“And God created the human in His image. He created it in the image of God; He created them male and female.” So Richard Elliott Friedman translates Genesis 1:27—arguably the most influential verse in all Tanach. A great deal goes on at once in this verse, including direct statements and indirect reflections of what we today call “gender,” the topic of this issue.

Before the 1950s, the term “gender” commonly referred to grammatical categories. English speakers are barely aware of this aspect of grammar until they come to study another language, and no language I know is more gender-suffused than Hebrew. In addition to zachar and n’kevah for nouns, as well as gender-marking for second- and third-person verb forms, Hebrew compels its speakers to reiterate their male or femaleness virtually every time they talk about themselves. By way of contrast, consider the way in which the Romance and Germanic languages retain the distinction between formal and familiar in the second person while Hebrew cares not a whit about this.

So then, Jews have been set up by our sacred texts and language to pay attention to gender. Furthermore, Judaism is like all civilizations in supplementing the sheer biology of sexual reproduction with cultural accretion and interpretation of voluminous proportions. As has been much remarked upon, a tractate of the Talmud deals specifically with women, Nashim. Within and far beyond that tractate, the gender preoccupation of Judaism seems grounded on male hyper-awareness of the complementary, and also opposing, female.

To this, add Judaism’s overall emphasis on drawing distinctions, lines, borders, fences. The habit of mind according to which life’s multiplicity gets categorized through grids and oppositions suffuses traditional Jewish life and thought, and continues to influence liberal Judaism, even with its greater flexibility.

In the vast arena of human, not grammatical, gender, we have in recent times discovered the inadequacies and costs of all that categorization. It turns out that human sexuality, like much else in God’s vast universe, can be arranged on continuums instead. The basic, indispensable enterprise of producing the next generation
goes on, with X and Y chromosomes playing vital roles, but now in
a wide variety of ways. The fecund possibilities that have mostly
lain beneath the surface of texts and society have been pulled out
for examination and exploration. The consequent blurring and
pressing of boundaries has generated a good deal of social unease,
both within and beyond Jewish circles.

I am not a specialist in Linguistics or Genetics or Gender Studies.
But my experience with the world of gender is extensive and in-
triguing. And so I simply could not resist indulging in these open-
ing ruminations and speculations. Mostly though, what I want to
do here is prepare the way for Elyse Goldstein, guest editor of this
important symposium issue.

When the idea of an issue focusing on gender and sexuality
arose, Elyse came to the fore as a natural convener of the sympo-
sium. The editor of four foundational books within Jewish Femi-
nism, Elyse’s experience and understanding span the congrega-
tional, educational, and community realms. Of course, the topic of
Gender goes beyond, even while including, Feminism. As is clear
in her Introduction to this issue, no one understands that better
than Elyse. The results of her broad and deep thinking are directly
apparent there, and indirectly reflected in the articles that follow.

Like most Journal issues, this one also includes book reviews,
responses, and poetry. Among the excellent book reviews are two
that focus on Israel—by Ron Kronish and Hank Skirball—thus
hooking back nicely to the cluster of articles on Progressive Reli-
gious Zionism in the Fall 2011 issue. That cluster generated one of
several Responses to Prior Articles and Issues, and the Winter 2012
symposium on Judaism and Science stimulated two others.

Finally, we decided to seek out a few poems specifically atten-
tive to the symposium topic, and the four fine poems appearing
here were anonymously chosen. These poems respectively picture
a sensual flower that’s both male and female, a couple seen as roy-
alty, humor and other bonds between friends and couples, and a
day care center alongside home parenting—a few of the myriad of
ways in which gender manifests itself.

Riches galore. Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, oter Yis-
rael b’tifarakh: We are grateful to the Eternal One, who sheds glory
on the Jewish People through gifted writers and attentive readers

Susan Laemmle, Editor