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Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey between Genders

Joy Ladin
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The first openly transgender employee of an Orthodox Jewish institution, Joy Ladin endured media glare and controversy when she made the transition from male to female. In this poignant, intimate, and often lively memoir, she describes her journey. And it starts with a blessing.

"Every day I say a blessing in Hebrew over my medication," she writes, noting that the progesterone and estrogen that she takes to boost female hormones have created such deep gratitude that she feels called to thank God for them. She adds, "For the first time in my life, when I look in the mirror, I see someone who has begun to resemble me."

Like others who make such a momentous transformation, Ladin's story is layered with complexity and rife with issues related to manhood, family upbringing, religion, and self-worth. Making the gender shift shook and shattered nearly every aspect of her life, and Ladin's propensity for introspection seemed to be both a gift and a curse. She was able to acknowledge all of the hurt and confusion that others expressed, but at the same time, these toxic emotions could sometimes darken what she felt to be a miracle.

Throughout all the turmoil, though, Ladin's resilience and hope remained as strong and tightly wound as high-tension wires. She relies heavily on these twin strands and, at times, her belief in the process is seemingly all she has; she nearly loses her job, alienates her family and friends, and becomes the subject of numerous news articles.

Yet she continues her progress from bud to bloom, becoming ever more comfortable and relieved by finally being able to be herself. Ladin notes that she first began the transition from male to female when she was just six years old: "For decades, not a day passed when I didn't feel the secret shame of presenting myself as someone I knew I wasn't."

For Ladin, being a "good man meant being a bad person" because she felt like she was lying and cowardly. Moving from living in misery to being joyful and grateful provided a profound, fundamental release from what she saw as a moral quandary. It's that kind of resolve that makes her work reverberate with emotion, and her artful, thoughtful writing creates an even deeper resonance.

Ladin's story can swerve in many directions at the same time—a riff on Judaism's restrictions can suddenly turn into an aching description of loneliness—but she manages to weave all the elements together into a cohesive, powerful memoir.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (February 29, 2012)

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