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RELI 2200: Judaism
Professor Deidre Butler
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Script- Final Project: Podcast on Drag and Judaism

Intro Music: This is How We Jew It by Detox¹

Detox, Miz Cracker, Sasha Velour, Jinkx Monsoon, Alexis Michelle: if you're familiar with these names, you might be a superfan of Rupaul's Drag Race like me. These are some of my favourite queens from the popular drag competition show, that has been making waves in LGBTQ+ community and mainstream culture for the past 12 years. These queens also have another thing in common: they're all Jewish, and use their Jewishness as part of their drag (case in point: the song you just heard is "This is How We Jew it" by Detox, and on Season 10, Miz Cracker coined her catchphrase, "Shabbat Shablam!"²)

Jewishness in American drag seems to be pretty accepted, but how did we get here? And is this the same around the world? My name is Meghan Burns and today on our podcast we'll be taking a deep dive into the history of drag and Judaism.

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Chapter 1: History and Context of Drag in Judaism (Biblical and Talmudic texts)

For those who aren't familiar with the art of drag, drag is an art form that bends gender binaries, allowing for the fluidity of expression in ways that wouldn't traditionally be allowed within rigid gender roles. In the mainstream, this is generally represented by drag queens like the ones who compete on Rupaul's Drag Race (generally men who dress as women), but there are also drag kings (women who dress as men), bio queens (women who perform as drag queens) and non-binary drag performers. Drag performers have historically been at the forefront of change and social movements, and have encompassed all kinds of queer identities and individuals, especially trans individuals. For clarification, someone who is trans doesn't identify with the

¹ The Only Detox, "Detox - This Is How We Jew It - [Official Music Video with Moovz] from Christmas Queens," *The Only Detox*, December 5, 2015, video, 0:40-0:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trbfeXG1zyl>.

²Miz Cracker, "Miz Cracker saying shablam and I'm a woman for 40 seconds," *Jade Street*, June 13, 2018, video, 0:32-0:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8wohSgB8jc>

gender they were assigned at birth, so a trans man was assigned as a woman at birth but identifies as a man, and trans women were assigned male at birth but identify as women. For many trans individuals, drag can be a stepping stone into learning about their true identity (I mention this as I will be including a trans woman on this episode). However, for those who practice Judaism, cross dressing, (and by extension drag), has not been historically accepted by the Jewish community.

So what does the Hebrew Bible, the heart of Jewish life, practice and tradition, have to say about drag and cross dressing? The most quoted mitzvot (Jewish commandment) condemning cross-dressing is Deuteronomy 22:5- “A woman should not put on the apparel of a man; nor should a man wear the clothing of a woman—for whoever does these things— it is a to’evah [completely off-limits behavior] to the Eternal your God.”³

This seems like pretty damning statements (pun intended)- essentially saying that if you dress in another gender’s clothing, you are going against God’s will. This literal interpretation is used by many in the Jewish community to oppose drag, as drag threatens the binary and gendered expectations of men and women in Jewish society, (not only in their roles but in how they present through clothing). This mitzvah demonstrates, to some, the Jewish societal value of upholding traditional roles in order to keep harmony and to prevent “licentious (or indecent sexual) behaviour”⁴. It continues the idea of the duality present in many rituals and biblical imagery (such as in Genesis of light and dark, good and bad). But **should** this literal translation be considered binding? Is this interpretation correct according to rabbinic scholars?

Let’s bring this verse into context. Deuteronomy is the 5th book of Moses, and is a book of laws Moses gave to the Jewish people before his death⁵. This book emphasizes the covenant between God and Israel, especially now that His people have arrived in the promised land. He emphasizes the laws needed for these new people to live in harmony⁶.

This particular statement is written in Chapter 22, a chapter focused on understanding how to be respectful to neighbours and nature. The surrounding verses talk about helping your neighbour’s fallen donkey or ox out of the road, and that from a bird’s nest, one must only take the eggs, not

³ Sefaria, “Deuteronomy 22:5,” *Sefaria*. Accessed June 27 2020.

