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Queering Jewish Theology in Parables

GWYNN KESSLER

This essay applies queer theories of gender fluidity and gender performativity to readings of rabbinic parables. Although parables in rabbinic literature have been explored for their theological insights, they have not been placed in conversation with understandings of gender that emerge from queer theory. This essay suggests that queer readings of parables offer a compelling counter-narrative to an always and singularly rigid, binary construction of gender in rabbinic sources. Rabbinic parables, which highlight gender fluidity, multiplicity, and instability, illuminate a queer theology at the heart of rabbinic understandings of gender, God, and Israel.

I Introduction

This essay reads rabbinic parables as texts saturated with theology and gender.¹ I explore how the intimate, immanent, engendered relationship(s) portrayed between Israel and God within rabbinic parables (*meshalim*) challenge a more common reading of rabbinic constructions of gender as best characterized by a rigid, stable male-female binary. I employ two aspects central to queer theory – gender instability and gender performativity – in order to illuminate a queer theology at the heart of rabbinic understandings of gender, God, and Israel.

At the outset, I want to take note of a serendipitous connection between parables and gender performativity. If gender is now, somewhat famously, not what one *is* but what one *does*, so too the parable. As A.J. Levine writes about parables,² ‘We might be better off thinking less about what they “mean” and more about what they can “do”’: remind, provoke, refine,

confront, disturb'.³ So too, queer theory's investigations into gender are meant to provoke, confront, disturb, and yet ultimately refine and further our knowledge about gender. Throughout this essay, I focus not on what parables are and what they mean – especially in any singular way – but on what *meshalim* do. Put simply, what rabbinic parables do is offer countless compelling counter-narratives to an always and singularly rigid, binary construction of rabbinic gender.

The first section of this essay presents some aspects of Israel's gender fluidity, or instability, in rabbinic parables, and the second section explores how gender performativity provides an important, novel lens through which to examine parables. The final section shifts to a concern with God's gender in rabbinic parables, querying whether they may offer images of God that destabilize assumptions of exclusive maleness.

II Gender fluidity

Rabbinic parables foreground, even depend on, constructions of gender that are more fluid and unstable than rigid or fixed. For my purposes here, gender fluidity is defined as any movement among genders, encompassing 'gender-bending' as well as so-called 'gender reversals.' Such gender fluidity appears in rabbinic parables in two prominent ways. First, male figures, whether individual biblical figures or collective Israel, are compared or conflated with female figures. This likening, which assumes similarity, comparability, and fluidity between male and female genders, appears in multiple ways, for example, through applying a biblical verse about women to male characters and/or likening a male figure (e.g. Moses) to the female figure (wife of the king/God) within the parable. The second aspect of gender fluidity is that the gendered representations of Israel and other (male) figures populating rabbinic parables are not themselves stable or fixed. Some examples will help illustrate these points.

Genesis Rabbah 39.1 juxtaposes two scriptural verses, Genesis 12.1, which is God's address to Abraham (Avram) to leave his native land and his father's house, and Psalm 45.11, which urges a daughter to leave her people and her father's house for the king who desires her. The parable applies the verse in Psalm 45.11 that refers to a daughter to Abraham:

*'And God said to Avram, Get thee out of your country (Gen 12.1).
R. Yitzhak opened: Hearken, O daughter, and see, and incline thine*

ear; forget also your own people, and your father's house (Ps 45.11). R. Yitzhak said, 'This may be compared to a man who was passing from place to place and he saw a building aflame. He said, "You might say that this building has no one to look after it." The owner of the building looked out and said to him, "I am the building's owner." So too, Abraham our father, when he said, "You might say that this world has no one to look after it," the Holy Blessed One looked out and said, "I am the one who oversees all of the world." *And the king will desire your beauty* (Ps 45.12) – to make your beauty known in the world; *Because he is your lord and you should bow to him* (Ps 45.12). And God said to Avram, Get thee...'

I open with this text not so much to assert that Abraham is here made female, or that the text posits a clear, singular 'gender-reversal.' Rather, while the text first likens Abraham to a daughter, gendering him female through the application of Psalm 45 to him, the text also refers to him as 'Abraham our father'. Abraham's gender is thus depicted as fluid, defying and destabilizing a rigid male-female binary, as he embodies both a daughter whose beauty God desires and the patriarch of Israel.

