

## **Blessed Are the Binary Breakers**

Episode 14: How are trans people like Jonah? - A Jewish trans woman's perspective

*Transcribed by Avery Smith*

*[ Acoustic guitar intro music ]*

**Avery:**

Hi there, listeners. And welcome to...an unconventional episode of *Blessed Are the Binary Breakers*. Before I explain what's so unconventional about it, I have an announcement:

I have decided to put this podcast on hiatus for the rest of August and into September. The next episode won't be coming out until some time in October. I have a few reasons for this break.

First of all, I have discovered over the course of creating these episodes that it's really hard to keep a reliable publishing schedule when there are multiple people involved in a project!

The lovely people I interview have lives of their own, and it's often tricky finding a time and date that works for both me and my interviewee. Thus it's happened several times now that I've expected to have an episode ready in time for my scheduled publishing date, only for something to come up that delays the interview and therefore the episode.

I don't like doing that to you listeners – I don't like saying that there's *going* to be an episode coming out on a certain date only for it to not happen.

So that's the main reason for the hiatus – I plan to record lots of interviews in the next couple months so that I'll have them stored up and ready when I come back in October.

The other reason for the hiatus is a personal one – I take my ordination exams at the end of September, and I need to study for them! It's 5 written exams that will test my knowledge of my denomination's rules, biblical Greek and Hebrew, theology, and so on. And I haven't even begun to study, so I have got to get on that. Recording, editing, and transcribing these podcasts episodes takes me hours and hours of time and a lot of energy, which I need to pour into studying so I can officially be "Reverend Avery"! ...Instead of "Avery, that unemployed kid with a seminary degree they're doing nothing with." [laughs]

So that brings me to today's episode topic. The unconventional thing about it is I do not have a new interview for you all – instead you get to listen to *my* dulcet tones ramble on about a cool thing I read.

Along with creating this podcast, I have spent much of 2019 researching gender diversity in a variety of religions and cultures. And what I have found throughout my research as well as in the

conversations I've had within this podcast is that transgender people really are an incredible gift to our communities.

Way back in the second or third episode of this podcast, Willow Hovingh told us that when we as trans people decide to visit a worship community, *they* are not doing *us* a favor by "letting" us in – we are doing *them* the favor by choosing to be there. Along with building up the community in ways that anyone can – through our leadership and service, musical talent or technical know-how or so on – we as trans people also bring our unique perspectives into the community.

What I'm going to tell y'all about in this episode is a book in which a Jewish trans woman offers her thoughts on the gifts that trans people bring – and then I will invite *you* the listeners to share *your* stories about what gifts you have brought to your faith communities.

The most recent book I have been reading for my research on gender diversity is Joy Ladin's book *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective*. And y'all, it is such a good book! I cannot recommend it enough for anyone who is interested in a Jewish perspective on being trans and interpreting the Torah through a transgender lens. I'm just gonna share a little bit from the book's introduction where Joy Ladin describes one way trans people help their communities.

Ladin compares trans people fleeing their true selves to the biblical prophet Jonah fleeing his call to be a prophet and even making the self-destructive decision of throwing himself into the stormy sea to avoid that call. Like Jonah refusing to live into his identity as a prophet, Ladin says that she ran away from her womanhood. And, like Jonah telling the sailors to throw him overboard to save themselves, Ladin says that trans people, and here's a quote,

"Often tell ourselves that suicide will resolve the conflict between our need to be and not be who we truly are. Our families, our communities, and our world will be better off without us, we think. And we, released from the shame of hiding and the terror of living as who we are, will finally be at peace." End quote.

But we are wrong. Our communities are much richer for our presence, our lives, not our deaths. Just as God sent a fish to swallow Jonah and keep him safe from drowning, so God held Ladin close and kept her alive through all her decades of suicidal depression. And she would have been content to live there, in the belly of the fish, not realizing the good that would come of, I quote, "Living a truth that would mark me, permanently and publically, as Other." End quote.

Just like the people of Nineveh needed to hear God's call to transform their lives from a human throat, from a body they could see, from a person who not only saw things differently than they did but who was also willing to stand up and stand out as different, so trans persons are often that agent of the divine for their communities. Here's what Ladin says about that:

"Transgender people face daily the kinds of choices Jonah faced. Will we run away, sink into despair, throw ourselves into the sea; or will we live as who we are, even when that means

being seen as different, disruptive, or a threat to the social order? I do not mean to suggest that the Book of Jonah is about being transgender. The Book of Jonah is about being human. But transgender experience is human experience, and questions transgender people face are questions that we all face. Everyone, transgender or not, has to decide what parts of ourselves we will and will not live. Each of us has to decide when we can't and when we must sacrifice our individuality for the sake of our families and communities. And when, like Jonah, we have to live the truths that set us apart from others and reveal to the world what we have only revealed to God. When we read the Book of Jonah in the light of transgender experience, we are reminded that the crisis it dramatizes is one that most people face sooner or later: the crisis of realizing that we must live what makes us different, or we cannot live at all."