<https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.22.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

⁴Eliezer Danzinger, “Is a Woman Allowed to Dress Up as a Man on Purim?”, *Chabad.org*, accessed May 24, 2020.

https://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article_cdo/aid/483409/jewish/Is-a-Woman-Allowed-to-Dress-Up-as-a-Man-on-Purim.htm

⁵Dr Jeffrey Tigay, “The Book of Deuteronomy”, *My Jewish Learning*, accessed May 24, 2020.

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/deuteronomy/>

⁶ibid.

the mother⁷. All the verses in this chapter surround ethical mitzvot- the sacred obligations between us and our neighbours⁸.

Because of this context, many early rabbinic scholars, including Rashi and Rambam (arguably two of the most famous), understand this verse slightly differently than the literal meaning. Ancient Babylonian talmudic scholars say that this verse means, “Cross-dressing is prohibited when used as a disguise to invade someone else’s space”, so it is only prohibited when used with malicious intent, for example to infiltrate spaces meant for the opposite sex⁹.

For the medieval French Rabbi Rashi, this verse is a further prohibition of adultery. Continuing the Talmudic interpretation of cross-dressing being prohibited when it is used to falsify your identity, Rashi argues against cross dressing when it is used to commit sin (such as sexual betrayal)¹⁰. The medieval Sephardic Rabbi Rambam argues that this verse is actually against idolatry, as sometimes wearing the clothing of another gender has been associated with idol worship (another sin in Judaism)¹¹. Additionally, Rambam wrote that gender norms in clothing should be determined by community standards, not divine or religious figures.

Also important, most scholars agree that this verse is a Rabbinic restriction, and not a Torah based prohibition¹².

Based on these three examples, we can agree that in general, classical rabbinic scholars don’t have much a problem with concept of cross-dressing if there is no bad intent behind it. But heterosexual norms and social codes have been successful in maintaining cross-dressing as a taboo for most Jews. Have there ever been exceptions to these social rules? The most compelling example is of a Jewish holiday where dressing up and disguising yourself is central- Purim.

Purim tells the story of a plan to kill the Jews, instigated by the Persian King’s prime minister Haman. The King’s wife, Esther, was Jewish but hid her identity until she divulged it to the king to help save her kinsmen. Haman ended up being killed instead, and a Jewish scholar named Mordecai replaced him as prime minister¹³. Purim is commonly celebrated by dressing up in costumes, as it is a time to peel back labels and go into the unknown- with “everything in

⁷ Sefaria, “Deuteronomy 22:4, 22:6,” *Sefaria*. Accessed June 27 2020.

<https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.22.4?lang=bi&with=Rashi&lang2=en>

⁸ Rabbi Elliot Kukla and Rabbi Reuben Zellman, “TransTexts: Cross-Dressing and Drag,” *Keshet*, June 3, 2008. <https://www.keshetonline.org/resources/transtexts-cross-dressing-and-drag/>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Chabad, “What is Purim?” *Chabad.org*. Accessed June 27, 2020.

https://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article_cdo/aid/645309/jewish/What-Is-Purim.htm

moderation, even moderation!”¹⁴ Rabbis have made concessions to Deuteronomy 22:5 when it comes to Purim since the 16th century, as can be read in the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayyim 696:8) :“It is permitted [for a man] to dress as a woman on Purim”¹⁵. The author argues that it should be allowed if it is meant to bring joy, harmless fun and entertainment (which is at the core of what drag is all about!) In the spirit of Purim, this song, V’Nahapoch Hu, is about how everything is topsy turvy on Purim!

Play Purim song- V’Nahapoch Hu¹⁶

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Chapter 2: Strides to Acceptance (Major players and Movements to Modernity)

The Jewish reform movement, known as Haskalah, brought a lot of changes to late 18th century and 19th century Jews. This movement, led by Jewish philosophers like Moses Mendelssohn and Abraham Geiger, saw modernity as opportunity to redefine their relationship with the state and renew Jewish life to be more integrated with the modern world¹⁷. Reform Jews (those who adapted Jewish ideas to be more in line with modern Europe) changed some gender roles, such as allowing men and women to sit together in synagogue, and allowed musical instruments in services¹⁸. This was a time of loosening restrictions and adopting new ideas, to be able to access more opportunities and ensure Judaism continued to remain relevant to new generations¹⁹.