Many rabbinic parables portray God and male biblical figures or God and Israel as husband and wife, building on spousal metaphors that are prominent in the Hebrew Bible. In the following parable, Moses is portrayed as the wife of God and Moses and God are imagined as the parents of Israel:

'A mashal: To what may this be compared? Moses is like a king's wife who was about to depart from the world. She said to him, "My lord the king, I charge you concerning my children." He said to her, "Do not command me concerning my children, command my children about Me!" So too, when Moses said before the Holy Blessed one, "Master of the Universe, since you are removing me from this world, make known to me what leaders you will make stand for Israel"' (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* on 1.10).

Here Moses is likened to God's wife, and Israel's mother, who worries about Israel and their well-being after his pending death. God takes offense at Moses's questioning, responding that Moses does not command

God about God's own children, but commands God's children about God. In other words, a wife/mother does not rule over a husband/king, but supports him by instructing his children.

In another parable, Israel is imagined as, or plays, God's wife:

'And you shall write them upon the door posts of your house (Deut 6.9). Precious are Israel, for Scripture has surrounded them with commandments: tefillin on their heads, tefillin on their arms, mezuzot on their doors, tzitzit on their garments [...]

A parable of a king of flesh and blood who said to his wife, "bedeck yourself in all your finest jewellery in order that you be desirable to me." So too, the Holy Blessed One said to Israel, "Mark yourself with commandments in order that you will be desirable to me." And thus it says, *You are beautiful my darling, as Tirzah (Song 6.4), i.e., you are beautiful when you are desirable to me' (Sifre Deuteronomy 36).*

Here, the text portrays Israel as God's wife, dressed in her finest jewellery – the commandments of *tefillin*, *tzitzit*, and circumcision. These three *mitzvot*, so clearly gendered male insofar as according to halakhah (Jewish law) only men are obligated and permitted to perform them, are here performed by Israel imagined as God's *wife*. The parable thus simultaneously portrays Israel as female, insofar as they are God's wife, and male, insofar as they perform commandments that are constitutive of Israelite males.

The fluidity of Israel's gender in rabbinic parables is further exemplified when one incorporates *meshalim* that draw on familial relationships between God and Israel beyond husband and wife. This next parable first portrays Israel as God's son, and then as the female lover in the Song of Songs. The text states:

'This is likened to a king who had a son who went away to a far off country. He went after him and stood by him. The son went to another country, and the king again went after him and stood by him. So also, when Israel went down to Egypt, the Shekinah went down with them, as it is said, I myself will go down with you to Egypt (Gen 46.4). When they came up from Egypt, the Shekinah came up with them, as it is said, And I myself will also bring you back (Gen 46.4). When they went

into the sea, the Shekinah was with them, as it is said, *And the angel of God...journeyed* (Ex 14.19). When they went out into the wilderness, the Shekinah was with them, as it is said, *And the Lord went before them by day* (Ex 13.21) until they brought him with them to his holy Temple. *And so it says, Scarce had I passed them* (Song 3.4).

At the start of this passage, God and Israel are likened to a father and a son. As a father follows his son, so God follows Israel – to God’s very temple. Thus God, here as Shekinah, accompanies Israel to Egypt and back and to the sea and through the wilderness until, it seems, Israel delivers God to God’s own temple. The last line of the text, however, shifts the representation of Israel from God’s son to Israel as God’s female lover with the quote from the female protagonist of the Song of Songs, which reads in full, ‘Scarce had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves; I held him and would not let him go, until I had brought him into my mother’s house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me’ (Song 3.4). By the end of this passage, and I will return to this below, not only has Israel shifted from God’s son to God’s female lover, but God’s temple is now reconfigured as Israel’s *mother’s* house.

Each of these parables demonstrate gender fluidity, a movement among genders, thus destabilizing rigid, binary constructions of gender. Abraham is portrayed as God’s daughter, through the application of Psalm 45.12 to him, yet he is also presented as ‘Abraham our Father’. Israel is portrayed as God’s wife, though performing quintessentially male *mitzvot*. And Israel is portrayed as both God’s son and God’s female lover. Further, even though Moses performs the role of God’s wife in the parable cited above, the audience comes to the text knowing Moses as male, and thus Moses is portrayed as always already performing maleness (‘Moses our Rabbi’), and here simultaneously, performing femaleness (Moses as Mother/Wife).

III Gender performativity

One of the most exciting aspects of exploring rabbinic constructions of gender in *meshalim* specifically is that parables provide an intentionally discursive space where gender exceeds the boundaries of the body. There is no pretence that gender is confined to physical gender, or what is commonly referred to as ‘biological sex’. Israel is no doubt understood as a collective entity comprised of men, but they are, often, simultaneously

rendered female in relation to God.⁴ In rabbinic parables, gender is not constituted by bodies, but by performative acts within particular relational matrices.

