

Ep #1: Two Ways to Tell a Story



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Welcome to Speaking Torah. I'm your host Rabbi Jeffrey Summit, Director of the Innovation Lab at Hebrew College. Torah is one of the most profound sources of wisdom available to us. In this podcast, Jewish leaders from around the world read essays from Hebrew College faculty and Rabbinical alumni about how Torah can help us navigate the most pressing issues of our time. Together, we'll explore the ways Torah can help us approach the world with creativity, healing, and hope.

This week, Gray Myrseth brings us on a powerful journey of continuity and disruption. From Moses shattering the 10 commandments, to their own journey to find a self that they could inhabit fully and without fear. Rabbi Gray Myrseth was ordained in 2017 by the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College in Newton Massachusetts and is currently serving as Youth Programs Director at Kehilla Community Synagogue in Piedmont, California.

We ask Joy Ladin, Gottesman Chair in English at Yeshiva University to read Gray's essay. In 2007, Joy became the first and still only openly transgender employee of an Orthodox Jewish institution. Her work has been recognized with a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a Fulbright Scholarship, an American Council of Learned Societies Research Fellowship, and two Hadassah-Brandeis Institute Research Fellowships, among other honors.

Here's Joy reading Gray's essay, Two Ways to Tell a Story.

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Joy Ladin: Two Ways to Tell a Story, in Parshat Ki Tisa tremendous rupture occurs. Moses is still up on Mount Sinai, obscured by the God Cloud of Revelation. And the people wait long enough that they start to get scared. They want something to worship, so they build a golden calf and call it their God.

When Moses returns with the Tablets of Divine Testimony, he cries out and throws the tablets to the ground, shattering them into fragments. The story

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could so easily have ended there, with the covenant broken almost before it began. But ultimately, Moses ascends once again to the heights and the holy one.

During this second ascension, God promises to let Moses come even closer than before, to see not God's face, but God's back, so long as Moses carves a second set of tablets where the covenant can be re-inscribed. I read this Parshah and I see my own family.

When my father was a young man, he returned in love from a trip abroad. In a teahouse in Kathmandu, on New Year's Day 1982 he'd met a woman from Norway. They both fell in love at first sight. Back in his hometown of Minneapolis, he went to his childhood Rabbi saying, "I've met the woman I'm going to marry." He was right.

My parents would be married within the year. My mother would move to San Francisco to live with my father, and the rest of our lives would unfold from there. But in that moment, when my father had declared his momentous news, his Rabbi could only say, "Don't do it. This is the worst mistake you could make. What will happen to the children?"

I can tell my story as one of disruption. That Rabbi nearly succeeded in pushing my family out of organized Jewish community and practice. I grew up with a Judaism that existed mostly in our own home, away from larger institutional Jewish settings.

Like my parents, I learned a subtle discomfort in organized Jewish spaces, a fear of judgment and exclusion, a wariness and uncertainty about whether I belonged. And then somehow, I found a way back in. As an adult, I fell in love with Jewish learning and practice. I learned the alef-bet. I became a Rabbi.

Now, my parents are members at the Synagogue where I work. It's a miracle that we weren't split off from Jewish community forever. I can also tell my story as one of seamless continuity. One of my mother's brothers is

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a Lutheran minister; a Bishop in the Norwegian church, and another is a catholic priest. It's a family business.

I grew up with no shortage of clergy role models. On both sides of my family were inquisitive nerds; bookworms with insatiable appetite's for learning. My parents are therapists with well-developed spiritual lives of their own. It's no wonder I turned out the way I did.

What's remarkable is that both stories are the same story. Both lives are my life. This is not only true in the realm of my family's Jewish story, but also in the realm of my own experience as a non-binary transgender person.

I can tell you that I've always been this way. That my love of flower patterns as a child has become a love of flower-patterned button-down shirts in adulthood. I can tell you that I've always been exactly who I am. I can also tell you that, for years, I had no idea who I was becoming, that I mistakenly assumed that being feminine meant I had to identify as a girl, and then a woman. I can tell you that it took me decades to find a self that I could inhabit fully and without fear.