And Ladin still continues,

"Every religious community that embraces people that do not make sense in terms of binary gender categories honors the image of the incomprehensible God in which, the first chapter of Genesis tells us, all human beings are created. In fact, if we take seriously the idea that human beings are created in the image of God, then whenever we expand our understanding of humanity, we expand our understanding of God."

Ladin goes on to talk about how traditional readings of the Torah have tended to think of humanity in terms of men, and how the Torah itself is full of stories of men and laws directed towards men, and God is most often described as a warrior, a father, a king, and other masculine language. But, Joy Ladin continues,

"Feminist scholars have taught us that we can understand God as female as well as male, mother as well as father, queen as well as king, she as well as he," and Ladin says that "of course God is no more male than female, but thinking of God in terms of women's as well as men's experience draws attention to aspects of God we tend to overlook otherwise." And so she says that, "by extension, expanding our definition of humanity to include transgender people draws our attention to ways in which God can be understood by analogy to transgender lives -- the lives of those who, like God, do not fit traditional roles and categories."

"When I started reading the Torah as a child, I was struck more by how its stories of God resonated with my life than by how my life could help me understand God. This was the 1960s. There was no Laverne Cox, no Caitlin Jenner, no internet blogs or discussion boards. The Torah's stories about God were the first I had seen about someone who, like me, did not fit binary gender categories. Someone who did not have a body to make them visible; someone who had no place in the human world. My sense of kinship with the God that I saw in the Torah didn't grow out of feeling female despite having a male body; it grew out of my more general experience of not fitting into a world in which it is assumed that everyone is either and always male or female."

I shared these various passages from Joy Ladin's introduction with you all because I just...I love what she has to say about...the gifts and the new knowledge and wisdom that trans people give

our faith communities. For her, expanding our image of humanity to fit trans people into it expands our image of God. And for her, interpreting the Bible through a trans lens the way she did with the Book of Jonah, um, brings, you know, it brings new meaning to the story. Meaning that might not have been found without applying that transgender lens.

So that's an example of some of the gifts that transgender people bring. And what I want to now call for from you listeners is more stories. We have heard the stories of so many different interviewees, um, from so many different faith backgrounds and countries, um, ages and ba -- other life experiences, um, in this first season of *Blessed Are the Binary Breakers*. And so many of them have talked about the way they give back to their communities, the way being trans and living into that transness bears good fruit not just for them, but for their whole community.

And I was hoping that you all would share some of your stories about the gifts that you bring your communities too. So just like a while back I called for stories about faith and violence, I'm now calling for stories about the gifts of transgender people. And that can be anything -- that can be, um, something kind of more tangible like a role you play in your faith community, whether that's as a choir member or a reader or a minister, um, or if it's something like an idea you brought to your church that you might not have had if you weren't transgender; a unique perspective that you brought to the table *because* you are transgender. Um. I would love to hear that. And so I am inviting you to email those stories in to my inbox, which is [queerlychristian36@gmail.com](mailto:queerlychristian36@gmail.com) by October 1.

And uh, you can send those in audio form if you don't mind having your voice heard, I would love that, um, get more voices into the episode is always great; or if you prefer not to do audio you can also send it as a written-out transcript that I will read for you for the episode. So yeah, please think about sending that in, um. Or you can email me if you have questions about what exactly I'm looking for. I'll probably have more information out soon on my tumblr blog [queerlychristian.tumblr.com](http://queerlychristian.tumblr.com), and that will go into more detail into what sort of things I'm looking for. But basically, any time you have felt that you have been a gift to your faith community *because* of your transness.

That's just about all I have for you today, listeners. Um, except to say once again, um, that yeah, I'm going to be on hiatus for the next couple months. You can expect *Blessed are the Binary Breakers* to return some time in October.

Um, in the meantime, I am gonna be working on podcast episodes, I just won't be publishing them. And I'm going to be continuing my work at [queerlychristian.tumblr.com](http://queerlychristian.tumblr.com) and at [transchristianity.com](http://transchristianity.com), and I also planning on making some YouTube videos pretty soon at Queerly Christian on YouTube. So I will keep be -- I will be doing work, it just won't result in any published episodes of this podcast until October. Um.

So that being said, if you like what I do and want to support me, head over to my Patreon. I am Queerly Christian on Patreon. And the support I get there goes to this podcast, and my work on

my blog, and my work on my website, and all the other stuff I do. The research I've been doing on gender diversity, and all of that. Um. Your support means the world to me.

If you prefer to take a break from supporting me during this hiatus of this podcast I totally understand. That's fine! But right now I do wanna thank the patrons who are currently supporting me at the 12 dollar level or higher:

So many thanks J Gebner, Willow Hovingh, Rosina Paige, and Ron Hartzler.

It means a lot to me that I've got people who consider my work worth supporting financially. If that's not a possibility for you right now, that's okay too! Please, please, please, share this podcast around with people who you think might like it, or rate and review it on iTunes or wherever else you listen to this podcast...it would mean a lot for me to, you know, get more people listening.

I will see you all in October. In the meantime, go break some binaries, and be a blessing to the world with your life.