At the heart of rabbinic parables is a fluid construction of gender, with figures moving back and forth among genders, rather than an untraversable male-female binary. Parables depend not so much on the categories of male and female being ‘reversed’, as being mutually inhabited. If parables depended on a fixed male-female binary construction of gender, one that operated in terms of opposites rather than likenesses, or fixity instead of fluidity, *then they would fail* – they would be rendered unintelligible by an audience and rejected. Instead, rabbinic parables become powerful vehicles for theological exploration, for lending voice to the varied ways in which the rabbis of antiquity articulated the relationship between Israel and God.

There is some scholarly debate about whether *meshalim* equate the varied figures that appear in the two sections of typical rabbinic parables: the parable proper (*mashal*) and its application (*nimshal*). The question is usually posed when considering the relationship, be it conflation or comparison, between the ‘king’ in the parable proper and God in its application. But the question is at least implicitly posed for the figures Israel portrays or ‘plays.’ Is Israel equated, even conflated and collapsed with various figures to whom they are compared, or does Israel merely approximate them? Is Israel really God’s wife, son, daughter, lover, etc.? Theories of performativity, which highlight *doing* as opposed to *being*, move us beyond such a scholarly impasse. We need not determine who Israel or God *is*, but instead we are invited to explore what God and Israel *do* – what roles they play, or more precisely which acts constitute them as Israel and God in relation with each other. From the vantage point of theories of performativity, which we may recall are shared by both parables and queer understandings of gender, the focus becomes how both God and Israel are constituted through performative acts within varied intimate relationships.

Judith Butler’s productive theorizing of gender performativity has often been criticized based on a selective reading of her work. Much of the criticism arises from neglecting to take seriously the ever-present constraints Butler emphatically acknowledges that society, or language, imposes, which work to make a heterosexual, male-female gender binary

system appear natural, even inevitable. In the final section of this essay, I consider potential constraints posed by parables, shifting my focus from Israel's gender(s) to that of God's gender. The rabbinic parables discussed thus far, though exhibiting gender fluidity on Israel's part, have remained consistent in portraying God as male (king, father, husband, etc.). God's presumptive maleness in *meshalim* does not mean theories of gender performativity are not applicable; maleness is as performative as other genders. The question explored in the following section takes God's gender performativity for granted, it merely takes up the challenge of the presumptive exclusiveness of God's maleness in rabbinic literature.

IV God's gender(s)

Almost fifty years have passed since feminist scholarship has unearthed traces of female images of God in the Hebrew Bible.⁵ To my knowledge, little has been done on a similar scale for God's gender in rabbinic sources. The scholarship that focuses on rabbinic parables has by and large asserted God's exclusive maleness, not only in parables but across rabbinic sources.⁶ To be certain, the overwhelming majority of rabbinic parables imagine God as male. This dominance of male God images, however, signals the very significance of the relatively few parables that dare to imagine, conflate, or even compare God with female figures. The novelty of these passages demands our attention. They invite us, as Psalm 45.11 did for Abraham in the parable above, to 'Hearken, O daughter, and see, and incline thine ear; forget also your own people, and your father's house'.

We do well to recall the parable about Israel as God's son and then female lover in the *Mekhilta* passage cited above. The end of that text reconfigured the Temple as the female lover's *mother's* house. The text thus gestures toward not only re-imagining God's Temple as the mother's house, where the female lover was conceived, but to imagine that God is also transformed into the mother of the House, and the one who conceives.

We also saw a parable above where Moses played God's wife, and mother of Israel. A 'proto'-parable reverses this dynamic as this text portrays Moses as God's husband:

'This is the blessing, with which Moses the man of God blessed the people of Israel (Deut 33.1) "Man of God" means husband of God.

Reish Lakish said, if it were not written it would be impossible to say: Just as a man decrees that his wife do something and she does it, so too, Moses decreed over God and God did it' (*Pesikta d'Rav Kahana Zot HaBrakhah* 1.13).

This text interprets Deuteronomy 33.1 quite literally. Man of God (*ish ha-elohim*) means Moses is God's husband. Moses plays the man, and thus God the wife/woman. Moses's maleness is constituted by virtue of his making a decree that his wife, God, must perform.