During this time, Jews were able to travel more freely and had more opportunities to reinvent themselves as more than medieval stereotypes. Many turned to the theatre, and it was there that traditional gender roles were questioned even further. A prime example of this is performer Pepi Littmann.

¹⁴ Melanie Weiss, “Purim Does Drag,” *My Jewish Learning*, February 22, 2013.

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/keshet/purim-does-drag/>

¹⁵ Rabbi Elliot Kukla and Rabbi Reuben Zellman, “TransTexts: Cross-Dressing and Drag,” *Keshet*, June 3, 2008. <https://www.keshetonline.org/resources/transtexts-cross-dressing-and-drag/>

¹⁶ Chabad, “V’Nahapoch Hu,” *Chabad.org*. Accessed June 27, 2020.

https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/media_cdo/aid/1519/jewish/VNahapoch-Hu.htm

¹⁷ Deidre Butler, “Module 7: Lecture 2: Jewish Responses to Modernity: Slide 2-3,” (PDF slides, *RELI 2110 Judaism*, Carleton University, Ottawa, Summer 2020).

¹⁸ Deidre Butler, “Module 9: Lecture 1: Denominations- Religious Reform 1790s-1890s: Slide 3-4,” (PDF slides, *RELI 2110 Judaism*, Carleton University, Ottawa, Summer 2020).

¹⁹ Ibid.

Pepi Littmann, born Pesha Kahane in Galicia (what is now the Ukraine), was a popular vaudeville performer who traveled throughout Eastern Europe, Germany, Hungary and Russia from the late 1870s until her death in 1930²⁰. She performed in Yiddish, and also became very popular for ‘performing as a male Hasidic youth and as a fashionable bachelor’²¹. This made her, from archivist Chana Pollack’s perspective, the first famous Jewish drag king. Pepi was the leader of a group of ‘broderzingers’ or Broder Singers, who were among the first groups to perform Yiddish-language songs outside of weddings and Purim plays, performing mostly in taverns and restaurant gardens²². The next song you’ll hear, Di Apikorsim (translating to “The Skeptics, or the Heretics”) was sung by Pepi Littmann in a 1913 performance in Poland with her theatre troupe.

Play “Di Apikorsim”²³

If you’re liking this podcast so far, you should check out episode 196 of Judaism Unbound, with Abby Stein. Abby talks about her book “Becoming Eve: My Journey from Ultra-Orthodox Rabbi to a Transgender Woman”, which details her journey to accept herself and become a voice for LGBTQ+ Jews²⁴. Listen to it wherever you get your podcasts.

Chapter 3: Moving Forward (What is the drag community like in Israel today?)

Play Diva by Dana International²⁵

Perhaps no one has been more emblematic of recent LGBTQ+ issues in the state of Israel than Dana International. This international star made headlines in 1998 as the winner of the Eurovision singing competition (a huge deal in Europe)! representing Israel with her song Diva. However, her win in 1998 brought up a lot of controversy in her country, because Dana is a trans woman. Here is a 1998 CNN report on her story.

²⁰ Mayrent Institute for Yiddish Culture, “Litman, Pepi,” *University of Wisconsin- Madison*. Accessed June 27, 2020. <https://mayrentinstitute.wisc.edu/collection/biographies/litman-pepi.html>

²¹ Ibid.