I suspect that this double-consciousness, this both-and narrative will be familiar to anyone who lives, prays, and teaches in a tradition that never anticipated their leadership. And sometimes, not even their presence. You know who you are. You know what I'm talking about. You know that to be at home in my own tradition, to declare my role as a learner and teacher of Talmud, I have to believe that the Rabbinic sages are, for the most part, my allies, that while they could not have anticipated me specifically, they are my spiritual and intellectual kin.

I have to believe my presence at this table is one eventual consequence of their radical, creative, courageous project. But to only tell the story in this way is to miss an essential half of the picture, because there is also the audacity needed to claim my seat at the table. There is the also the effort, the challenge, the loss and grief of living and loving a holy relationship with

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a tradition that was not traditionally designed with me or most of my colleagues in mind.

Our tradition knows this doubling deep down at its roots. After his intimate encounter with the divine, Moses comes back down the mountain carrying a new set of engraved tablets. In the Talmud, an elaborate debate emerges around the question of what exactly is inside the Biblical Ark of the Covenant?

When we learn, in Bava Batra 14a-b that the ark contained just the tablets bearing the 10 utterances or commandments, how are we to interpret this? We are to understand that when Moses comes down from the mountain, the people receive him receive the second tablets, and place those new slabs of stone alongside the broken ones in the ark.

The story of continuity and the story of disruption, neither one is whole without the other, our ancestors carry both in all their wanderings. One is sacred, the other is sacred as well.

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: We asked Joy what she liked about this essay.

Joy Ladin: I really love the confidence that comes through in the writing. There's a directness and a simplicity to the writing, about telling the story and also simultaneously commenting on the multiple ways the story can be understood that is – well, number one, it's just great to see that in any writer.

But I am particularly grateful to see it in a trans or a non-binary writer because that's a sign that the writer doesn't feel that they have to defend or explain themselves or justify themselves. That they can simply use their standpoint, their experiences and bring all of themselves into their experience of and teaching of the Torah. And so, I loved that aspect of it.

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: Here's what Joy had to say about what spoke to her most in this essay.

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Joy Ladin: Because my life's story doesn't touch Gray's life story at all, I thought it was interesting, but it wasn't something that I was personally resonating with, until the moment at the end when Gray connects the two ways of understanding their life story with the image of the broken and whole tablets carried in the ark.

I loved that in and of itself. I've always found the image of the two sets of tablets and the ark to be deeply evocative. But until I read Gray's essay, it hadn't occurred to me that this was a perfect example of non-binary thinking in the Torah, but also a perfect example of the way a non-binary person's understanding of life can illuminate the Torah.

Because of the things that can be hard for us to understand – but seems to be embedded in so many Torah stories – is that truth for the Torah is never an either-or situation. There's two different contradictory creation stories, for example. But there's no image of both of those creation of humanity stories being put together.

This moment of the tablets and the ark is the moment when two contradictory ideas of God's relation to humanity, the idea that God's relation to humanity is irrevocably shattered – human beings are just not up to it. It's broken into pieces, as Gray says, right from the beginning – is held together with the directly contradictory image of a whole relationship, one which is even more whole because those second tablets are a partnership, that are created both by God and by Moses.

And instead of the Israelites discarding the broken tablets and just enshrining the whole tablets, they put both together because the divine human relationship, the truth of that requires these contradictory parts that, as Gray says, these are not really divided into an either-or binary. Together, there points to a larger truth and a larger whole.

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: We asked Gray, what made you write this essay?

Rabbi Gray Myrseth: So, there was a point during Rabbinical school where we did a group activity and we were given the prompt to tell our stories, first

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as one of disruption, and then as a story of continuity. And it left such an impression on me, particularly because it came at the time where I was deepening my study of the Rabbinic genre of Midrash.

And in Midrash, the ancient Rabbis expand on a verse from scripture, often in ways that alter or even completely contradict the plain meaning of the original text. And then, this new writing becomes part of the canon of sacred text, even when it departs from it.

