

PARASHAT BERESHIT ·
GENESIS 1:1–6:8

In the beginning,
more than a binary

A queer Jewish study of creation, embodiment, companionship, and the expansive image of God.

Core question What becomes visible when we read the text beside its own interpretive plurality?

Use Solo learning, chevruta, or a 60–90 minute group



Creation imagined as layered, embodied, and abundant.

01 / Opening frame

The tradition is already arguing Bereshit does not offer a single account of human beginnings. Genesis 1 and 2 differ; the midrash multiplies them further. Queer reading enters an argument already in motion.

Image before category

Genesis names humanity *b'tzelem Elohim* before it names “male and female.” Margaret Moers Wenig reads that sequence as a claim that LGBTQ people and their orientations belong to creation’s original design.

[Wenig in Torah Queeries ↗](#)

Two poles, or the whole field?

A contemporary reading treats “male and female” as a merism: like “heaven and earth,” two poles can name everything between and beyond them. This is interpretation—not the uncontested plain sense.

[Defying Dichotomies ↗](#)

The first “not good”

Before disobedience, shame, or exile, the text calls one thing *lo tov*: human aloneness. An affirming reading centers companionship rather than heterosexual reproduction.

[Close reading of Genesis 2 ↗](#)

No one gets the last word

Joy Ladin calls Genesis 1:27 a “theological disaster” for people outside the binary—then turns to Genesis 2, Talmud, and Kabbalah, where the human story keeps opening.

[Torah in Transition ↗](#)

productive question is not only “Which is right?” but “What does each make possible?”

GENESIS 1:27

בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא
אֹתוֹ
זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא
אֹתָם

*“In the image of God ...
male and female God
created them.”*

Received reading

Humanity is created in two sexes. Hirsch sees the two together as completing the human conception; Maimonides locates the divine image in intellect, not bodily form.

Queer opening

Wenig reads the divine image as prior to the binary. Rabbi Baht Weiss asks whether plural-named *Elohim*, paired with a singular verb, can ground a theology of God beyond gender.

[Rabbi Baht Weiss on Bereshit ↗](#)

GENESIS 2:7, 21–22

וַיִּצְרֶה ... אֶת־הָאָדָם
עֹפֶר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה
וַיִּקַּח אֶחָת
מִצִּלְעֹתָיו

*God forms ha-adam from
adamah, then takes one
tzela.*

Rib—or side?

Ramban retains the rib reading. Genesis Rabbah 8:1 reads *tzela* as a whole side: an originally double-faced human is separated into two backs. Rashi

Earthling first

Ladin emphasizes that Genesis 2 begins with one earth-creature whose needs unfold over time. Gender differentiation is not the human’s starting condition.

adopts this
aggadah.

[Toldot Trans source sheet ↗](#)

GENESIS 2:18

לֹא־טוֹב הָיֹוֹת
הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ
אֶעֱשֶׂה־לּוֹ עֶזֶר
כְּנֶגְדּוֹ

*“It is not good for the
human to be alone; I will
make a strong help
corresponding to them.”*

Word study

Ezer appears 21
times in the
Hebrew Bible; 16
refer to God as
humanity’s help.
K’negdo can
suggest
correspondence—
one who meets
the other face to
face.

[Israel Drazin on ezer k’negdo ↗](#)

Ethical center

The stated
problem is
aloneness, not
childlessness. The
partner is neither
accessory nor
subordinate, but
an adequate
counterpart.

GENESIS 2:24

וַדָּבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ
וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד

*“He cleaves to his wife,
and they become one
flesh.”*

Restrictive use

Genesis Rabbah
18:5 and
Sanhedrin 58a use
“to his woman—
and not to a male”
in deriving
prohibited unions.
This history should
not be erased.

**Affirming
response**

Other readers
understand the
verse as
descriptive
etiology, not
universal
prescription.
Davaq names loyal
attachment; “one
flesh” can name
kinship and
household, not
only reproduction.

Genesis and same-sex marriage ↗

“The text’s plurality is not a loophole. It is the terrain of Jewish interpretation.”

03 / Rabbinic
categories

Six names in the archive

Rabbinic literature did not reduce every
body to one of two legal categories. Its
vocabulary is not identical to modern

identity language—but it unsettles the claim that gender complexity is new.

Zakhar זָכָר Male. One of the two most familiar rabbinic sex classifications.	Nekeivah נִקְבָּה Female. Paired with <i>zakhar</i> in Genesis 1:27.	Androgynos אַנְדְּרוֹגִינוֹס A person with both male and female sex characteristics. Rabbi Yose calls the <i>androgynos</i> “a creature by itself.”
Tumtum טוּמְטוּם A person whose sex characteristics are obscured or indeterminate in the rabbinic legal frame.	Saris סָרִיס A person identified male whose development or anatomy differs from the expected category; texts distinguish natural and human-caused cases.	Aylonit אֵילוֹנִית A person identified female who develops traits the rabbis associated with maleness and does not bear children.

Read with care. These are ancient legal classifications, not simple equivalents for “trans,” “nonbinary,” or “intersex.” Noam Sienna notes that the rabbis variously place the *androgynos* nearer one category, the other, both, or neither—while still treating that person as a full community member. Rachel Adler cautions that the terms draw on ancient science and may not adequately describe people today.

04 / A living conversation

Who is reading with us?

These thinkers do not speak with one voice. Together they show several ways queer Jewish interpretation works: close reading, reclaimed midrash, halakhic argument, liturgical invention, and lived experience.