²² Rich Tenorio, “This turn-of-the-century crossdressing feminist proves that Yiddish theater ain’t no drag,” *Times of Israel*, March 12 2017.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/this-turn-of-the-century-crossdressing-feminist-proves-that-yiddish-theater-aint-no-drag-2/>

²³ Peppi Littmann, “Peppi Littman - Di Apikorsim (Yiddish song),” Classicklezmer, July 2 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gSS7CDb1qE>

²⁴ Judaism Unbound, “Abby Stein: Judaism Unbound Episode 196- Becoming Eve,” *Judaism Unbound*, November 15, 2019. <https://www.judaismunbound.com/podcast/episode-196-abby-stein>

²⁵ Dana International, “Dana International - Diva (Hebrew) [Official Video],” Dana International, July 9 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7w6MRuhZsrE>

Clip- CNN report²⁶

Israel, a Jewish state created after the Second World War, ended up hosting Eurovision in 1999, to the dismay, I'm sure, of those Orthodox rabbis and politicians. Since 1998, Dana International has performed throughout Israel and has become a symbol of LGBTQ+ excellence in Europe, and the Middle East, where being gay is still a crime punishable by death in many countries. Israel as a country has seen a large amount of progress for LGBTQ+ communities, with current laws around gender reassignment surgery, same-sex adoption and anti-LGBTQ discrimination being consistent with other so-called 'progressive' countries like Canada²⁷.

In present day Israel, there is a large gay community, and a thriving drag scene in Tel Aviv²⁸. Drag has seen a renaissance lately, exemplified by the many talented queens performing throughout Israel. Though there is a lot of political and social acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in the Jewish state, there are still many pockets of more conservative views, especially in Jerusalem, where many traditional gender roles are still being upheld (for example, there are separate places for men and women to pray at the Western Wall)²⁹. As a state in the Middle East, there are also consistent reminders of the threat to LGBTQ+ rights, and work is still needed to ensure safety and equality for all.

In a 2016 documentary by Refinery29 on the drag scene in Tel Aviv, drag performer Asis D'Orange had this to say about being LGBTQ+ in Israel today.

“to be LGBTQ+ in Israel..” clip³⁰

Clip of queens talking on the show³¹

Near the beginning of April 2020 after performing on Facebook Live during quarantine, the two Israeli drag queens you just heard, (Talula Bonet and Ziona Patriot), have landed a show on a major Israeli music channel, called (what else?) 'Quarantined'³².

²⁶Dana International, “Dana International CNN Interview 1998,” Dana International, June 10 2014. 0:07-2:25. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHQ8BGmhxZc&t=304s>

²⁷ Equaldex, “LGBT Rights in Israel,” *Equaldex*. Accessed June 27, 2020. <https://www.equaldex.com/region/israel>

²⁸ Connie Wang, “Tel Aviv’s Jewish Drag Scene Is NOT What You Think | Style Out There | Refinery29,” *Refinery29*, March 10 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9B2P-DHnHEY>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 4:59- 5:18.

³¹ Isaac Scharf, “Quarantined Drag Queens land TV show in Israel,” *Times of Israel*, April 8, 2020. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/quarantined-drag-queens-land-tv-show-in-israel/>

³² Ibid.

I believe this can be taken as proof that drag can (and will) continue to thrive and grow in the mainstream as a means of expression, entertainment and as a way to increase visibility for queer folk. We're all searching for connection, a place to belong, and for many LGBTQ+ Jews (including Peppi Littman, Dana International, and Miz Cracker), drag is that place. As Nona Chalant, an Israeli drag queen, explains, to be yourself is an act of courage.

Clip- "To be us, is political"³³

To close off the show, I'll leave you with another clip from the short documentary by Refinery29 on drag in Tel Aviv. As an observer to drag like myself, the host of the show Connie Wang beautifully sums up what drag is all about:

Clip- "Maybe I do want to be a drag queen"³⁴

We hope you enjoyed this week's episode on Drag and Judaism. Tune in next week for another edition of historical deep dives with Meghan Burns. Oh, and Happy Pride month everyone! In the words of Miz Cracker, Shabbat Shablam!

End with Nona Chalant- "Drag Will Save the World"³⁵

³³Connie Wang, "Tel Aviv's Jewish Drag Scene Is NOT What You Think | Style Out There | Refinery29," *Refinery29*, March 10 2018. 3:41- 4:00. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9B2P-DHnHEY>

³⁴ Ibid, 7:43-8:02.

³⁵ Nona Chalant, "DRAG WILL SAVE THE WORLD | Nona Chalant | Morbid Eddie | Lyrik," HouseOfNona, June 1, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_spCgd1cv8M.

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