And it seemed to me that Midrash is this really old way to tell two stories at the same time, where the new text is both totally continuous with the original revelation of Torah, and it exists as this wildly innovative disruption. And then the Rabbis get to be loyal to the tradition they've inherited at the same time as they're adapting it to fit their changed context.

And I can tell you that as a queer non-binary trans patrilineally Jewish Rabbi, this way of seeing the Rabbis and this way of seeing Rabbinic Judaism really appeals to me. It gives me a way to see my struggles with the tradition I've inherited and with the institutional structures of contemporary Judaism as this scared task that Jewish people have been doing as long as Judaism has existed.

And it lets me understand that Judaism's constant evolution is built into the foundations of the tradition and that participating in that evolution and change is a really good thing. And that's really important for me to remember, particularly since there have been times where my presence, just existing in a Jewish space, can seem to throw that whole system into chaos.

And there's kind of this, "Well, what do we do with you?" experience. And I know I'm far from the only one who's been in that position. And it can be alienating. But then, I think about the fact that Rabbinic Judaism was built by people who took Biblical Judaism and radically reshaped it, who are these loyal tricksters who, at the same time, loved Torah and needed to change it. And then, I get to feel like I'm part of that lineage.

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Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: Here's what Gray had to say about the essay's relevance to today.

Rabbi Gray Myrseth: I really appreciated the chance to get to reflect back on this piece, which was written under totally different circumstances and what feels like a different world. But the experience of simultaneous disruption and continuity of these two different ways to think about stories feels so resonant to me right now, in this moment of global crisis.

There are so many things that are getting disrupted right now, at the scale of individual lives and of whole systems. And I can also see threads of continuity, both for better and for worse. On the more challenging side, pre-existing inequalities, inaccess to healthcare and food and housing are getting amplified. And the marginalization of people with disabilities and chronic health issues is getting amplified. And the disregard our current administration is showing towards so many of its citizens is getting amplified.

But I also see positive continuities, like communities coming together for mutual aid and supporting each other where systems fail. I see the commitment shown by frontline workers, whether in hospitals or grocery stores. And I also see the fact that the Jewish tradition has so many resources for times of crisis.

It makes me think about the fact that Judaism was kind of made as an apocalypse survival handbook, in this time, around the destruction of the temple when it was hard for our ancestors to imagine there would be any kind of Jewish future.

So, I think about us in that same light, that we'll have this unique opportunity to think together on the individual and communal and systemic levels about what we really want to disrupt, what stories aren't serving us anymore and what institutional inequities aren't really serving people anymore. And then, we'll also get to think about what we need to ensure

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continues, what we want to keep from our older stories, even as the times continue to change.

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: And here's what Gray said about Joy Ladin reading their piece.

Rabbi Gray Myrseth: It is such an honor to have Joy Ladin be my reader. I remember the first time I saw her speak. It was in my first year of Rabbinical school and she came to Hebrew College to give a talk. And I just have this very strong sense memory of sitting there in the Beit Midrash at the end of the talk, having felt like I had been on a spaceship or some kind of interplanetary journey listening to her.

I had, at that point, so few experiences of hearing trans people teach Torah and this may seem obvious but it really didn't feel obvious, which is that – I entered Rabbinical school not entirely believing that someone like me could be a Rabbi or a teacher of Torah because, practically speaking, I didn't see it in the world.

Intellectually, I understood that I could do it. But it wasn't an embodies experience until I started seeing people like Joy talk about the way that her trans identity impacts her experience of Judaism and of Jewish spirituality. That was such a deep and powerful experience for me. And every one of those moments of feeling myself reflected in another teacher of Torah brought me closer to the understanding that I could also be a teacher.

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Thank you for joining us for this episode of Speaking Torah. We want to thank Emily Hoadley for our logo, and Hebrew College Rabbinical student and composer Jackson Mercer for our theme music Esa Einai. To learn more about Hebrew College, please visit hebrewcollege.edu/podcast. And remember to subscribe, like, and rate Speaking Torah on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to podcasts.

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We'll leave you this week with Ma Gadlu, composed and performed by Hebrew College graduate Rabbi Micah Shapiro. I'm your host, Rabbi Jeffrey Summit. See you next time for Speaking Torah.