Breaking Out of the Gender Box

Elective 2

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| **Author(s):** | Ariella Rosen |
| **summary:** | An exploration of our personal experiences with gender at camp, framed by the creation story in the Torah. This session focuses both on what we have experienced and how we can effect culture change at camp. - *Submitted by* *Ariella Rosen* |
| **Topic(s):** | Gender identity |
| **Learning Objective:** | Participants will recognize moments in which their own experiences were influenced and affected by assumptions about gender. Participants will leave motivated to inspire their campers and broader camp community to think about gender in a more nuanced way. |
| **Audience:** | Ideal for ages 15 and up (can be modified for younger kids), with an ideal group size no fewer than 10, but no more than 40. |
| **TIMING:** | 90 minutes |
| **AppendiCes:** | Handout (story template), Handout (twilight scenes) |
| **Materials Needed:** | Copies of the story template, copies of twilight scenes, flipchart paper or other large paper, marker, pens |
| **Set-UP DETAILS:** | This program should ideally be held in an enclosed or isolated space (where no one passing by could overhear). Having participants sitting in a circle (in chairs, on benches, or on the ground) will work best to create a sense of community and relationship. At each seat, place a pen, paper, and a clipboard (if needed) On the wall, tape a printout of twilight scenes (Handout 3) in color or projected on the wall. Cover it with large sheets of paper (like flipchart paper), with boxes drawn on the paper to look like bricks. |

**Session Timeline & Outline:**

**00:00-00:10- Welcome and Introduction**

**00:10-00:20- Day and Night in the Torah**

**00:20-00:35- Exploring the Box (Writing Exercise)**

**00:35-00:45- Twilight: Blurring the Lines**

**00:45-00:55- Hevruta (Partner Share)**

**00:55-01:05- Changing the Narrative (Writing Exercise)**

**01:05-01:15- Reclaiming Twilight**

**01:15-01:30- Debrief**

**Welcome and Introduction (10 min.)**

* Give participants an overview of the flow of the session.
* Agree on confidentiality and communication norms (such as using “I” statements and not making generalizations or assumptions about others)
* Go around the room and share the following: Name, camp, pronouns, and the answer to the question: “When does day end and night begin?”

**Day and Night in the Torah (10 min.)**

Show participants the Torah verse (Genesis 1:5, prewritten on flipchart paper) and discuss:

* + What words jump out when you first read it?
  + What is evening (and morning)? How is it different from night (and day)?
  + What are all of these different terms doing here?
  + What is helpful about having “day” and “night” as categories? What is challenging about having these categories?

**Exploring the Box (15 min.)**

Hand out the story template (Handout 2).

Ask participants to think about a time that they felt stuck in a category, experience, or space in which, due to gender, they felt uncomfortable or otherwise not right. This can be an experience that happened at camp, but doesn’t have to be. Write the story of that moment in the center box of the template. Ask participants to underline or circle the three most important phrases or words in their story.

Invite volunteers to share their stories. If there are many volunteers, ask them to focus only on the underlined parts of their stories.

**What is Twilight? Blurring the Lines (10 min.)**

Transition participants to the writing workshop segment. Explain that it is now their turn to blur the fixed categories of “day” and “night” in their own stories, with a little help from their peers.

First, discuss as a group:

* What is twilight?
* How do you know it’s twilight?

Explain: The ancient rabbis didn’t know what to do with twilight, which had a big impact on Jewish law. Knowing whether or not it was day or night was very important when it came to Shabbat, holidays, and other rituals that had to happen at a certain time of day. Out of the mystery of how to categorize twilight came the idea that this hour is very auspicious, mysterious, and mystical. Twilight in Hebrew is ***bein hashmashot*,** between the suns. (Write on flipchart paper) It was said that many of the most important objects from Jewish history (such as the rainbow from the Noah story, the Manna that fed the Israelites in the wilderness, the tablets of the Ten Commandments) were created then (Pirkei Avot 5:6). Twilight becomes a time that is neither day nor night, but rather has its own qualities. Ask participants for reactions to the role of twilight in Jewish tradition.

**Hevruta: Partner Share (10 min.)**

Break into hevruta pairs. (Explain that hevruta comes from the same word as haver, or friend). A hevruta is a thought-partner, someone to challenge and support you when you learn, which is a sacred relationship in Judaism.)

Give each partner 2 minutes to share their story, followed by 2 minutes for each partner to offer suggestions for how their partner could rewrite their story to break out of the box – to help bring it into “twilight.” In giving feedback, ask partners to consider the following questions: What would you change if you could? How would you change it? How would this story end if that change was made?

**Changing the Narrative (10 min.)**

Give participants 10 minutes to write in the margins of their story templates a retelling of their original story. This time, they should change details so that the final product is a story in which they are settled/comfortable/welcomed in the experience they first shared. Suggest that participants keep in mind the questions from above:

* What would you change if you could?
* How would you change it?
* How would this story end if that change was made?

The retelling of the story could take any form: a journal entry, a poem, a speech, a treatise, a list, etc. It can include drawings and not have full sentences. Encourage participants to decide on the form that works best for them.

Ask participants to underline or circle the words that best represent how they are going to break out of their box. Ask them to think about how they will be able to bring that change or another one like it to camp.

**Reclaiming Twilight (10 min.)**

Invite participants to get up and share a way they can bring a sense of “twilight” to their camp community this summer. After they share, rip off a “brick” from the large paper that is covering the sunset scenes.

**Debrief (15 min.)**

* What did it feel like to change your stories? Does the new ending feel realistic? Why/why not?
* What are ways you can effect culture change at your camp?
* Highlight that there are two different approaches to noticing someone mis-stepping when it comes to gender inclusion: calling out and calling in. Calling out is meant to publicly pressure people in leadership positions to make change by shaming them. Calling in is based on relationships, on using compassion and patience to explain your personal perspective. (Learn more here: [**http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/guide-to-calling-in/**](http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/guide-to-calling-in/))
  + How might you use “calling in” as a tactic to shift the culture around gender at your camp?
* What happens at your camp during the actual twilight time? How can you best take advantage of that special time?
* What are moments or programs at your camp that offer individuals the space to exist in the twilight? Where can you make more of that space?
* Notice the story template. What did it feel like to literally write outside the box? (Explain that this has long been a tactic in Jewish tradition. The Talmud and many other texts were written by people taking a fixed text in the middle and writing their own interpretations and ideas around it, giving us completely new texts.)

Do one last go-around of the circle and ask participants to share one word that they are carrying with them out of the session.

**Additional Notes for Bringing it Back to Camp:**

Time this session to end around sunset, so that the view that is revealed at the end is the beautiful real evening-into-twilight. Instead of using paper with boxes drawn on it to hide the twilight scene, you can use real boxes stacked up as a wall that needs to be dismantled.

The Talmud-style story template is a useful template for exploring any sort of idea you might want to take in creative directions. A bunk activity could involve collaborative storytelling by writing one sentence in the middle and everyone contributing and expanding outside the box.

You can turn the box three dimensional by standing in a box, and then stepping outside of it to retell or expand the story.

While this session is meant for to work for anyone, no matter their gender identity, it might be particularly useful as an activity to support and to build community with campers who are gender non-conforming, trans, or who are otherwise being “othered" or bullied in the camp community for reasons related to gender.