Margaret Moers Wenig

Begins with the power of *b'tzelem Elohim* for gay people, then refuses to let “male and female” close the conversation around intersex, trans, and nonbinary lives.

“Male and Female God Created Them,” in *Torah Queeries* (2009)

Joy Ladin

Does not soften the wound of Genesis 1:27. She argues instead that Jewish interpretation lets later texts answer, complicate, and outgrow an apparent binary.

Torah in Transition; The Soul of the Stranger (2018)

Benay Lappe & SVARA

Practice a “traditionally radical” method: rigorous Talmud study informed by queer experience and moral intuition, treating halakhah as a dynamic process rather than a sealed code.

SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva

Steven Greenberg & Eshel

Work inside Orthodox and halakhic categories. Eshel’s “From Oxymoron to Opportunity” says halakhah does not forbid same-sex-attracted people from raising children or building families.

Orthodox-affirming argument and community practice

Judith Plaskow

Her feminist midrash “The Coming of Lilith” imagines Lilith and Eve together in Eden, turning a demonized figure into a symbol of women’s freedom and solidarity.

“The Coming of Lilith” (1972)

Rachel Adler

Proposes *b’rit ahuvim*, a lovers’ covenant structured around mutuality and suitable for loving adults, including lesbian and gay couples.

Engendering Judaism

Movement reception

Reform

Queer liturgy and ritual appear in *Mishkan Ga’avah* (2020), alongside Keshet’s educational resources.

Reconstructionist

The movement admitted lesbian and gay rabbinical students in 1983 and sanctioned same-sex marriage in 1992.

Conservative

A 2006 responsum opened a path to affirmation; in 2012, the CJLS approved model same-sex ceremonies that did not use traditional *kiddushin*.

Orthodox-affirming

Eshel, JQY, and Greenberg press for dignity, family inclusion, and honest ritual while acknowledging halakhic limits and disagreement.

05 / Bring it to the table

Questions that stay open

Choose two texts and three questions.

Read aloud, sit with the friction, and resist racing to consensus.

1

What changes when *ha-adam* is translated “the earthling” rather than “the man”?

2

Does “male and female” set a boundary—or name the outer points of an abundant whole?

3

If every person is made in the divine image, what obligations follow for language, ritual, and communal belonging?

4

What is gained—and what is risked—when modern identities are mapped onto ancient categories?

5

Is the core of Genesis 2 reproduction,

Suggested 75-minute flow

10 min: read Genesis 1:26–28 and 2:7, 18–24 aloud. 20 min: chevruta on the two creation accounts. 20 min: study Genesis Rabbah 8:1 beside Ladin or Wenig. 15 min: discuss one rabbinic category and its limits. 10 min: closing round—one teaching, one remaining tension.

Facilitator note: disagreement

Mark whether a statement is biblical text, classical interpretation, modern scholarship, or your own reading. This prevents an affirming conclusion from being presented as the only historical reading—and prevents a restrictive reading from being presented as the only Jewish one.

Facilitator note: language

Invite people to name the language they use for themselves. Do not use ancient legal categories as labels for participants. When discussing God, notice what gendered language does rather than enforcing a single substitution.

companionship, kinship, or something else?

6

Where do you see interpretation repairing a wound in the text? Where might it conceal one?

Optional creative midrash

Retell the separation of the first earthling from the perspective of one “side.” What is lost? What becomes newly possible? What does reunion mean if wholeness is not sameness?

06 / Reusable method

Weekly research workflow

A four-stop sequence for grounding each parashah in text, tradition, contemporary movement commentary, and LGBTQ+ Jewish learning.

Used for this Bereshit deep dive: Sefaria and Keshet supplied directly linked study material. Chabad.org and ReformJudaism.org remain part of the weekly research sequence, but are not directly cited in this edition.

01

Sefaria.org

Text and source sheets

Read the bilingual Torah portion, compare classical commentaries, and follow community-built source sheets into related rabbinic texts.

Used here
Toldot Trans and
rabbinic sources

02

Chabad.org

Traditional baseline

Check the weekly overview, text-based study, and classical commentary before placing received

Weekly reference
Not directly cited here

readings beside queer interpretations.

03

[ReformJudaism.org](#)

Reform commentary

Compare the Reform movement’s weekly Torah commentary, with attention to contemporary ethics, community life, and interpretive change.

Weekly reference

Not directly cited here

04

[KeshetOnline.org](#)

LGBTQ+ learning and practice

Browse Jewish LGBTQ+ text studies, lesson plans, inclusion resources, and program ideas; adapt what fits the week’s core questions.

Used here

Queerly Created text study

07 / Source shelf

Continue the study

Primary texts, queer commentary, and denominational resources used in this guide.

Toldot Trans	Sefaria ↗	Torah in Transition	Joy Ladin ↗
Genesis creation midrash	Reconstructing Judaism ↗	Image of God source sheet	JTS ↗
From Oxymoron to Opportunity	Eshel ↗	Queerly Created text study	Keshet ↗

Is God
nonbinary?

Rabbi Baht Weiss
↗

Engendering Judaism Brandeis ↗

Research note: this guide was compiled in October 2026 from indexed web sources. Linked materials carry different theological and denominational commitments. Ancient sources are presented through the cited source sheets and scholarly summaries; disagreements are kept visible rather than harmonized.

Back to the beginning ↑