The final two parables I present offer relational matrices that are far less prevalent than king parables, and both are rooted in other domestic relationships than those of husband and wife. In both texts God is compared with or imagined as a female domestic worker. The first parable imagines God as a wet-nurse, who breast-feeds the infant Jacob.⁷

'R. Abbahu said, This is comparable to a son of kings who was sleeping in his cradle and there were flies settling on him. When his wet-nurse came, she bent over him and nursed him and the flies fled from him. So too, at first scripture states, *And behold, angels of God were ascending and descending on him [Jacob]* (Gen 28.12). When God revealed Godself to him, they fled from upon him' (*Genesis Rabbah* 69.3).

The second parable places the biblical figures of God, Jacob/Israel, and Moses in a complex web of family and domestic relationships. One of the more striking images the parable invokes is that of God as a female servant. The text interprets Exodus 3.11, 'And Moses said to God, Who am I [*anokhi*], that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'

'R. Joshua Ben Levi said: This is comparable to a king who married off his daughter and promised to give her a province and a female slave of high standing [*shifhah matrona*], but he gave her a female Cushite slave. His son-in-law said to him, "Didn't you promise to give to me a *shifhah matrona*?" So Moses said before the Holy Blessed One, "Master of the Universe, when Jacob went down to Egypt didn't you say to him, *I (anokhi) will go down with you into Egypt, and I [anokhi] will also bring you up again* (Gen 46.4). And now you say to me, 'So

come, I will send you to Pharaoh' (Ex 3.10). I am not the 'I' who said to him, 'I will also bring you up again'" (Exodus Rabbah 3.4).

The parable in Exodus Rabbah 3.4 is the more complicated of the two, as the comparisons proliferate in a narrative space that presents gender as multiple and fluid rather than binary and rigid. Thus Jacob/Israel is the king's/God's daughter; she is married off by God, her father, who promises to give her a female slave as part of the marriage contract. Moses simultaneously plays the roles of husband of Israel, son-in-law of God, and female Cushite slave. Last but not least, God simultaneously embodies the roles of the king/father of Israel/father-in-law of Moses, and the female slave of higher standing. The shifting gendered roles throughout the parable reflect a complex, gendered narrative world that foregrounds gender fluidity and multiplicity over rigid, binary constructions of gender.

Taken together, the parables in this section have imagined God as a mother, a wife, a wet-nurse, and a female servant. They are indeed exceptional, far less prevalent than parables that portray God as king, father, or husband, but they nevertheless demonstrate that rabbinic parables disrupt a reading of God's gender as exclusively male. In parables, which are narratives saturated with theological import, part of what constitutes God is conceiving and breastfeeding Israel, protecting and delivering Israel, and serving Israel as a female servant. And, it is God as the female slave, moreover, who brings Israel out of Egyptian enslavement.

V Conclusion

Rabbinic parables have long been valued for their powerful, at times profound, theological insights. But their important contributions to deepening and refining our understanding of constructions of rabbinic gender have been far less common; those that do exist have framed parables as sites where binary gender is 'reversed', which still allows binary constructions of gender to define the terms within which rabbinic gender is set, and fixed. I have highlighted gender fluidity and multiplicity over and against the language of 'reversal' and its implicit binary framing in order to challenge the exclusive hold of binary gender in rabbinic parables specifically, and, given the prevalence of parables throughout rabbinic sources, rabbinic literature in general.

I have also highlighted connections between the performative nature

of parables as stories and speech acts, and gender performativity. Performativity embeds and encodes within it the importance of ‘doing’, and I would add ‘doings’, ‘undoings’, and ‘re-doings’. If, as Jewish feminist theologian Rachel Adler so poignantly expressed, ‘stories are the body of God’,⁸ rabbinic parables remind us that the bodies, and genders, of both God and Israel are as multiple and fluid as their theological import is enduring.

Notes

1. See David Stern, ‘Imitatio Hominis: Anthropomorphism and the Character(s) of God in Rabbinic Literature’, *Prooftexts*, 12.2 (1992), 151–174.
2. See Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Consitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, *Theatre Journal*, 40.4 (1988); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London: Routledge, 1990.
3. Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014, p. 4.
4. On the composition of collective Israel in the Hebrew Bible as referring to men specifically, not men and women, see Stuart MacWilliam, *Queer Theory and the Marriage Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*, Sheffield: Equinox, 2011.
5. Phyllis Trible, ‘Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41.1 (1973), 30–48.
6. Alan Appelbaum, *The Rabbis’ King-parables: Midrash From the Third Century Roman Empire*. New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2010, p. 175; Stern, ‘Imitatio Hominis’, pp. 163, 174.
7. See Numbers 11.12.
8. Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.

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