, which is not embodied, it's earth), creating a self-portrait that is not embodied. Then it says "and G-d created him" ("him" being both the generic and androcentric "him"), followed by Genesis 2, "male and female created he them." All of that is in the piece. The rabbis talk about the explanation of Genesis 2, that G-d creates Adam as an *androgynos*. And that G-d created the original creature as male and female is embodied in the piece.

—RABBI SARRA LEV



Figure 4. self-portrait as *pshat* (2001). Performance installation. Street level view through window. Gallery 2, Chicago.



Figure 5. self-portrait as *pshat* (2001). Performance installation, detail. Gallery 2, Chicago.

Quite interestingly and revealingly, text was going through you, and through you going on the wall, which meant a lot to me. Basically you're the text here, to be decoded [in the Derridian sense], . . . in fact renouncing womanhood—it takes a lot. I doubt that a man would have persisted five hours there doing that. Perhaps that was your final gesture as a woman . . . I certainly thank you for presenting yourself as a text, to be read.

—DR. COSIMO ZENE

Notes

1. The following notes are added as a convenience for persons interested in replicating the text study described in this essay. Reuben Alcaly, *The Complete English-Hebrew Dictionary* (New York: P. Shalom Publications, 1996) defines *pshat* as “plain meaning, literally, literalness,” with a cross-reference to *pardes*, which is defined as “plain, symbolic, homiletic and esoteric (four methods of biblical interpretation).” For the Aramaic equivalent, *pshata*, Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006) has:

PSHATA, m. (preced.) [i.e., from the preceding verb—see below] 1) plain wording; plain sense. [Examples]: Talmud *Ketuboth* 111 b, *pshateh dikra bema'ei ketiv*, “what does the plain text (not homiletically charged) refer to?”; Talmud *Eruvin* 23b, *pshateh dikra*, etc., “what is the plain sense (not homiletically forced) of the text?”; Talmud Yerushalmi *Sanhedrin* 18a, *pshuteh dikraya*, “the plain sense of the text”; Yerushalmi *Bava Bathra* 16a, *ba'ei meitar pshateh*, etc., “wanted to give meaning (of the verse) and could not find it.” 2) extension, natural course (of a river). [As in] Talmud *Gittin* 60b, *Hullin* 18b, 57a.

“Preced.” is the verb *PASHEIT*, *PSHAT*. The meanings Jastrow lists are: “1) to stretch, stretch forth; to straighten; 2) to strip, tear, flay; 3) to be stretched forth, reach out; 4) to explain, teach; to deduce.” Jastrow begins the definition of the Aramaic verb by noting it is the same as the corresponding Hebrew verb, which is *PASHAT*. The meanings he lists for *PASHAT* are:

[*Kaf* conjugation: 1) to stretch, straighten; 2) to strip; to undress; 3) to make plain, to explain; 4) to spread, be published.] [*P'el* conjugation: 1) to stretch, straighten out; 2) to strip, take off] [*Nif'al* conjugation: 1) to be straightened out, be unfolded, become flat; 2) to be stripped.] [*Hif'il* con-

jugation: 1) to strip, flay; 2) to shed the skin.] [*Hof'el* conjugation: to be stripped.] [*Hithpa'el* or *Nithpa'el* conjugations: to be straightened, become even; to flatten.]

Chaim M. Weiser, *FrumSpeak: The First Dictionary of Yeshivish* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson Publishers, 1995) gives the following definition relating not to Torah but to Gemara study:

pshat n. 1. A manner fitting an explanation into the words of a difficult text: RENDERING. "His convoluted P. in the *sugya* makes you wonder if he's learning the same *daf* as everyone else." 2. An explanation of the logic behind or the source of a passage, event, work, etc: METHOD, INTERPRETATION. "I once had a *shiduch* in an art museum, and I made up P. in all the paintings to try to make an impression." 3. That which explains the rationale for something: JUSTIFICATION, REASON. "I thought they're friends, what's the P. they're fighting?" [< Heb. *peh shin tet* (straight).] Cf. what's *pshat*.]

Alexander Harkavy, *The Yiddish-English-Hebrew Dictionary*, 2nd. ed. (1928; repr., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005) has "PSHAT s. (pl. PSHATIM) meaning, sense, signification; commentary; interpretation of a text according to the plain meanings of the words."

2. "Process art emphasizes the process of making art (rather than any predetermined composition or plan) and the concepts of change and transience ... In a groundbreaking essay and exhibition in 1968, Morris posited the notion of anti-form as a basis for making art works in terms of process and time rather than as static and enduring icons, which he associated with object-type art." Excerpted from the glossary of the Guggenheim Collection Web site, www.guggenheim-collection.org/site/glossary_process_art.html.
3. This phrase from a specific context is used in a completely different context by Nahmanides in his commentary on Lev. 13:29, suggesting that it may be applied as a general principle in the interpretation of Scripture.
4. A more direct source for this idea is the Talmud, Berakhot 7b, "*minsh lan d'shma garim*." How do we know that the name causes/determines/affects a person's life or actions?
5. I have not been able to track this down in the Zohar. The teaching is in circulation on the internet in the name of everybody from the Talmud to the kabbalists to the Maharal, but without source references. The attribution to the Maharal seems most likely.
6. My birth name was created by my parents, a combination of my father's parents names, Toba and Aron (Yiddish).

binic literature from the University of California, Berkeley, and the Graduate Theological Union. In addition to cultural studies of the Talmud, she is passionate about feminist Judaism and Jewish environmentalism. A strong advocate for social justice, she serves on the advisory board of *Nehirim: GLBT Jewish Culture and Spirituality* and recently coauthored an international grassroots health guide, *A Health Handbook for Women with Disabilities* (Hesperian Foundation, 2007).

Tobaron Waxman is an interdisciplinary artist specializing in performance and digital media. He completed an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he also taught voice in the Performance Department. He has been a visiting artist/lecturer at the University of California, Irvine; Parsons; the School of Oriental and African Studies; Hampshire College; and Tel Aviv University. Waxman also studies and performs Jewish liturgical music as a cantorial soloist. He has conducted mourning ceremonies and services on Yom Kippur, as well as provided spiritual support for the homeless, the sick, and the dying. He has been a grateful recipient of awards including the Van Lier Digital Artist Residency, an ACO Hong Kong Art and Culture Outreach Residency, a Franklin Furnace Performance Art Award, and a Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry Fellowship, and he was an invited artist at Siggraph Asia 2009.

Margaret Moers Wenig has served as rabbi of Beth Am, The People's Temple in New York City (1984–2000), as its rabbi emerita and High Holiday rabbi (2002–present) and as instructor of liturgy and homiletics at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion (1985–present). She has also taught workshops for Christian clergy in continuing education programs at Union/Auburn Theological Seminary in New York and in the United States Navy. Rabbi Wenig has played a major role in moving the Reform movement and the Jewish community toward greater support of GLBT equality and civil rights and toward acceptance of GLBT people in synagogues and among the clergy. She ran the very first symposia in any Jewish institution on medical, legal, and religious issues affecting intersex and transgender people. These were held